

By Heather World

# Should the federal government sponsor "marriage promotion" as part of welfare?



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Oklahoma has appointed an evangelical Christian husband-and-wife team of "marriage ambassadors." Utah gives out videos about commitment when couples apply for marriage licenses. Arizona is creating a marriage commission.

These federally funded efforts would receive a boost under President Bush's welfare reform proposal, which includes \$300 million for "premarital education and counseling, as well as research and technical assistance into promising approaches."

The marriage promotion proposal, as it is known, is a drop in the total welfare budget bucket of \$16.5 billion, yet it has created quite a splash. While studies show that children reared in stable environments with two parents fare better than others, polls suggest that most Americans do not like the government taking such an active role in their personal lives.

Many say the money could be better spent elsewhere. Critics worry that women may be discouraged from leaving abusive relationships.

We asked people with a range of views: Should federal welfare programs include "marriage promotion?"

## Yes!

**Diane Shannon, a managing partner of the San Diego office of the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization**

The government is in people's lives anyway in every aspect—social security, taxes. If it's going to make a person better off by offering them services, then I support it. I believe that marriage is very important. I believe it is very much needed in the community. You want to be a good example for your children. You can have a family with a boyfriend and kids, but it's a more solid foundation with a married couple. Marriage respects the values of God as well as the values of community.

**Michelle Williams, cofounder and codirector of The International Center for Reconciling and God's Way Inc.**

Most of the children we talk to say they don't care if their mom and dad fight, they want them married. We agree that it is better. Obviously we don't agree with domestic violence. If there is any kind of domestic violence, we encourage separation. But with normal arguing, we believe that keeping that marriage together is going to benefit everybody.

Two incomes are better than one. And if the mom or dad has to work weird hours, at least the other parent can be there. We also believe setting that example of reconciliation gives your children the tools they need to work out their differences.

To me it's a no-brainer. The government pays for the consequences of divorce. Of course the government needs to use some of its resources to keep marriages and families intact. Let's prevent instead of after-the-fact.

## No!

**Martina Gillis, director of the Coalition for Ethical Welfare Reform**

I'm definitely against it. I think the original intent—which should still be purpose—of welfare is to support poor families. There's a lot of reasons folks don't get married. Domestic violence is one of the major reasons. A lot of folks receiving welfare have experienced domestic violence.

I was married before and I was still poor. Just to say, "If we get these poor women married they'll get out of poverty" isn't enough. Poor women usually know poor men. We need to talk about training and education to get people jobs that pay self-sustaining wages.

They're talking about legislating morality. Having been on welfare and dealt with an eligibility worker and a case specialist, it would be a sorry state if we asked these folks to become marriage counselors. They haven't even made the transition well to becoming employment counselors!

**Dan HoSang, project analyst for the GROWL, Grass Roots Organizing for Welfare Leadership, a project of the Center for Third World Organizing**

We're strongly and unanimously against it for a litany of reasons. First, there is a strong fear it will increase domestic violence. The domestic violence rate of mothers on welfare is

much higher than in the general population. To tell [a mother on welfare] the answer to her problems is to marry the father of her children seems destructive.

Second, there's been no conclusive studies that show marriage solves the problem of poverty. We think [the proposal] focuses attention away from time-tested anti-poverty measures like access to education, raising wage levels, and access to child care.

We certainly worry that it promotes discrimination against single parents, and it violates fundamental privacy rights.

**Shari Twidwell, director of governmental relations and political affairs, California chapter of the National Association of Social Workers**

Marriage excludes a large population of people, namely gay and lesbian people. [The proposal] sets up an additional method of discriminating against gays and lesbians. And who really winds up suffering is the children in those families. There is a lot of research that says kids in two parent families grow up to be more stable. However there's not a whole lot to say that if the parents are married the kids come out better.

With federal legislation, you really don't want to get specific unless you have to. That's what conservatives always say—let the individual decide.

## That's not the issue!

**Scott Anderson, executive director of California Council of Churches, representing 20 Christian denominations**

It's not a lot of money in the context of the total package. Encouraging marriage is not a bad thing—even for government. From an economic point of view, marriage may be one factor in helping people leave dependency.

As I read the proposal, it's not forcing anyone to get married. It says "Here are some local counseling and support programs to try." Providing support and counseling to help them enter and maintain stable marriages—how can we oppose that?

On the other hand, it's kind of a smoke screen. It's not addressing the real problems of poverty. Encouraging single moms on welfare to get married is not the answer. There are far bigger issues than getting married: Providing jobs that give a living wage, providing adequate job training so moms can move from seven dollar-an-hour jobs to \$12- to \$15-an-hour jobs, providing child care to every low-income household that can't afford to pay for it.

**Frank Mecca, executive director of the California Welfare Directors Association**

I think we were more anxious about what we thought might be included in the proposal than we are now that we've seen it. It's not a bad thing to try to promote two-parent families. It would be bad to force people into bad situations, and that's what we feared. But that's not what came out in the proposal.

The fact that the proposal does not carve out part of the base funding in the block grants and the fact that it does not dictate a particular methodology for how you would promote stable two-parent families was reassuring to us.

We're not talking about a lot of money here. You have to put this proposal in the context of what else is going on. The rest of the president's proposal is extremely problematic: increase in work participation requirements, decrease in state spending flexibility, and the absence of new money for child care are going to be enormously problematic, if Congress enacts this. The marriage promotion proposal is such a small part of the pot. ■