Toward More Perfect Unions:

Putting MARRIAGE on the Public Agenda

A Report from the
Family Impact Seminar

By Theodora Ooms

Family Impact Seminar

Founded in 1976, the Family Impact Seminar (FIS) is a national, non-partisan information and resource center on marriage and family policy. FIS provides balanced and comprehensive information, ideas, and technical assistance, and conducts Capitol Hill seminars and roundtables on cutting-edge family issues to help public and private officials strengthen and support family life. Current activities focus on marriage, welfare reform, teen pregnancy prevention, and fatherhood. They include:

- **The Welfare Peer Assistance Network** (WELPAN). Quarterly meetings of senior state welfare officials from seven mid-western states and periodic reports (with the Institute for Research on Poverty).
- **Community Partnerships on Welfare Reform Implementation.** A roundtable meeting and a practical guide (with the American Public Welfare Association).
- **The Culture of Girlhood and Passage to Womanhood: Implications for Teen Pregnancy.** A roundtable meeting and report (with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy).

In 1997, FIS launched a new program of activities designed to put marriage on the public agenda. Activities include:

- **Strategies to Strengthen Marriage: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?** Roundtable meeting in 1997. Summary report, *Toward More Perfect Unions: Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda*, July 1998 and accompanying volume of roundtable papers.
- **Community Dialogues on Couples and Marriage in Three Urban Poor Neighborhoods:** an exploratory action research project.
- **Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy:** A case study.

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Summary

Marriage is on trial. Ninety percent of Americans marry and want their marriages to succeed. Yet historically high rates of divorce and unwed parenthood raise serious questions about the survival of society's bedrock institution. These trends are having devastating effects on children, adults and society at large. For years the public has bemoaned the "breakdown of the family," yet it has avoided serious discussion of marriage as a public issue.

Society has a large stake in strengthening marriages. Children should be our central concern and, in general, they fare better when raised by two parents. Marriage also typically improves the health and economic wellbeing of adults, stabilizes community life and benefits civic society.

The Family Impact Seminar believes it is time to take marriage seriously and put it on the public agenda. Society has a large stake in strengthening marriages. Children should be our central concern and, in general, they fare better when raised by two parents. Marriage also typically improves the health and economic wellbeing of adults, stabilizes community life and benefits civic society.

Numerous fears about hidden agendas and personal sensitivities account for our longstanding reluctance to discuss the "M word." Yet, these natural impediments should not be permitted to stifle study and debate on a subject of such importance to so many.

Indeed, recent publicity about the effects on children of divorce and absent fathers, and the welfare reform debates about illegitimacy have stimulated the beginning of a public discussion on marriage. Within the last three years, dozens of state legislative proposals have focused on making divorce more difficult. But these proposals present too narrow and politically divisive an approach. A wider range of strategies is needed to respond to the several causes of marital decline and to focus more on prevention. Above all, marriage should be considered a nonpartisan issue.

The report paints in broad-brush strokes a preliminary landscape of marriage as a public issue and develops a framework for a public agenda on marriage. We hope it will contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issues and bring attention to some important avenues of action that deserve to be explored and expanded.

The primary goal of a marriage agenda should be to strengthen and support marriage, that is, make marriage better to be in rather than more difficult to get out of. In the Seminar's view this goal will command wide-spread support. Eight principles are put forward in this report to guide the debate about goals and the development of an agenda on marriage.

Three of these principles are:

- *We should not promote a single model of marriage.*
- *We must find a way of talking about marriage that does not offend single individuals or blame single parents.*
- *We can no longer take marriage for granted, but need to make a deliberate and conscious effort to help marriages succeed.*

Although marriage is a new topic for policymakers, scholars and practitioners have learned a lot about what makes some marriages succeed or fail. Many strategies are underway or being proposed at national, state and community levels.

The primary goal of a marriage agenda should be to strengthen and support marriage, that is, make marriage better to be in rather than more difficult to get out of.

They include:

- *Providing information and public education about marriage trends, causes, consequences, and remedies.*
- *Improving basic marriage and divorce statistics and research.*
- *Removing financial disincentives for marriage (e.g. in the tax and welfare laws).*
- *Promoting responsible, committed and involved fatherhood.*
- *Changing state laws to strengthen marriage.*
- *Learning how to make better marriages (e.g. the rapidly growing field of marriage education).*
- *Mobilizing religious and community support (e.g. Community Marriage Policy).*
- *Creating marriage-friendly workplaces.*

The report builds on discussions and debates the Family Impact Seminar (FIS) has had over the past two years as we prepared to launch our new program on marriage, and also on the commissioned papers and discussions at the roundtable meeting, *Strategies to Strengthen Marriage: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?* held on June 23-24, 1997 in Washington, D.C. (The papers presented at this roundtable are available in a companion volume to this report, see p. 52)

I. The Retreat from Marriage

The Public and Private Faces of Marriage

Next to parenthood, marriage is the most important, challenging, and rewarding relationship we ever undertake. But what happens in this most private of all relationships can have powerful effects on others, and on society as a whole.

Next to parenthood, marriage is the most important, challenging, and rewarding relationship we ever undertake. But what happens in this most private of all relationships can have powerful effects on others, and on society as a whole. Most of us marry and we want our marriages to last. Most of us believe that children need the support, love and attention of two parents. But over the past three decades the rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing and father absence have soared to historically high levels. These trends are having profound and often devastating effects on us all, but especially on children, and we are spending much time, effort and billions of dollars dealing with the consequences.

The nature of the crisis is well known. More than fifty percent of all first marriages today are expected to end in divorce; a third of all births are out-of-wedlock; nearly forty percent of all children do not live with their biological fathers; and the typical non-resident father neither supports nor sees his children on a regular basis.

Children living in mother-only households are five times as likely to be poor, are at higher risk of school failure and drop-out, and are more likely to engage in early sexual activity and other self-destructive behaviors. Father absence is also strongly linked to high rates of juvenile violence and crime. Further, the "breakdown in the family" is largely responsible for the rise in welfare rolls in the seventies and eighties.

Attention to these facts is not new. Ever since the 1973 Senate sub-committee hearings on *American Families: Trends and Pressures* chaired by Senator Mondale, these and other changes in family trends have been widely documented and commented upon.

For the past two decades we have had numerous studies, debates, and proposals to respond to the problems of teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, child abuse, as well as to the challenges posed by the growth in maternal employment and two-earner families. Many new programs were created or expanded to strengthen and support families—child care, family leave, Head Start, maternal and child health, welfare assistance, family preservation and earned income tax credits to name only a few. Yet none of these addressed the root cause of many of the social problems, namely the decline in marriage.

In the early 1980's, FIS and a few other organizations noted that in the emerging family policy agenda a critical element was missing — males and fathers.[1] Programs and policies designed to support families, such as Head Start and welfare, in fact focused only on mothers and children. If fathers were thought about at all, it was only as "dead-beat" dads. This neglect of fathers has begun to change. New research, programs and policies are launching the new field of fatherhood, and its activities are slowly beginning to change the way people think about families, family policy and programs, putting fathers back into the picture.

However marriage, the cornerstone of the family, is still not on the public agenda. Divorce, and especially the aftermath of divorce, has had a good deal of attention, as have teen pregnancy and childbearing. But marriage has not. No national studies, government commissions or task forces have been set up to review what we know about the causes of the changes in marital behavior and examine whether and how we can strengthen the institution. None of the major think tanks, foundations or national organizations have taken on the issue or come up with any serious proposals. Indeed most policy officials have avoided the subject.

Some conservative leaders have been forthright in talking about the value of marriage along with other traditional family values, yet they have not proposed many ideas about what can be done to strengthen marriage beyond getting rid of welfare and eliminating the marriage penalty in the tax code.

The avoidance of marriage as a public issue is mirrored by a lack of serious talk about marriage at a personal level. Many couples are striving to balance work and family roles and responsibilities within a framework of gender equality, but rarely do they discuss with others the strain that these pressures place on their marital relationship. People are encouraged to talk with their teenagers about how to avoid pregnancy, but seldom do we talk with our children (or our friends) about what it takes to have a good marriage or how to avoid divorce. Lots of advice is given to young couples about how to prepare for a wonderful wedding, and what to do if it rains. But rarely does anyone talk with the couple before or after the event about how to weather the predictable ups and downs of marriage.

The reluctance to discuss marriage is really quite astonishing. Over the last few years, as we began to plan the new FIS program on marriage, our attempts to bring the subject up have been typically greeted by silence or changing the subject. It is as if marriage was a dirty word, the "M word."[2]

Reasons Why Marriage Should Be On the Public Agenda

Two conditions must be met before the public will be ready to put marriage squarely on the public agenda. The first is to make the case for marriage, to convince people that marriage matters not only to them personally but also to society. The second is to understand better why people treat marriage as the "M word" even when they understand its public importance.

With respect to the first task, FIS believes there are at least seven compelling reasons why the public has an interest in marriage.

1. Marriage remains a personal goal for the vast majority of Americans. Across the political spectrum, people overwhelming want their children and grandchildren to be born into marriages, and for those marriages to be characterized by love, stability and durability. While young people reject the idea that marriage and having children is a personal necessity, most continue to value marriage. Nine-tenths of all high school seniors say that it is quite or extremely important that they have a good marriage and family life, and most expect to marry. As Arland Thornton has commented, "These values suggest that there would be strong support for appropriate policies to encourage and support happy and durable marriages and the bearing of children within those marriages."[3]

2. Children do best when raised by two caring, cooperative parents. Marriage, on average, is good for children economically, socially and psychologically. Studies document the common sense view that, in general, children do better on all kinds of measures when raised by two parents. Marriage strengthens children's claims to the economic resources, love and affection, nurturing and social capital of both parents.[4] This includes access to both sets of extended families. (These benefits however depend on the parents having a reasonably cooperative and caring relationship. When parents have a seriously troubled, high-conflict marriage, children are better off if their parents divorce).[5]

3. Marriage helps promote and support responsible and caring fatherhood.[6] According to a growing body of research fathers play a unique role in their children's development beyond being a second adult that helps provide and care for their child. Moreover the father's help, support, encouragement and love for the child's mother is critical for effective parenting. Indeed one of the foremost child psychologists, Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University maintains that the best thing fathers can do for their children is to love the child's mother. While a few single fathers are able to stay close, or become even closer to, their children upon the breakup of a marriage, this is not the typical pattern. In general the father-child bond is much more sensitive to the quality of the relationship between the parents (as well as to economic factors, institutional practices and employment opportunities) than is the mother-child bond.

4. Marriage is good for most adults.[7] On average married men and women are healthier, live longer, have fewer emotional problems, have better sex and are less likely to engage in self destructive behaviors such as alcoholism or drug abuse. These positive health outcomes of marriage are not primarily the result of self-selection but reflect the fact that people behave differently when they are married. They have healthier life styles, eat better, and monitor each other's health.

5. Marriage is good for the economy and employers. Married individuals work harder, earn more and save more.[8] They are more likely to be homeowners and to want to invest in the future. Employers benefit from contented marriages. Serious marriage problems, and the stress and conflicts involved in divorce create distracted and poorly motivated workers and lead to losses in productivity.[9]

6. Strong, stable marriages are the "seedbed of moral character and civic virtue," and help build stronger, more stable and less violent communities.[10]

7. Marriage is good for taxpayers. The rise in single-parent households is a major cause of child and family poverty and welfare dependency and many associated problems.[11] There is no doubt that the breakdown of marriage has increased the cost of many public health and social service programs. If the levels of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing could be reduced, government expenditures could be considerably lower.

Why Marriage is the "M Word"

The case for strengthening marriage is very compelling. Then why are we tiptoeing around the subject of marriage? Why, if the decline in marriage is having such serious effects, do national opinion leaders, public officials, religious leaders, policy analysts, educators, health care professionals, social workers, community leaders and others avoid the subject of marriage?

The Family Impact Seminar has talked with many people to try to understand why marriage has not been addressed as a public issue. We learned of several different reasons why people are nervous, embarrassed or defensive about the subject, even when they agree that it is important. Here are some of them:

Sensitivities. The "M word" brings with it many different kinds of baggage. People worry about the ideological agendas they suspect hide behind a pro-marriage stance. For example, many feminists react negatively to calls to "restore a pro-marriage culture," as they fear a reinstitution of patriarchy and putting women back in the kitchen. For others, especially front-line social workers and advocates who work with poor women, marriage has a bitter resonance since they are daily confronted with its dark side — domestic violence and child abuse. Others are concerned that pro-marriage policy will result in discrimination against single people in tax laws and other programs. While conservatives have been much more likely to speak up in favor of marriage they too are sometimes wary, fearful that the public focus on marriage will lead to proposals to legitimate same-sex marriage, which they vehemently oppose.[12]

Stigmatization. Promoting marriage is believed to stigmatize and blame single parents, many of whom are doing a good job under very difficult circumstances. Since single-parent households are more prevalent in low-income African-American communities, a pro-marriage agenda may seem especially insensitive to their concerns and realities. In addition, some fear that policies designed to reduce out-of-wedlock births may lead to re-labeling children as "illegitimate," and deny them their hard won rights to the support and benefits of their fathers.

Intrusion. Marriage is very personal and private. The idea of any outside authority having a say about marriage makes people very uncomfortable and resistant. For those who are religious, marriage is a matter between individuals, their God, and their church (temple, or mosque). For the secular, marriage increasingly has come to represent a private contract between individuals, who are free to enter and leave as they please, with minimal interference.

Skepticism. Some scholars argue that the decline in marriage is world-wide, a result of overwhelming social and economic forces that cannot be reversed. In their view attempts to strengthen marriage are largely futile. They also point out that nothing is permanent anymore. Jobs, houses, careers, lifestyles, community residence, and education all change constantly throughout our lives. Thus changing partners through "serial" marriages and creating "alternative" family forms may become appropriate norms for the future.

Misunderstanding. When confronted with the overwhelming evidence of the negative consequences for children who grow up in a single parent home, some discount the conclusions of the research. They are quick to point out individual situations in which children are clearly better off when their parents divorce, or when a single mother is doing a great job. This is a misunderstanding of statistics. The research findings apply to the population as a whole, not to each individual child. In fact, though divorce puts children at risk, many children of divorce do well. What the research says is that a growing, and to most people unacceptably large, number of children are much worse off growing up in a single parent home than they would be if they had two cooperative parents.

These fears and sensitivities about the "M word," however real, should not be permitted to stifle study and debate on a topic of such importance to the vast majority of Americans and that has such widespread ramifications for society.

Personal experience. Finally, marriage, divorce, and out-of-wedlock childbearing are very personal and often very painful subjects. Too often marriage can be "a stifling prison or a spirit-crushing battlefield."[1] The overwhelming majority of Americans have had some direct experience with divorce, as adults or children, either in their own families or their friends'. Many have had some acquaintance with unwed pregnancy and/or out-of-wedlock childbearing. Although the stigma attached to these events has lessened, the experience typically remains fraught with pain, anger, disappointment, guilt and feelings of failure. It is easier simply to avoid the subject.

The Family Impact Seminar decided that these fears and sensitivities, however real, should not be permitted to stifle study and debate on a topic of such importance to the vast majority of Americans and that has such widespread ramifications for society. Yet, these concerns must not be lightly dismissed. They need to be taken into account when seeking to establish goals for a public agenda on marriage that can receive broad support. They also help us identify questions and issues that must be addressed.

A common thread that runs through all of these perspectives is that even when people agree that marriage is a greatly weakened institution, they do not know what can be done to strengthen it. Moreover they are afraid that any effective remedies would be at the cost of other values they hold dear. FIS believes this conclusion is premature since so little effort has been invested in finding out what can be done to arrest or reverse the trends. As we will discuss later in Part V of this report, although there has been little discussion about strategies to strengthen marriage at a national level, much more has been going on at the state and local levels. Over the past two decades a small army of dedicated researchers and professionals have been learning a lot about couple relationships and marriage. As a result there are some promising ideas and approaches underway to help make marriages succeed that are not well known to others. These approaches focus largely on prevention, and are compatible with, and supportive of, principles of gender equality.

Emerging Pressures to Take Action

In the last few years a public debate about marriage has begun to surface in part as a result of the publicity given in several books, articles and media reports to the research on the effects of father absence on children.[14] Perhaps as a result, at state and community levels there is an increasing sense of urgency to "do something" about marriage. The number of marriage and divorce-related bills introduced into state legislatures has skyrocketed, although few have been enacted.

Initially the proposals at state level were largely confined to two highly divisive issues: whether and how to make divorce more difficult, and whether to legalize or ban same sex-marriage. However some new ideas have recently begun to be put forward. In August, 1997 Louisiana passed a law establishing an alternative type of marriage contract which couples could choose, namely Covenant Marriage. This contract is intended to help couples take their marriage vows more seriously and make it somewhat harder to obtain divorce. This new law attracted widespread interest in the media, and within the year nineteen states had introduced similar bills. In May, 1998, Florida enacted the Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act, which required relationship education in high schools, encouraged couples to take marriage preparation, and gave all those who applied for marriage licenses information about marital rights and obligations under the law.

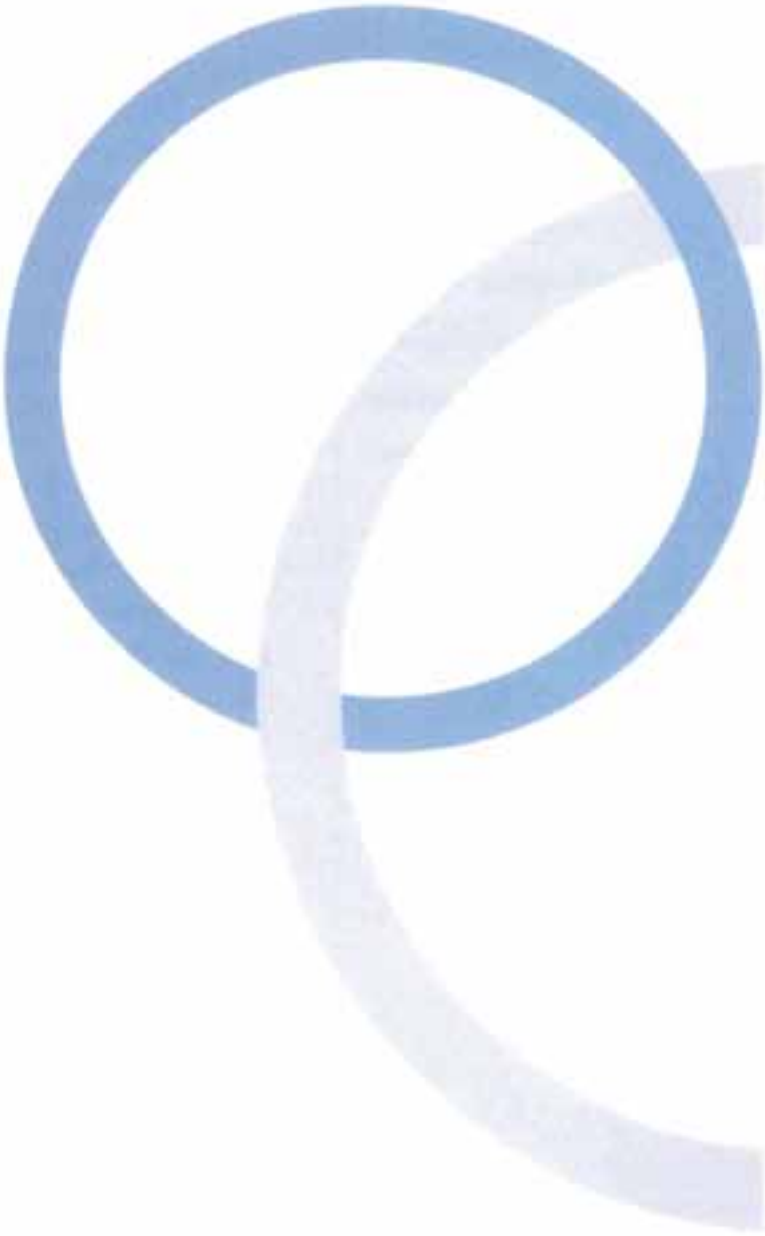
At the community level, increasing numbers of religious and civic leaders are searching for appropriate strategies to strengthen marriage. Since 1986, eighty metropolitan areas have established Community Marriage Policy agreements, in which groups of local clergy, sometimes in collaboration with civic leaders, agree to a set of minimum requirements for couples who plan to marry (see p.36).

Meanwhile the public's thirst for knowledge and assistance with their personal relationships is being fed by women's magazines, journals, and talk shows, which provide increasing coverage of marriage, divorce and gender relationships. Additional evidence is the remarkable growth in the field of marriage education (discussed below) and the phenomenal commercial success of self-help books and tapes, such as Gary Smalley's *Making Love Last Forever*, John Gray's series *Men are from Mars, Women are From Venus*, and Harville Hendrix's *Getting the Love You Want*.

These developments signal that marriage as an institution is attracting new attention in both private and public arenas. This interest has been given additional stimulus by the federal welfare reform law, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation (PRWORA) of 1996, and the new national interest in promoting responsible fatherhood. Governors, state legislators, state welfare directors, county officials, justices of the peace, and community leaders are slowly beginning to seek strategies to reduce divorce rates and out-of-wedlock childbearing, connect fathers to their children, and strengthen marriage.

Given these developments, now is a good time to talk seriously and sensibly about the crisis in marriage and what can be done about it. We owe it to the next generation, today's young men and women, who as the children of divorce and single parenthood have learned painful lessons about the fragility and impermanence of important relationships. Many of them are determined not to repeat their parents' generation's mistakes, but they worry about whether they know what it takes to have a good marriage and are wary of commitment.

As a public issue, however, the topic of marriage is still in its infancy. The groundwork of study, discussion, experiment, and debate has not yet been laid. Before people rush to take action it's important to step back and be clear about the purpose and meaning of marriage. In Part II we ask the most basic question: why, nowadays, do people marry? Next, we propose some goals and principles to guide the public study and debate that we believe will obtain broad support. In Part III we review what we know about the causes of the decline in marriage before describing, in Part IV, a wide range of strategies that are being tried out or proposed. We conclude, in Part V, by linking the public with the private agendas on marriage.



II. Goals and Principles to Guide a Marriage Agenda

Why Do People Marry?

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Marriage is viewed as such an integral part of society that people seldom stop to think about its purpose and meaning. But this is an important exercise because the answer is no longer obvious. Marriage has been with us for centuries, but its functions have changed, at least in the industrialized, developed countries. Historically, a primary purpose of marriage was to control men's sexual behavior and assure them of their paternity. Another was to regulate inheritance of property. Also, until the latter half of the twentieth century, marriage was the best route for most women to achieve a semblance of economic security.

None of these functions now seem as important as they once were. Sexual relations outside of marriage are now tolerated and common. Paternity can be established through DNA tests. For large numbers of people, childbearing and marriage have become de-coupled. And women can live and work independently and raise children on their own.

If marriage is no longer necessary for people to satisfy their sexual appetites, or for women's economic support, or for having children then what is its meaning? Why do people who live together get married?

Some commentators have deplored the fact that the larger meanings of marriage seem to have been forgotten. They claim that one reason for the weakening of the marriage institution is that for too many young people nowadays marriage has simply become an "expressive institution," a vehicle for the exchange of passion and romantic love. For such couples, marriage vows are made only for "so long as love doth last."

However most people embarking on marriage understand that taking public vows has significance beyond signaling the state of their feelings for each other. As Dr. Frank Pittman says well, "Marriage is not about being in love. It is about the agreement to love one another. Love is an active, transitive verb. It is something married grownups do no matter how they feel."[15]

Let's take a look at the several contemporary functions of marriage, grouped under the headings of personal, social, economic, legal and sacramental.[16] We discuss each briefly.

Personal. No better institution than marriage has been found to satisfy the deep human need for physical and emotional closeness, for lasting love, affection, companionship and to be cared for. Importantly, these qualities are built up over time and depend upon familiarity and a continuous relationship. Marriage is about sharing memories and planning the future. It is about having someone to grow old with. Marriage ensures that you have a partner to share the intense joys and triumphs, the pain and disappointments and the sheer hard work of raising children. The commitment of marriage—"I'll be there for you for better and for worse"—is a personal safety net for times of distress, economic hardship and ill health. The commitment of marriage also serves as a brake on impulsive behavior. There's something about the legal and public commitment which makes it harder to walk out on a marriage than on a cohabiting relationship. In short, marriage assures some stability and continuity in an era of uncertainty and rapid change.

Social. Society's main interest in marriage is because it is the best and least costly institution in which to raise children. The legal tie assures society that two parents are available and responsible for supporting and nurturing their children, safeguarding their health, promoting their education, and teaching them moral and social values. In addition, marriage typically connects two extended families, creating additional resources and supports for the children, as well as additional moral and social family obligations for the adults. In this sense marriage is the crucible for a civic society — children learn the value of giving, and of respect, kindness and compromise by observing their parents' relationship.

Economic. Although the family household is no longer a self-sufficient unit of economic production as it was in the agrarian times, marriage remains a vitally important economic partnership. Spouses pool their economic resources through their employment and unpaid work at home and thereby achieve some economies of scale and specialization. Marriage is also typically the primary unit of economic consumption, investment and saving.

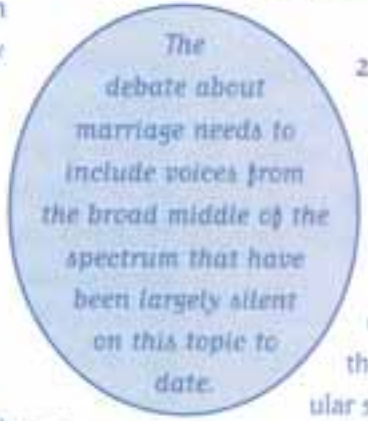
Legal. Marriage is distinctively a legal institution, both protected and regulated by a body of state law that determines the rules under which people can marry, separate and divorce. Numerous rights and benefits accrue to married persons, including eligibility for employment-related health benefits, the right to make medical decisions for the spouse, inheritance in absence of a will, filing joint tax returns and obtaining Social Security and Medicare benefits. Marital obligations and responsibilities on the other hand are rather few, are generally loosely defined in state law and often become clear only upon marital separation and divorce.

Sacramental and Spiritual. In most societies marriage is also seen as a sacramental institution, a commitment before God, built upon sacred promises and overseen by religious authorities. In most cultures, the wedding ceremony and other symbols and rites underscore the religious significance and spiritual meaning of the relationship. Even for those who are not affiliated with a religion, marriage, like parenthood, can be a vocation, connecting them to the ultimate values and meaning of life.

Finding Common Ground

The public interest in marriage is clear. But marriage is a complex and personal subject about which people have strong views. Given the sensitivities and controversies surrounding the subject the challenge is to find common ground. Is it possible to agree upon a set of guiding principles and goals to unlock the current paralysis and begin a broader discussion about what should and can be done?

The Family Impact Seminar believes that, although there is much that divides us about marriage, there are some broad goals and principles upon which we can agree. Too often the family values debates have been framed in extreme, simplistic terms, with conservatives said to be "for" marriage and liberals either neutral or "against." Marriage is clearly not a partisan issue when ninety percent of Americans marry and want their marriages to succeed. We believe it is possible to get agreement on a few basic goals, namely that we want the next generation to have stronger marriages, fewer divorces, with more of their children (our grandchildren) growing up with their fathers in their homes.



Guiding Principles

We propose the following eight principles to guide the discussion about goals and strategies:

1. **We must engage in a more balanced discussion about marriage.** The current polarization of attitudes and positions on marriage is harmful and does not reflect the complex struggles and dilemmas ordinary people are dealing with every day. The debate about marriage needs to include voices from the broad middle of the spectrum that have been largely silent on this topic to date.

2. **The debate must be informed by data and research.** We cannot restore marriage simply by passing laws or preaching from the pulpit. We need to understand what is happening to couples and marriage today before we can develop effective remedies. Facts are needed to inform and shape, though not dictate, the values underlying particular strategies.

3. **The debate about marriage needs to be comprehensive and nuanced.** Just as there are no single causes to account for changing marital behaviors, there can be no simple or single solutions. Moreover, the marriage problem is not confined to the acts of getting married or divorced. The very nature of marriage is in a state of tremendous uncertainty and change. The values, attitudes, and expectations held about marriage, the roles and tasks performed by couples within marriages, the underlying economic and legal context surrounding marriage, and community and institutional supports for marriage are all in tremendous flux.

4. We should not promote a single model of marriage. People will have different preferences about the kind of marriage they want to have. Just as there is no one way of being a good parent, there is no one way of having a good marriage. Some value and promote a traditional form of marriage with the husband as the "head" of the family, and a clear division of roles and tasks between the spouses. Many others reject this model and seek to create relationships of greater gender equality and a sharing and blending of tasks and roles. We must respect the views of those who have traditional values, just as we respect those who seek to create more egalitarian forms of marriage. We also need to understand and respect the patterns and traditions of marriage in other cultures and religions, whether Latino or Asian, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. However we should all be able to agree that mutual respect and caring between husband and wife are essential to any marriage, and that violence between spouses is unacceptable.

Just as there is no one way of being a good parent, there is no one way of having a good marriage.

5. We must not blame or shame people for their choices or the circumstances they find themselves in, but join forces on what we all want for the next generation. We must find a way of talking about marriage that does not offend single individuals or blame single parents. None of us are untouched by the changes in marriage and family formation today. No one should point the finger at others. Most of us have some experience with making bad choices and with pain, guilt and disappointment in our personal relationships. But whether single, married or divorced, we all can unite in the hope that the next generation will have stronger and more stable marriages than ours did.

6. Unmarried, cohabiting and step-parents need to be included in a pro-marriage strategy. A strengthening marriage agenda needs to be broadly inclusive. Efforts to promote cooperative relationships between unmarried parents, and to remove program disincentives to their marrying, are an important part of a pro-marriage agenda. When successful, these efforts will benefit the children and may lead to stable and good marriages. Similarly, any initiatives designed to strengthen marriage should address the special needs of the fast growing numbers of couples in their second or later marriages.

7. We should not overstate the value of marriage and must acknowledge its dark side. For the majority, marriage brings many benefits, but not everyone should, can or wants to marry. Moreover some marriages clearly need to be ended. When parents are in serious conflict, divorce is often the best solution for their children. Moreover, some single parents do a great job, and their children do well. They need understanding and support.

8. It is premature to declare that marriage is on its way to becoming extinct. However, if the institution is to adapt to the new fast-changing environment, individuals, couples, communities, and public officials must make a more deliberate and conscious effort to help marriages succeed. To do this we must acknowledge the public and the private interest in marriage and recognize that we all can play a part in strengthening the institution.

Goals for the Marriage Agenda

It is important to come to agreement on the broad goals for a public marriage agenda before entering discussion about the best strategies, a subject on which we can expect many different views. The Family Impact Seminar believes that a marriage agenda will get the broadest support if the goal is not simply to reduce divorce, or increase "shotgun" marriages, but rather to make marriage stronger.

FIS proposes the following as a starting point for a national discussion about goals and outcomes:

> The primary goal of the marriage agenda is to improve the quality and stability of marriage relationships. The second related goal is to make marriage more rewarding to enter and to remain in. These two goals are what is meant by "strengthening marriage."

The success of efforts to strengthen marriage are best measured by the following outcomes:

- Fewer children born out-of-wedlock; more children living with two married parents; and fewer children experiencing divorce.
- More couples who report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their marriage; fewer couples who divorce.
- More children living in stable homes where their parents care about, cooperate with, and are committed to each other.
- More children, who, if living only with their mother, have regular, committed and positive relationships with their fathers.

In addition, if we achieve some progress on these outcomes across population groups then it would be reasonable to expect that we would also see children doing better in school, less juvenile violence and child abuse, reduced welfare and other public expenditures and many other positive results.

III. Understanding the Decline in Marriage

What accounts for this decline in marriage? Is it a result of the weakening of legal, social, moral, and economic barriers to divorce and non-marital childbearing? Is it because expectations for marriage have risen so unrealistically high, and cannot be fulfilled? Or is it due to excessive individualism?

The decline in marriage is a worldwide phenomenon, but is especially marked in America. It has occurred across all segments of society and regions of the country although at somewhat different rates. The term "decline in marriage" (or, as some prefer, the declining significance of marriage) generally refers to the combined effect of two major demographic trends that have occurred over the last 25 years: the increase in divorce and in out-of-wedlock childbearing (see data provided on pages 46-47). Together they are responsible for the dramatic increase in the numbers of children being raised in single parent households. In 1970 only 12 percent of children lived with only one parent, but by 1996, this figure had risen to 28 percent. Although the rates are higher for minorities, the rise has been steeper for whites. Both trends have had the effect of de-coupling parenthood and marriage.

The decline in marriage has been exacerbated by the later age of first marriage, the greatly increased rate of cohabitation and the decline in remarriage. Second and third marriages are even more likely to divorce than the first, in part because of the difficult challenges of stepparenting and blending two families' children.

The breakdown of marriage is often blamed on teen pregnancy and unwed mothers on welfare. Indeed illegitimacy has received a good deal of public discussion. As Barbara Whitehead has pointed out, the failure to see that these two issues, divorce and out-of-wedlock births, are different aspects of the overall decline in marriage has allowed the middle class to view family breakdown as a "them" problem rather than an "us" problem.[17]

Divorce rates have been rising fairly steadily since the middle of the 19th century. But the steep escalation in the seventies and eighties appeared especially dramatic on the heels of the fifties and sixties, at the height of the nuclear family. This was a period when people married by their early twenties, had three or more children, "shotgun" marriages were the most common resolution to an unplanned pregnancy, white mothers were homemakers, and divorce rates had fallen back to pre-war levels after the short-lived steep increase immediately after World War II.[18]

Cohabitation, namely unmarried couples living together, increased sevenfold between 1970 and 1996. One survey conducted in 1995 found that half of all persons under age 40 have lived in a cohabiting relationship.[19]

What accounts for this decline in marriage? Is it a result of the weakening of legal, social, moral, and economic barriers to divorce and non-marital childbearing? Is it because expectations for marriage have risen so unrealistically high, and cannot be fulfilled? Or is it due to excessive individualism?

Scholars generally agree that many different factors are responsible, that some factors are more important for some groups than others, and that they interact with and reinforce each other. Economic trends in female and male employment, the profound changes in the roles of women, liberalization of sexual and moral values and attitudes, increased mobility and the disintegration of community life, and changes in the law have all played a part. Some are clearly irreversible, but others may be more amenable to policy or program intervention.

These changes have transformed the internal landscape of marriage and removed many of the supports and constraints that used to hold marriages together. Some view the changes as entirely negative, and seek to turn the clock back to former eras. But others believe that some of the causes are positive, especially the hard won gains women have made in the economy and public life, in gaining control over their reproduction and achieving greater equality in the home. While these gains for women are creating major adjustments and some turmoil in the short term, in the long run they create new opportunities for reshaping marriage into a different, better, and stronger institution.

Economic Factors

Several different economic factors have played a role in the decline in marriage.[20] Of these the most important is the increased participation of women in the labor force, a rate which rose three-fold between 1950 and 1995. During this period more women worked full time and earned higher wages. Most dramatic were the increasing numbers of married women with young children who worked outside the home. In 1970, only one third of married mothers with children under age six were employed, but by 1996 that proportion had doubled to two-thirds.[21]

Women's ability to earn their own income has created what economists call an "independence" effect. Women who are less economically dependent on their husbands are freer to end an unhappy marriage. Similarly their husbands are less likely to feel guilty if they take the initiative to leave the marriage. Women who become pregnant outside of marriage are now more able to support their children with their own earnings (although many have to turn to public sources of support).

The second economic explanation concerns the decline in male employment and wages. While the growth of the service sectors has encouraged women's employment, the decline in manufacturing industries has led to a shortage of jobs for low skilled men, especially in urban areas. Paradoxically, it is male joblessness, rather than female employment, which, through undermining men's capacity to provide for their families, seems to play a strong role in the low marriage rates among the urban poor, especially African Americans. William Julius Wilson and others maintain that the very high

rates of unemployment, combined with high rates of male mortality and incarceration, have created a scarcity of marriageable males in the inner city ghettos.[22] While this explanation has a lot of plausibility it does not explain why marriage rates have fallen and divorce risen, although not as much, among middle class African-Americans who have jobs and earn decent incomes.[23] (It is not well known that in the forties and fifties marriage rates were almost as high among African Americans as among whites. They began to fall sharply in the sixties.)[24]

In his most recent book, *When Work Disappears*, Wilson, places greater weight on cultural factors and their interaction with the economic. He states, "The weaker the norms against premarital sex, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and non-marital parenthood, the more that economic considerations affect the decision to marry."[25] In communities with high concentrations of poverty, economic, cultural, and social factors appear to reinforce each other in a downward, amplifying spiral across generations. At this time we do not know enough to know how and at what level to intervene to reverse the spiraling process.

A third economic factor cited as a major cause of the decline in marriage, especially in low-income populations, is the expansion of welfare benefits that occurred in the late 1960's and 1970's. Welfare, it is argued, offers government support in place of the fathers and breaks up or discourages marriage. There has been a vigorous debate among economists about whether research supports this view. The evidence is mixed and often conflicting; however, on balance, the new consensus is that the welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, inadvertently contributed to the rise in non-marital childbearing and divorce. However, the magnitude of the effect was not large, and was certainly not large enough to account for the dramatic decline in marriage over the past 20 years, which has occurred in all classes of society.[26]

Finally, these economic factors, occurring alongside the advent of women's political equality and control over reproduction, have played a strong role in reshaping gender roles. Two-earner couples have become the norm rather than the exception. While this has enabled many families to increase, or at least maintain, their standard of living, it has also created new stresses and strains on the marital relationship. Couples are struggling to evolve new types of marriage partnerships that can help with balancing work and family responsibilities.

Changes in Values and Gender Roles

Changes in values and attitudes have clearly served to weaken marriage bonds. The desire to marry, as measured in public opinion polls and surveys, remains as strong as ever, however the social pressures to marry and constraints to remain married have weakened substantially.[27]

The rules and norms that governed traditional marriage in their parents' generation no longer seem relevant to many contemporary two-earner couples. Hence, with no models to follow, almost every task and decision has to be negotiated.

We now accept and tolerate many kinds of behavior that former generations regarded as wrong, such as sex outside of marriage, unwed motherhood, and divorce.

It is not generally recognized that the problem of teen pregnancy, which has captured so much national attention, is a result of the decline in teen marriages not an overall increase in teen pregnancy or births. Teen birth rates were in fact higher in the 1950's and 1960's than in the 1980's, but in these earlier decades most of the teen mothers were married by the time of their child's birth. Nowadays, 75 percent of births to teens 15 through 19 years old are out-of-wedlock.[28]

Several analysts have identified the cultural emphasis on "expressive individualism" that emerged in the sixties and seventies as being destructive of marriage, and as contributing to a "divorce culture."[29] Beginning in the late 1950s, there was a distinct shift away from notions of obligation and commitment to others towards an obligation to self, personal growth and self-fulfillment. At this time divorces were often defended on the grounds that the children would be better off if their parents were happier.

The major changes in the role of women outside the home has been paralleled by shifts in gender roles within the home, especially in two-parent families. The rules and norms that governed traditional marriage in their parents' generation no longer seem relevant to many contemporary two-earner couples. Hence, with no models to follow, almost every task and decision has to be negotiated, from who will take the children to school, or stay home from work when they are sick, to who will take the garbage out and wash the dishes. This situation, marriage educators point out, creates many more opportunities for conflict and dissatisfaction within marriage.

Changes in Family Law

The above changes in behavior and social attitudes were reflected in, and then reinforced by changes in family law.[30] The seventies ushered in the era of no-fault divorce, designed to enable spouses to dissolve unhappy marriages without having to prove their partner's guilt or their own innocence. No fault divorce meant that a marriage could be dissolved at the instigation of only one party, sometimes within only a few months even when the other objects.

In a parallel development, during the early 1970's a series of court decisions and the Uniform Parentage Act of 1973 gave children born out-of-wedlock essentially all the legal rights possessed by children born to married parents, as long as their paternity was established. This development served to de-stigmatize out-of-wedlock childbearing even further and the term illegitimacy almost dropped out of use (only to be resuscitated in the recent welfare reform debates).

The legal structure of the institution of marriage has also undergone profound changes. Historically marriage was closely linked to unequal power and highly differentiated gender roles. Up until the late 19th century, for example, marriage stripped a woman of her independent legal identity and merged it into that of her husband. The law also gave husbands control over their wives' property and earnings. Justice Hugo Black described this marital unity doctrine as follows, "this rule has worked out in reality to mean that though the husband and wife are one, the one is the husband."[31]

Over the past century, marriage as a legal institution has become less hierarchical, less privileged, more egalitarian, and more privatized. Changes in state marriage and divorce law have transformed the nature of the marriage relationship from being a public status to something resembling a private contract. (When marriage is defined as a status, the state determines the obligations of the relationship and the conditions under which it may be entered and terminated. When it is viewed as a private contract, the obligations and terms of dissolution are determined largely by the couple.)

Any attempt to reinvigorate marriage as a legal status must therefore confront the question of whether it is possible to privilege marriage without also privileging gender inequality.

Over the past century, marriage as a legal institution has become less hierarchical, less privileged, more egalitarian, and more privatized.

What More Do We Need To Know?

In addition to having acquired some understanding of the causes of the changes in marital behavior, researchers and practitioners are learning a lot more about the typical stages, pressures and challenges of contemporary marriages and the factors that account for success and failure.

However many gaps and questions remain. The vital statistics system which collects data on marriage and divorce is seriously inadequate. We need much better basic data about marriage, divorce and cohabitation to be able to track and understand trends especially across different population groups. We also need to develop much better measures, for example, of the quality of couple and marriage relationships which at present are largely based on self-reports of levels of satisfaction.

Some of the big questions about marriage that we need to research and discuss include the following:

? Is the institution of marriage simply going through a period of struggle and transition, to be restructured and stabilized along more egalitarian lines? Or is it disappearing, like the dinosaurs, to be replaced by a variety of alternative family forms?

? Why is there such an increase in unmarried couples living together and what is the impact of cohabitation on the institution of marriage? How do cohabiting patterns vary by income?

? Why do eight out of ten births occur outside of marriage in distressed inner city communities? Has marriage disappeared in these communities and is it no longer valued? (We have a few clues that is not the case. Many couples are cohabiting, and will later marry each other or someone else.)

? Why do out-of-wedlock and divorce rates differ so widely by state and geographic region?

? What are the patterns of marriage, divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing in different racial and religious groups in the U.S.? How have marriages in different immigrant populations been affected by their exposure to the sexual values and gender roles of the dominant American culture?

? From the point of view of children, how many divorces are "unnecessary?" In other words, when should parents put the interests of their children ahead of their own happiness and refrain from divorce? What is a "good enough" marriage?

? Many children are exposed to serious parental conflict, including physical violence within marriage. Do we know how to reduce violent conflict between couples?

? How important to the quality and stability of marriage is chastity before marriage and/or fidelity within it?

? What are the likely costs and benefits of various strategies and interventions designed to strengthen marriage? Which are most likely to be successful?

Research cannot by itself answer all these questions which involve value dilemmas and judgements that need to be discussed and debated in the public arena. However, better data and research about couples and marriage are urgently needed to inform these discussions and ensure that new policy and program proposals are at least grounded in what we know.

IV. Strategies to Strengthen and Support Marriage

There is a growing momentum in states and communities to take action and do something about the crisis in fatherlessness and strengthen marriage. Laws, policies, and programs not only reflect cultural values and community norms about marriage but also help to shape them. Hence the strategies discussed below, if they become widespread, will undoubtedly both signal and shape shifts in cultural values towards making marriage a higher priority.

Many different approaches are underway or being proposed. However for the most part they are not well known.

Together, these strategies are designed to:

- Educate the public about marriage and its benefits;
- Remove economic barriers and disincentives to marriage;
- Restore marriage as a legal status with accompanying obligations as well as privileges;
- Give individuals and couples the information, knowledge and skills needed to create better, more long lasting marriages; and
- Create a community, work, and social/cultural environment that helps couples cope with the inevitable pressures, crises and challenges of contemporary marriage.

Provide Public Education and Information

The first essential step to placing marriage on the public agenda is to educate policy officials, community leaders, and the general public about why marriage is important, what is happening to marriage and why and what we can do about it. Some argue that the decline in marriage is a major public health problem and recommend a national public health campaign be launched to make the case for strengthening marriage. Others are wary of such direct government involvement and point out there are many other avenues that can be used to provide information to the public about marriage.

Several types of information need to be shared. **First,** to make the case for marriage as a public issue, we need to share facts about the health and other benefits of marriage and the costs and consequences of divorce and nonmarital childbearing.

Second, the public generally, and all couples planning to marry need to be informed about the legal and moral obligations, rights and benefits of marriage. (Typically couples only learn about these when they apply to get divorced.)

Third, we need to find ways to promote an ongoing discussion about the purpose of marriage, both its personal rewards and benefits to society.

Fourth, everyone who interacts with young people needs to learn about and discuss with them the predictable stages, challenges and crises of marriage. This would serve to make individuals and couples' expectations about marriage more realistic, normalize some of their difficulties, and make it easier for them to seek advice and help from others.

Fifth, there needs to be greater resources available to couples—information, education and assistance—to help make their relationships more successful and to turn to when they are in serious trouble.

Finally, there needs to be broad public discussion about the various options and strategies to strengthen marriage that need to be initiated at national, state and community level.

Improve Data and Research

Sound marriage policy and programs need to be based on sound information. However, since marriage has had low priority, public investment in the necessary data and research has been minimal. (Generally, private foundations have not funded studies on marriage or marriage programs.) It is thus not surprising that there are so many gaps in our understanding about why people enter and leave a marriage, choose not to marry, or why some marriages are good and others bad. For example the failure to collect adequate information on cohabitation, seriously limits our understanding of behavior and leads to skewing many statistics (e.g., child poverty.) It is even difficult to find out what *is* known, since there are no reports that synthesize the basic research about marriage, cohabitation, divorce and remarriage.

It is ironic that, just at the moment when marriage is surfacing as a public issue, the government's investment in collecting marriage and divorce data is on the decline. The basic national source of information is the marriage and divorce registration data collected by county and state public health officials. However, unlike birth and death data, marriage and divorce data are of very uneven quality and not available for all states. In 1995 the National Center on Health Statistics, in response to budget cuts, decided to cut back on compiling national data from state reports on marriage and divorce. This means that we cannot adequately describe trends in marriage and divorce across or within states. This lack of good information will seriously handicap governors' and state legislators' ability to design and assess policies to strengthen marriage.

Some marriage and divorce data is also collected by the Census Bureau and other offices throughout the federal government, but generally only as background variables. No federal agency or research office has the responsibility for keeping track of what we are learning about marriage and divorce. Two federal offices within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) however, are funding some useful studies: the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development and the National Institute of Mental Health.

Developing a coherent national research agenda on couples and marriage is a major challenge. The new Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, a coordinating body, is taking the first step to find out what data is being collected related to marriage and family formation throughout the federal government in order to identify gaps and decide how best to address them. However, this small effort will not bear fruit until senior administration officials and members of Congress decide to make marriage a priority and invest modest resources in improving data collection and research efforts.

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Remove Economic Disincentives for Marriage

Economic factors are often amenable to policy intervention, so it is natural that policy officials, especially at the federal level, should turn to tax and welfare remedies to influence marriage and childbearing.

Tax reform and marriage. In the past there have been many attempts to reduce the marriage penalty in the tax code, and a few adjustments have been made. In 1998, Republican legislators once again introduced proposals to eliminate or reduce the marriage penalty in the tax code. While these proposals have popular appeal, tax policy is a cumbersome and costly strategy to strengthen marriage. The tax system is very complex, and changing it is a highly complicated, technical matter. There are approximately sixty provisions in the federal tax code that address marriage. These create as many marriage bonuses as there are penalties,[12] and it is difficult to reduce the penalties without also affecting the bonuses. Since all taxpayers are affected by such changes it is extremely costly and politically very difficult to get rid of the marriage penalty.

Arguments supporting these proposals are in part based on grounds of equity, but also in the belief that tax penalties serve as an incentive to divorce or barrier to marriage. In fact, studies suggest that the behavioral effects of the tax code are minimal for most of the population. Few make decisions to marry or divorce based on the receipt or loss of a few hundred dollars. (There is some anecdotal evidence that growing numbers of elderly couples who live together forgo marriage for financial reasons.)

However, there is evidence that the much larger penalties faced by low-income workers in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) may indeed be a significant deterrent for those who live at the economic margin. The interaction between EITC and welfare programs creates a very sizeable marriage penalty for low-income working couples who decide to marry. (For example, a man and a woman who each have one child, and who both work full time at the minimum wage, stand to lose as much as $8,000 per year in higher taxes and lost benefits if they marry.)[13] None of the 1998 proposals to reduce the marriage penalty address the substantial penalties facing low-income wage earners in the EITC.

Welfare reform and marriage. For many years welfare has been attacked as anti-family. By providing assistance only to single parent households it inadvertently encourages marital break-up and out-of-wedlock births. This critique has persisted, although since 1962 states have had the option to offer welfare aid to poor two-parent families that met certain eligibility requirements. In 1990 it became mandatory to do so.

In 1996, the Congress enacted sweeping welfare reform legislation designed to "end welfare as we know it." Most public attention has focused on the new law's stringent work requirements and time limits on benefits. But the desire to do something about illegitimacy and marriage was a prime motivation of the bill's authors. In addition to promoting work and reducing dependency, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reform Act (PRWORA) establishes additional goals: "promoting marriage, reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing, and the encouragement and maintenance of two-parent families." Thus PRWORA is the first federal law to explicitly promote marriage.

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In the new welfare block grants program, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), states are given much greater flexibility to define who gets what kinds of benefits and services and what their obligations are. States that succeed in reducing non-marital births without increasing abortion rates will receive performance bonuses. No guidance has been offered to states about how they should promote marriage or reduce out-of wedlock childbearing, although HHS has launched an initiative to promote state and local public/private partnerships to reduce teen pregnancy.

Most state welfare agencies have taken action to ensure their welfare programs are at least more marriage neutral by deleting the 100 hour employment rule in the two-parent program (formerly ADFC-UP). Other more radical changes that would actually "privilege" marriage, such as giving married, two-parent families priority for public housing benefits, have not yet been enacted and are likely to run into strong resistance.[14]

As increasing numbers of mothers leave the welfare rolls and get jobs, there is a growing appreciation that many are unlikely to earn enough to support their children. This reinforces efforts to focus on both parents as a source of income. Efforts to collect child support from the dads who can pay are being tightened, and current policy towards young never-married fathers who generally cannot pay is being reassessed.

Promote Responsible, Committed, and Involved Fatherhood

In response to the growing concern about fatherlessness, national initiatives in the public and private sector are underway to reconnect fathers to their children. This emerging fatherhood movement is another source of interest in removing economic and program barriers to marriage.

Until a few years ago, policy officials' interest in fathers rested solely on improving efforts to collect child support from "deadbeat" dads. However in 1994 Vice President Gore's Family Reunion III Conference, *The Role of Men in Children's Lives*, led to President Clinton's 1995 Executive Order encouraging federal agencies to strengthen the role of fathers in families. These led to an interdepartmental effort to focus much more broadly on men and fathers in government data collection and research, programs and policies.

At the same time the private, nonprofit National Fatherhood Initiative has launched a highly visible public education campaign to acknowledge the important role of fathers in children's lives and to promote responsible, committed and involved fatherhood. And several private foundations are funding academic centers, such as the National Center on Fathers and Families at the University of Pennsylvania as well as numerous community-based fatherhood programs.

A major concern of these fatherhood initiatives, especially those located in low-income, minority communities, is what to do about unmarried couples, who may or may not be living together, and whose relationships are typically fragile. Policies designed to maximize the collection of child support from middle-income, non-custodial fathers often have the effect of driving low-income dads away from their children. Poor non-custodial fathers typically have low skills, no employment history, a history of substance abuse and involvement with the criminal justice system, and intermittent earnings at best. Innovative demonstration programs are finding ways to reconnect these fathers to their children and thereby motivate them to turn their lives around. They also help them get access to job search, training, and job placement services to enable them to contribute to their child's support.[35]

The success of these initiatives to connect fathers to their children is highly dependent on the cooperation and support of the children's mothers. Fatherhood programs are thus targeting their efforts around the time of the child's birth when the relationship between the couple is generally the most favorable. And other efforts to help young parents learn cooperative, "team parenting" are just beginning. In a few cases, these apparently lead the couples to marry.

These responsible fatherhood programs have gained considerable attention at state level. In January 1998, the National Governors' Association set up a Task Force on Responsible Fatherhood. A few states are experimenting with offering employment-related services to non-custodial fathers, and some plan to use Department of Labor Welfare to Work grants for this purpose.

At the national level, in February 1998, Rep.Clay Shaw, (R-FL) Chairman of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources, introduced a bill to provide $2 billion over five years in Fathers Count block grants to states to fund community efforts to promote responsible fatherhood and marriage.

Change State Laws to Strengthen Marriage

Since marriage is a legal institution it is natural to turn to changes in state family law to try to restore the primacy of marriage. The majority of the changes proposed thus far focus on the back-end, making divorce more difficult. However some states are beginning to think about enacting laws that focus on the front-end, preparing couples to make better marriages.

Making Divorce More Difficult.[15] It is unclear to what extent the enactment of no-fault divorce in the early seventies contributed to the increase in divorce rates. But the new drive for divorce reform is not basically research driven. It derives its strength from the conviction that the law should send a clear value message that couples need to take marriage more seriously. In this regard it reflects the view of the majority of Americans who think that divorce should be more difficult. Support for reform is especially strong among adults under the age of 30, the generation that suffered widespread divorce as children.

The field of divorce law reform is very complicated and is attracting attention from policy officials, the legal community, and advocates. The initial wave of state divorce reform proposals, which have for the most part not been enacted, addressed several different goals: to make it less easy for one party to unilaterally end the marriage, to create a longer waiting period to give couples time to change their minds especially when children are involved, and to address the inequitable financial effects of divorce especially for many women and children.

While it is possible that such legal reforms may deter a few divorces, they are very unlikely to improve the quality of couples' relationships. Moreover, some fear that policies to make divorce more difficult may also undermine the institution by making couples less likely to marry, and, for many the problem of non-marriage (i.e., cohabitation and non-marital childbearing) is as serious a problem as divorce. Lastly, these back-end strategies tend to make people defensive and protective of the "right to divorce" and discourage them from investing in the topic of marriage.

The Louisiana Covenant Marriage Act, passed into law in August 1997, has received a lot of attention in the press, and by the spring of 1998 at least two dozen states were considering similar covenant marriage proposals. (In May 1998 Arizona enacted a similar law.) The Louisiana law includes an amalgam of reform ideas, making it a little harder to get divorced by restricting the allowable grounds, lengthening the waiting period, and requiring counseling before a divorce is granted. It also requires couples to sign a form to say that they have been informed about the consequences of divorce.

The most innovative feature is that engaged couples must choose whether they wish to be married under the existing law or to be married under the new covenant contract. This choice, the advocates state, forces engaged couples to think more seriously about the meaning of a marital commitment. Only a small percentage of newly wed couples have thus far chosen the covenant contract, although apparently many hundreds of already-married couples have chosen to renew their vows under the covenant law. (Some churches will only marry couples who choose the covenant contract.)

Critics of the law have come from different quarters. Some remain skeptical of its effects, pointing out that those who are most likely to need the covenant contract are the least likely to choose it. But critics and advocates alike agree that the passage of the law has stirred up a long overdue discussion and debate about the value and meaning of marital commitment. (One young wit quipped that covenant laws promote marriage "dark", whereas citywide ordinances to permit heterosexual, unmarried couples to register as domestic partners are promoting marriage "lite.")

The majority of the changes proposed thus far focus on the back-end, making divorce more difficult. However some states are beginning to think about enacting laws that focus on the front-end, preparing couples to make better marriages.

Prepare Couples to Make Better Marriages

A few states, such as Michigan, have proposed laws that focus on the front-end and require or encourage engaged couples to take marriage preparation or marriage counseling before granting them a marriage license. Many leading marriage educators favor incentives but oppose legal requirements, fearing government regulation and the encroachment of the state in what they believe is essentially a religious domain. Others worry that the pressure to license and credential only certain categories of professionals to provide marriage education would result in depriving the field of one of its major assets — trained volunteers. Still others point out that, whatever the substantive merits of these proposals, requirements are premature. There are currently not nearly enough trained marriage educators to be able to carry out such a legal mandate.

In May 1998, the Florida legislature passed the Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act of 1998, (which was signed by Governor Chiles in June.) The vote was unanimous in the Senate and overwhelming in the House. The bill's prime sponsor was Rep. Elaine Bloom (D) from Miami Beach, who worked with the director of Florida's Christian Coalition, John Dowless, to draft a bill that would obtain the support of liberals and conservatives. The preamble to the bill states "the State has a compelling interest in educating its citizens with regard to marriage, and if contemplated, the effects of divorce."

The bill has four key components, and several of them are unique.

- High school students are required to take a course in marriage and relationship skill-based education. (This is the first state to make such a requirement.)

- Engaged couples are encouraged to take a premarital preparation course of at least four hours. Those who do so can get a reduction in their marriage license fee. Each courthouse will have a roster of religious and secular sponsored approved courses.

- Each couple applying for a marriage license will be given a handbook prepared by the Florida Bar Association informing them of their legal rights and responsibilities as married partners to each other and to their children both during marriage and upon dissolution.

- Couples with children who file for divorce must take a parent education and family stabilization course. (Many states require similar courses for divorcing parents.)

Learn How to Make Better Marriages

Marriage, like babies, comes with no instructions. Parents however do not hesitate to turn to books or pregnancy and parenting classes for information, or ask for advice from friends or pediatricians about what they need to do to care for their children. In contrast, few newly married couples buy books, attend courses, or ask for advice on how to be better spouses and take good care of each other. Marriage educators urge us to approach marriage in the same way we approach parenthood. In addition to relying on our instincts and experience, we need to seek out information and learn about how to make the relationship work.

Research-Basis for Marriage Education. Marriage preparation programs which in the past were typically restricted to one or two meetings with the minister or priest are not new, but have been widely used in the Catholic Church and sporadically in other denominations.[17] Within the past 15-20 years, the field of couples and marriage education has made great strides in part due to the findings of marital researchers, such as John Gottman of the University of Washington, who have learned a lot about couple relationships and what makes some marriages succeed and others fail.[18]

Research has found that, contrary to much popular opinion, the key to marital success is not whether you choose a compatible mate, or indeed whether you can manage to stay "in love." Rather it is dependent on the kind of relationship you build and how you handle your differences.

Developments in brain research have created a solid grounding in basic science for what marriage educators are trying to accomplish. Neuroscientists have been able to pinpoint the areas of the brain that are responsible for feelings and emotions, and show the precise

pathways that link emotional memory and processes with the rational parts of our brain. Daniel Goleman (1995) has popularized this rich body of brain research in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, in which he asserts that emotional illiteracy is responsible for many of our social problems, including our marriage problems. Happily he writes, our emotional intelligence appears to be more malleable than rational intelligence, and many of the relationship skills essential to good marriages (e.g. empathy, self-awareness and self-control), can be learned.

The best of these educational programs are research-based and designed to teach individuals the information and specific skills needed to make good marriage choices, develop realistic expectations about marriage, and learn how to effectively communicate, resolve differences, and sustain commitment with one's partner.[39] Some programs also emphasize the importance of becoming more aware of the two different family/ethnic cultures, and accompanying sets of expectations and life experiences that each partner brings to their union that can so dramatically affect its course. These programs do not promote a particular model of marriage, how roles and tasks are shared, but they do assume that men as well as women can learn relationship skills and need to respect each other as equal partners to make the marriage work.

Marriage educators urge us to approach marriage in the same way we approach parenthood. In addition to relying on our instincts and experience, we need to seek out information and learn about how to make the relationship work.

Couples and marriage education is provided through written information and courses, marriage mentoring, and other supportive activities provided to adult couples primarily by the faith community, but also in freestanding or university-based centers. Most premarital and marriage education is offered on a group basis, and many of the educators are trained lay people. Among the best known programs are: The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Relationship Enhancement, Couple Communication, Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS), and PREPARE/ENRICH.

Different models of marriage education are used successfully across the couple life cycle with high school students, courting and engaged couples, with couples who want to enrich a "good enough" marriage, remarried and blended families, and seriously troubled couples. To date, marriage education is mostly available to middle class, white couples. A particular challenge is to adapt it to African-American, Latino, and other minority populations and expand both religious and secular avenues to make these programs more accessible, especially to low-income couples.

Marriage Mentors.

Marriage mentoring is one of the most interesting aspects of the newly emerging field of marriage education. Mentors are long-time married couples who are lay members of the sponsoring church and who serve as a resource to engaged, newly married, and/or seriously troubled couples. Marriage mentoring has not yet been the subject of study. Since mentoring has been found to be an effective, low-cost strategy in the field of youth development, it is important to explore its potential for helping support marriage.

Is Marriage Education Effective?

At the FIS June 1997 roundtable meeting, two views were presented about what was known about the effectiveness of couples and marriage education.[40] One researcher spoke of the glass being "half-empty," and pointed out that, for the most part, these programs have not been rigorously evaluated. Another researcher believed the glass was "half-full." He pointed out that since the preponderance of studies all identify the same basic skills (communication, conflict

resolution and commitment) as key factors in marital success, this knowledge was enough to act upon, given the urgency of the problem. Both agreed that it is very difficult to overcome inevitable selection biases that arise when participants in the control group drop out of the study. Most studies suggest that any positive effects tend to wear out after a few years, suggesting that "booster" sessions are needed.

Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE).

At present the field is largely dominated by a few, highly energetic and creative researchers and practitioner leaders. Most have joined the newly formed Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education. The Coalition was founded in January 1996 by Diane Sollee, a marriage and family therapist who came to the conclusion that therapy was an ineffective and costly approach to the crisis in marriage. Convinced that couples can learn how to have a good marriage, Sollee singlehandedly set out to pull together the fragmented field of marriage educators. The Coalition has grown rapidly in strength, numbers and influence. The annual conference, *Smart Marriages*, has been the focus of her highly successful efforts to promote communication and networking and catalyze new ideas. In addition, through establishing an Internet Directory of Providers, an e-mail newsletter, and intensive work with the media, Sollee has helped to unify and connect the field and introduce it to the wider public.

Over the course of a year over a hundred articles and broadcast segments have appeared in the major media outlets. CMFCE's annual conference program demonstrates the wide array of creative research and practice applications, and the growing number of sponsors and settings in which these courses and workshops are being offered, including high school classes, childbirth clinics, HMOs, church basements and community mental health centers. Efforts to train more marriage educators to meet the growing demand are mushrooming. For example, at the 1997 Smart Marriages conference 200 marriage educators were certified in post-conference institutes and at the 1998 Conference 400 have signed up for training.

Marriage Counseling and Therapy.

Marital counseling and therapy provided by trained mental health professionals remains an important back up service to help sustain and rebuild shaky marriages. But studies show that only a very small proportion of couples in troubled marriages seek professional help voluntarily. The Louisiana Covenant Marriage Law and the 1996 British Divorce Reform Act have gone beyond voluntary approaches to require mental health counseling for couples who are filing for divorce. Although sometimes very helpful, most therapeutic interventions are offered too late to keep couples together. Hence increasing numbers of marriage therapists are becoming involved in the more preventive, educational interventions. Another barrier is that third party payors such as Medicaid or private insurers, who pay for individual counseling and therapy, seldom reimburse for the cost of treating couples. Nor is there any public funding available for these services. In contrast, both the British and the Australian governments have for many years provided modest levels of funding to nonprofit organizations to provide couples and marriage guidance, counseling, and other support services to couples.[41]

Mobilize Religious and Community Support

Since the vast majority of people in America marry under religious auspices, religious institutions clearly have a special responsibility towards marriage. A few have always taken this responsibility seriously, and offered substantive marriage preparation and enrichment programs and marriage ministries to troubled couples. Most have not, and increasingly are being challenged to do so.

Community Marriage Policy.

Perhaps the most promising and innovative marriage strengthening strategy bubbling up from the community level is Community Marriage Policy (CMP).[42] This is a strategy rooted in the religious sector and was originally conceived of and promoted by Michael McManus, a syndicated religious journalist and author of Marriage Savers (1993, 1995). McManus was appalled at the devastating effects of divorce. Noting that close to 74 percent of all marriages are blessed by organized religion and 40 percent attend church weekly, McManus began challenging U.S. clergy to take their responsibilities more seriously. He asserted that in every congregation there are couples with strong marriages who could be of help to other couples, but have never been asked, inspired or trained to do so.

In a (CMP) initiative, clergy and congregations in a community get together and agree upon a set of guidelines for requiring premarital preparation and community support for all marriages that take place within their congregations. At a minimum the program requires that the couple take a premarital inventory, with the results discussed with them by a trained mentoring couple or counselor. The couple also attends several weeks of educational group sessions. The churches are also encouraged to offer a broader array of marriage services including marriage enrichment and ministries to troubled marriage, such as those conducted by Retrouvaille, a Catholic marriage encounter program which uses trained lay couples whose own marriages had once been in serious trouble.

By the spring of 1998, according to McManus, 80 cities had adopted a community marriage policy. Very little is known about what they have done or achieved. McManus reports that county divorce rates have fallen dramatically in several of these communities, but no independent scholars have examined the extent to which the CMP initiatives have been a cause of these declines.

Greater Grand Rapids (MI) Community Marriage Policy.

A few of these CMP's have expanded the model beyond the faith community to involve secular leaders and organizations. The best known is taking place in Greater Grand Rapids, Michigan, where in 1996, the community launched an ambitious community-wide mobilization designed to support children through strengthening marriage. The initiative has some core funding, an executive leader, Dr. Roger Sider, and institutional support from Pine Rest, a Christian community mental health center. It has involved a high caliber and breadth of community leadership, including many civic leaders and health professionals as well as the clergy. They have taken pains to be as inclusive of many different views on marriage. For example, they have been careful to listen to and accommodate the concerns of feminists working with battered women, and minority leaders working with single parent families.

The chairman of the 50-person steering committee is Bill Hardiman, the African-American mayor of Kentwood, (the second largest suburb of Grand Rapids), a very popular and highly respected public official. The business sector, health and legal professions, and many others are being asked to find ways that they can strengthen and support marriage throughout the life cycle. After more than a year's careful planning, in the spring of 1998 the initiative began implementation starting with offering training to ministers and courses to couples. The Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy has set itself a goal of reducing the divorce rate by 25 percent by the year 2010. It will also establish some interim benchmarks of progress towards this goal.

Community Dialogues on Couples and Marriage. The CMP strategy, which focuses on preparation and support for engaged couples or those who are already married, is not designed for low income communities where the large majority of children are born outside of marriage and marriage is viewed as much less of a real option. The voice of the poor has been largely absent from these discussions about marriage. We do not know what those who live and work in these communities think about the relationships between men and women or the strategies needed to help make marriage a rewarding and realistic alternative for these populations. Poor communities have so many problems to deal with – lack of jobs, violence, substance abuse, sex-related diseases, bad housing – it is no surprise that marriage is not on their agenda. Yet most do understand the connection between strong marriages and healthy communities.

A preliminary step we suggest is for community-based organizations who are concerned about the issue of fatherless families to sponsor a series of structured dialogues designed to learn what community leaders, service providers and residents of all ages think about the status of couple relationships and marriage, what factors discourage marriage, and what if anything can be done to improve couple relationships, encourage marriage and assure children of a stable home.

The Family Impact Seminar is currently engaged in a pilot project to work with community based organizations in three poor urban communities — African-American, white, and Latino — to test the process of community dialogues about couples and marriage and see if they generate a better understanding of the issues and some ideas for action.

Create Marriage-Friendly Workplaces

Many studies have documented the interactions between the work and family environment. High levels of stress experienced in the workplace spill over into the home. And intense family problems are often the cause of absenteeism, poor health and poor work productivity.[43] These negative interactions take on even greater significance for today's working parents since most workplace schedules and expectations are still structured around the outdated assumption that married employees can rely on the other parent to take primary responsibility for child care and other domestic tasks.

Over the past two decades, a small but growing number of progressive employers have implemented a range of family-friendly policies and benefits designed to help alleviate work/family strain, including flexible schedules, part-time work with benefits, child care and elder care.[44] Although controversial, some large companies have begun to offer many of these benefits to registered domestic partners, the majority of whom are heterosexual cohabiting couples.

Human resource directors acknowledge that employee assistance programs, originally put in place to provide short term counseling for substance abuse problems spend much of their time dealing with issues of marital conflict and family disruption. Few corporate policies have however been specifically designed to strengthen or support the marriage relationship.

In contrast, for at least two decades, the U.S. Department of Defense has studied the effects of changing family trends on the military and have worried about the effects of single parenthood, marital stress, separations, and disruption on military readiness and productivity. In contrast to the civilian sector, the military salary and housing policies provide financial incentives to marry, and as a result young enlistees have high marriage, but also very high divorce rates. In response, the Navy has recently launched a modest program to train its personnel in marriage education and relationship enhancement programs.

However the majority of employers have not instituted family-friendly policies. For their employees, balancing the demands of work and family life especially when children are young, can place incredible strains on the marriage.

Private sector employers who require frequent transfers also place great strain on marriage and family life. Some of the large global companies have been following the lead of military employers and the foreign service in limiting the frequency of moves, and offer relocation and spousal employment assistance.

However the majority of employers have not instituted family-friendly policies. For their employees, balancing the demands of work and family life especially when children are young, can place incredible strains on the marriage. Before employers are likely to move in this direction they need to be convinced of the costs of marital disruption and stress on work productivity and employee health. Unfortunately there have been very few such estimates to date.

This issue raises larger questions about how our culture, the economy, and institutions can reorder priorities and work expectations to make it possible for fathers and mothers to invest more time and energies in caring for their children.

Part V. Crafting Action Agendas

Thus a guiding principle for any pro-marriage agenda is to engage many different sectors and professions to work together towards the common goal at all levels of society - national, state and community.

The overarching lesson of two decades of effort to reduce teen pregnancy, as well as the early lessons of innovative local welfare reform initiatives, is that no one sector can turn around a deeply embedded, complex social problem. There are no simple solutions, no magic bullets.

The same lesson applies to solutions to the marriage crisis. Since there are many different factors that contribute to the decline in marriage it cannot be reversed by tackling only one cause. Thus a guiding principle for any pro-marriage agenda is to engage many different sectors and professions to work together towards the common goal at all levels of society—national, state and community.

The National Level

The federal government and key national organizations must make marriage a priority and put it on the public agenda. There are numerous roles open to them in crafting and implementing a marriage agenda. They can set the overall direction and tone, provide the informational infrastructure and resources to support the change initiatives at the community level, and make changes in existing national family benefits and service programs.

Federal government

There are a number of actions the federal government could take that would, overtime, help to put marriage on the national agenda.

Set up a broad national inquiry on marriage. Both Great Britain and Australia have had national inquiries into the state of marriage. Following their example, the U.S. federal government could set up some kind of national commission to study the state of marriage in America. At best, a public/private study commission would serve to educate the public, stimulate debate, discuss goals and put forward some constructive proposals.

Improve and expand data and research. The federal government has a unique responsibility to compile and publish what is known about marriage, cohabitation and divorce, to improve the collection of data on marriage and divorce, to fund more and better interdisciplinary research on marriage and family formation, and to launch special demonstrations and program initiatives to learn what kinds of programs help strengthen marriage at a local level.

Modify existing tax and welfare programs to be more supportive of marriage. The federal government can strive to remove tax and welfare barriers and institute incentives to be more supportive of marriage, especially for the low income working couples. The success of welfare reform in this age of devolution, depends, however on decisions largely made at the state and local levels.

Expand the focus of child and family health and social service programs. The federal government also has many other opportunities to expand the current focus of family health and service programs to include fathers and support marriage. For example, the Cooperative Extension Service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has always had broad political support, has for 40 years been offering education about family life management skills and preventive-oriented services to families and youth in every county in the nation. If the Extension Service were funded to launch a special initiative on strengthening marriage, county extension agents could be trained to offer information about marriage, and skills building marriage and couples education courses. Similarly prenatal programs, home visiting programs, Head Start and other early childhood programs, building on some existing promising demonstrations could be encouraged to involve the fathers and their staff trained to focus on the parental couple, not just the mother.

Make government a marriage-friendly employer. The federal government is the nation's largest employer, and in both the civilian and military agencies there are many opportunities to reassess personnel, transfer and employment policies that may contribute to marital conflict and family stress.

National Private Sector Organizations

In the non-governmental sector, professional membership associations of lawyers, educators, health care and social service professionals can also help break the silence and put marriage on the public agenda. They should inform and educate their membership about the value and benefits of marriage, and encourage and train them to think of ways that they can use their professional tools and opportunities to strengthen marriage. The corporate sector can incorporate marriage-friendly policies. Philanthropic foundations can fund research and community based initiatives and programs. United Way and other national service organizations can provide information and technical assistance to their local affiliates to facilitate their efforts to connect fathers to families and strengthen marriage.

The State Level

At the state level, governors and state legislatures, working with the private and nonprofit sectors can choose from a wide array of available strategies to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening marriage. However they first need to engage in a broad-based public education effort to lay the groundwork of understanding and support for particular pro-marriage initiatives. This will be no easy task. Although the case for marriage is compelling, many will be wary or actively hostile, fearing the hidden political agendas.

Creating a public/private, independent task force or study commission on marriage could be a useful first step. Representatives of key state professionals associations (lawyers, health care professionals, educators) and religious and community leaders need to participate in such a body. The Commission could review the patterns of marriage, divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing across the states, consider and debate the case for marriage and strive to develop a consensus on goals. The next step would be to discuss and review strategies to be initiated in the public and private sector. The following is a very preliminary suggestion of actions that could be considered by such a Commission. Undoubtedly, when bringing such a group together, many other creative suggestions will be put forward.

Governors and state legislatures, working with the private and nonprofit sectors can choose from a wide array of available strategies to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening marriage.

Strengthen our knowledge base. Improve the quantity and quality of marriage and divorce data collected by counties; track and report on these trends and the numbers of children living in single-parent and two-parent households state-wide and by county.

Public education. Compile summaries of the facts about marriage and divorce, and the findings of research on successful relationships to share with the media and the public generally.

Remove financial barriers to marriage. Institute changes in the welfare, employment and other programs to help low income non-custodial fathers connect with their children, fulfill their economic responsibilities, and improve the relationship between the parents. Assess and then modify state marriage tax penalties.

Encourage marriage preparation and education. Offer incentives to engaged couples to enroll in marriage preparation and education programs and help communities expand the number of programs offered. Require relationship education be incorporated into high school curricula.

Provide information about marriage. Currently all hospitals and birthing facilities must by federal mandate provide information to unmarried birth fathers and mothers about the benefits to children of paternity establishment and the father's responsibility to provide support. Similarly states could require that couples applying for marriage licenses be given information about the rights and responsibilities of marriage, the consequences of divorce, and resources for further information and help.

Divorce law reforms. Change the grounds and procedures for divorce to create a waiting period when children are involved and require parents to participate in divorce mediation and/or parenting education. Establish the option of "covenant" marriage contracts.

Encourage assistance for troubled marriages. Require health insurance plans to provide coverage for marriage counseling and treatment.

The Community Level

All of the above actions are aimed at affecting the information, attitudes and behaviors of men and women who live and work in communities. They will be more likely to be effective when the communities themselves have collectively decided they want to take steps to do something to strengthen marriage. As discussed above, there are several ways to go about putting marriage on the community agenda.

Community Marriage Policy initiatives, as noted, are already underway in about 80 metropolitan areas. Their core purpose is to mobilize the faith community but a few areas, such as Greater Grand Rapids in Michigan, have moved beyond to involve the civic, professional and non-profit leadership as well. The strategy is young and still unproven in terms of long term results, but is clearly raising awareness, stimulating discussion and debate, and catalyzing cooperation across denominations and sectors.

Community Dialogues. The Community Marriage Policy strategy, which focuses on preparation and support for engaged couples or those who are already married, is not designed for low income communities where the large majority of children are born outside of marriage, and marriage is viewed as much less of a real option. In these communities, initiating structured dialogues on couples and marriage is a promising initial step.

What are some of the concrete actions that these community based initiatives can take to strengthen and support marriage?

Public Education About Marriage. Communities can make available basic information and education to the public, and especially young men and women, about the benefits of marriage, rights and responsibilities, how to prepare for marriage and make marriage work. This information can be disseminated through various media outlets (articles in the printed press, public service announcements and radio talk shows, etc.) and by the clergy, health care professionals, marriage registry offices and justices of the peace, employers, lawyers, educators, and the bridal industry, among others.

Marriage preparation, education and support programs. Communities can make available a variety of marriage preparation and education programs and informal supports tailored to the needs of different income levels, for those who are religious and those who are not. These can be offered under the auspices of houses of worship and faith-based organizations, health and mental health centers, public/private schools, cooperative extension, nonprofit service organizations, youth programs, and financial institutions (who teach couples courses in financial planning and money management). The community will need to find the resources to invest in ongoing training of the professionals and volunteer mentor couples who will conduct these education programs. (The training is not lengthy or expensive.)

Responsible Fatherhood Programs for Fragile Families. Third, to address the needs of low income, "fragile" families, community-based programs can work with public sector agencies and private foundations to establish responsible fatherhood programs, connect fathers to their children, provide job search, skills training and job placement to unemployed fathers, offer fatherhood support groups, and workshops and counseling in "team/cooperative parenting" and anger management.

Conclusion

In crisis there is always opportunity. There is reason to hope that marriage can be transformed into a stronger, more stable and vibrant institution in which both partners can accept each others' imperfections, realize self-fulfillment and be more free to create more perfect unions that work best for them.

In addition to the public agendas outlined above, there is much that we can do in our private lives. As noted in the 1995 Council on Families in America report on marriage, "No one sector of society is responsible for the decline in marriage. We are all part of the problem and must all be a part of the solution..... All of us can consider ways in which we as individuals, on a daily basis, can demonstrate support for the marriages in which we are involved, as spouse, parent, child, or other relative."[45]

We can talk realistically about marriage — its meaning and value as well as its challenges and difficulties. We can give young couples marriage education courses as wedding gifts — a lifetime investment. We can make it normal and desirable to seek advice and help from friends or professionals when our marriages go through troubled periods. We can join with others to set up policies and programs in our neighborhoods and cities that strengthen and support marriages.

In our professional and public capacities we can conduct research, develop and enact policies and programs, inform our colleagues, and in a host of other ways show that marriage is an institution that matters and deserves our attention and support.

Marriage is a resilient institution but it needs care and attention. We must stop taking it for granted. It will survive the present crisis if young couples learn that marriage is like a garden which needs good seeds and soil and constant tending by skillful gardeners. If neglected, the garden becomes overgrown with weeds and thorns and is an unpleasant place to be. But even the best gardeners need assistance from other sources — the rain, sun and fertilizers — to make the garden bloom. Just so do couples need information, advice, encouragement and support from family, friends, community and the public for their marriages to survive and flourish.

This era of intense social upheaval and change has challenged and stressed traditional patterns of marriage and created much pain and difficulty for adults and children alike. Yet in crisis there is always opportunity. There is reason to hope that marriage can be transformed into a stronger, more stable and vibrant institution in which both partners can accept each others' imperfections, realize self-fulfillment and be free to create more perfect unions that work best for them. If this happens, their children, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be the grateful beneficiaries.

End Notes

[1]In 1984 FIS began several years of work on young unwed fathers which resulted in a conference report and book edited by Lerman and Ooms (1993).

[2]I first heard the term "the M word" used by William Doherty, Ph.D. University of Minnesota.

[3]Thornton, (1995) p.211.

[4]McLanahan and Sanderfur (1994).

[5]Amato and Booth, (1997). In this well designed, longitudinal study, the authors report that only one third of divorces occur as a result of high conflict relationships. In these cases the children are clearly better off when their parents divorce. In the other two thirds, from the children's perspective, the divorce appeared to be unnecessary and harmful.

[6]See Blankenhorn (1995), Bronfenbrenner (1990), Doherty et al. (1998), National Center on Fathers and Families (1997), and Popenoe (1996).

[7]See Waite (1995) and forthcoming.

[8]See Waite, *ibid.*

[9]Forthofer *et al.* (1996).

[10]Council on Civil Society (1998).

[11]Lerman (1990) and Sawhill (1992).

[12]We do not discuss the controversy about same-sex marriage or domestic partnerships in this report since these are highly divisive issues and the Family Impact Seminar is seeking to find areas of common ground on marriage.

[13]Rubenstein ed.,(1990) p.xii.

[14]The Atlantic Monthly article summarizing the research findings, "Dan Quayle Was Right: The Re-education of Sara McLanahan," by Barbara Whitehead (December, 1993) launched a highly charged debate about the merits of two-parent versus one-parent families. Two years later the Council on Families in America (1995) issued a bold report, *Marriage in America*, calling for national attention to shift from divorce to marriage. Since then mainstream news publications as diverse as the *Wall Street Journal, Esquire*, the *New Republic, American Enterprise, Slate, Governing Magazine*, the *Public Interest, Washington Post , USA Today*, the *Weekly Standard, Washington Times* and *Policy Review* have featured major stories on marriage and divorce.

[15]Pittman (1998) p.159.

[16]This discussion is adapted from *Marriage in America*, a report of the Council on Families in America, March 1995. p.10-11.

[17]Whitehead, 1996, p.7

[18]Cherlin, (1992).

[19]Bumpass and Sweet (1995).

[20]Sawhill (1998) and Tucker (1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[21]*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1997, Table 631.

[22]Wilson (1987) and Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan eds. (1995).

[23]Lichter (1995).

[24]Mare and Winship (1991).

[25]Wilson (1996) p.97

[26]Moffit (1998) in the Roundtable Volume.

[27]Thornton (1995).

[28]National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy *(May, 1997), Whatever Happened to Childhood? The Problem of Teen Pregnancy in the United States.* Washington, DC: Author. page 5.

[29]Whitehead (1996) and Bellah et al, (1987)

[30]See Wax (1998) and Singer (1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[31]United States v. Yeazell, 382 U.S. 31,361 (1966) (Black, J. dissenting).

[32]Congressional Budget Office (1997).

[33]Steuerle(1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[34]Horn and Bush (1997).

[35]Johnson and Pouncy (in press).

[36]See Simmons ed. (March 1998).

[37]Silliman (1998) and McCord (1998) in Roundtable Volume and Center for Marriage and the Family (1995).

[38]Gottman (1994).

[39]Guerney (1998) and Sollee (1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[40]Bradbury (1998) and Stanley (1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[41]See Roberts (1998) and Andrews and Andrews (1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[42]Community Marriage Policy and Marriage Savers are trademarked by Harriet and Michael McManus. See their paper in Roundtable Volume.

[43]Forthofer et al. (1996).

[44]Friedman (1998) in Roundtable Volume.

[45]Council on Families in America (1995) p.17.

The Decline in Marriage 1970-1996

(Data on Marriage and the Status of Children)

1 Married

The proportion of adults currently married has declined from 72 percent in 1970 to 60 percent in 1996. The decline has been significant for all races and ethnic groups, but has been most pronounced for Blacks.

Percent of Adult Population Married		
	1970	1996
All adults	72	60
Whites	73	63
Blacks	64	42
Hispanics	72	58

2 Divorced

Divorced adults are the most rapidly growing marital status category. The proportion of adults currently divorced has more than tripled, from 3 percent of the adult population in 1970 to 10 percent in 1996.

3 Never-Married

In 1996 there were more than twice as many adults who had never married (45 million) as in 1970 (21 million). The proportion of adults who have never married rose from 16 percent in 1970 to 23 percent in 1996. This rise has been most rapid among both men and women in their late twenties and early thirties.

4 Unmarried-Couple Households (Cohabitation)

The number of households composed of couples of the opposite sex increased seven fold between 1970 (0.5 million) and 1996 (3.7 million). In 1970 there was one unmarried-couple household for every 100 married couple households; today there are seven.

5 Age When First Married

The age of first marriage rose by 15-20 percent between 1970 and 1996. The median age of women when first married rose from 21 to 25 and of men from 23 to 27 during this period.

6 Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing

The proportion of births occurring to unmarried mothers has risen dramatically for all races and ethnic groups. The proportion is highest for Blacks, but the rate of increase has been most rapid for Whites.

Percent of Births to Unmarried Mothers		
	1970	1996
All births	11	32
Whites	6	26
Blacks	38	70
Hispanics	n.a	41

7 LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN

Single Parent Families

The proportion of children who live with only one parent has more than doubled since 1970. Again, the proportion is highest for Black children, but the rise has been steepest for Whites.

Percent of Children Living With One Parent		
	1970	1996
All children	12	28
Whites	9	22
Blacks	32	57
Hispanics	n.a	33

8 FAMILY COMPOSITION, MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND POVERTY

Child Poverty and Family Composition

Between 1975 and 1996 the proportion of families with children living in poverty rose from 13 to 17 percent. This rise in child poverty was due to the increase in the proportion of female-headed families, since these families are far more likely to be poor than married couple families or families headed by single fathers.

Percent of Families With Children Living in Poverty

	1975	1996
All families with children	13	17
Families with children headed by:		
Married-couples	7	8
Female householders with no husband	44	42
Male householders with no wife	12	20

9 Poverty and Marital Relationships of Single Mothers

Single mothers (and their children) are also far more likely to be poor if they have never married, or are separated, than if divorced.

Percent of Custodial Mothers Living in Poverty

	1991
All custodial mothers	35
Married	12
Divorced	29
Separated	55
Never-married	56

SOURCES

(1), (2), (3), (4), (5) U.S. Bureau of the Census, (March, 1998) *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1996. P.* 20-496

(6) Department of Health and Human Services, (September, 1995) *Report to Congress on Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing*, 1995, Table I-3; DHHS Pub. No. (PHS) 95-1257; National Center on Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Volume 46, Number 1, Supplement 2, Table 6

(7) U.S. Bureau of the Census (March, 1998) *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1996: P.* 20-496. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present* "www.census.gov" Tables CH-2, CH-3, April 1998

(8) U.S. Bureau of the Census, (September, 1997). Current Population Reports, P60-198, *Poverty in the U.S.*, Table C-3. The federal government uses legal marriage as its criterion for a two-parent couple, but marital status is self-reported. Thus, cohabiting couples will mostly, but not necessarily, be included in single-parent households.

(9)) U.S. Bureau of the Census, (September, 1995). Current Population Reports, P60-187, *Child Support for Custodial Mothers and Fathers, 1991*. Table 2

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Organizations

The following national organizations are resources for information about marriage research, programs, services and policy.

Contact: Karen Gautney
Director of Professional Development (AAMFT)
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American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) is the professional association for the field of marriage and family therapy. Since its founding in 1942, its members have been involved with the problems, needs and changing patterns of couples, marriage and family relationships. The association facilitates research, theory development and education and develops standards for graduate education, clinical supervision, professional ethics and clinical practice. Marriage and family therapists are qualified to treat marital distress and conflict and a full range of mental and emotional disorders and health problems.

Contact: Diane Sollee,
Founder & Director
Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education
5310 Belt Road, NW
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Email: mfce@smartmarriages.com
www.smartmarriages.com

Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE), founded in 1996, has as its mission strengthening the field of marriage education and researching and informing the public and policymakers about the value of skills-based couples and marriage education. It serves as an information exchange to help couples locate courses, to identify training opportunities for professionals, to promote the development of the field, and increase the availability of courses in the community. The CMFCE website includes the program for its annual conference, a Directory of Practitioners, articles, resources and an on-line newsletter.

Contact: Amitai Etzioni, Ph.D.
Founder & Director
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Fax: (202) 994-1606
Email:comnet@gwu.edu
www.gwu.edu/~ccps

Communitarian Network is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of individuals and organizations who aim to shore up the moral, social, and political environment. The Network has an interest in marriage and the family as one of the key foundations of civil society. In November 1996 it held a one day conference on marriage and divorce law reform. The endorsers of the Communitarian Platform support modifying divorce laws, and a number of other proposals to help parents.

Contact: Theodora Ooms
Executive Director
Family Impact Seminar (FIS)
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Washington, DC 20036
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Family Impact Seminar (FIS) is a policy research institute whose mission is to help public and private officials develop and implement policy that supports and strengthens families. Founded in 1976, FIS conducts seminars, conferences and action research on a wide range of family policy issues, defining cutting edge issues and questions before they become mainstream. Increasingly it serves as a national, nonpartisan information and resource center on marriage and family policy, providing information, consultation and technical assistance. Publications include books, over forty background briefing reports, guides and articles.

In June, 1997 FIS launched a new program designed to promote a balanced, informed and comprehensive policy debate about couples and marriage. New projects include Promoting Community Dialogues on Couples and Marriage in three poor urban communities, and a study of the Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy. In July 1998 it released the report, *Toward More Perfect Unions: Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda* and a companion volume of papers, *Strategies to Strengthen Marriage: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?*

Contact: Sheila Ervin
Family Research Council (FRC)
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Family Research Council is the non-profit research and education arm of Focus on The Family, a conservative advocacy organization. The Council aims to promote and defend traditional family values in the media, develop and advocate policy initiatives which strengthen the family and promote traditional values, be an accurate source of research on families, and inform citizens about how to promote Biblical principles. The Council supports legislation to change no fault divorce, promote covenant marriage and ban same-sex marriages.

Contact: Patrick Fagan Ph.D.
William H.G. Fitzgerald Fellow
on Family and Culture
Heritage Foundation
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Heritage Foundation is a research and educational institute whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense. Heritage has published many papers on the centrality of marriage and family to public policy. In April 1998, the Foundation co-sponsored with Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) a half day seminar in the Capitol on Marriage Matters: What Congress Can Do to Strengthen Marriage in America. Its journal *Policy Review* has published several articles on covenant marriage and no-fault divorce.

Contact: Allan Carlson Ph.D.
President
Howard Center for Family,
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Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society (formerly part of the Rockford Institute) is a charitable and educational organization dedicated to articulating a pro-family world view, and strengthening the bond between religion and family through research, publications and other activities. It publishes a monthly newsletter, *The Family in America*, which reports the findings of marriage research and comments on marriage policy. (Research abstracts are available on a CD-ROM) It also publishes conference proceedings, including the *Retreat from Marriage* and *When Families Fail: The Social Costs*.

Contact: David Blankenhorn,
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Institute for American Values founded in 1987, the Institute is a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and public education on major issues of family-wellbeing, family policy, and civil society. Through its publications and other educational activities, the Institute seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship and policy making. In 1995, it published *Marriage in America*, a report written by the Council on Families in America, an affiliated group of scholars and analysts. A major current activity is the Council on Civil Society which is a collaboration of the Institute with the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Contact: Michael McManus,
President
Marriage Savers
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Marriage Savers is a national organization dedicated to preparing, strengthening, and restoring marriages. The organization was founded in 1986 by journalist Michael McManus who designed and promotes the concept of Community Marriage Policy whereby the clergy in a community make a formal agreement to set minimum requirements for engaged couples. McManus and his wife Harriet have helped to start Community Marriage Policies in nearly 80 metropolitan communities. Marriage Savers publishes a resource collection of videos and books and a regular newsletter.

Contact: Mary Jo Czaplewski Ph.D.
Executive Director
National Council on Family
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www.ncfr.com

National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) is a national association of scholars, educators and family-life professionals. The research published in its journals, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* and the *Journal of Family Relations*, has laid the foundation for much of the current knowledge about couples and marriage. NCFR's publications, its national certification program for family life educators, and other resources and its annual conference are aimed principally at the academic and professional community.

Contact: David Popenoe, Ph.D.,
and Barbara Whitehead, Ph.D.,
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National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, established in late 1997, is a university-based research and public education initiative. Its goal is to generate and disseminate knowledge and information about marriage--its meaning, purposes, formation, conduct and dissolution--and thereby help to revitalize a troubled institution. The Project plans to inform policymakers, opinion leaders, the academic community, and the general public, especially young adults, about contemporary issues and trends in marriage and family life. Planned activities include an annual report on the state of marriage in America, studies of attitudes toward marriage among our nation's young people, an examination of how marriage is portrayed in the popular media, and an evaluation of marriage-oriented curricula at the high school level.

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