

Supporting an African American Healthy Marriage Initiative

Marriage is a vital source of economic security and greater psychosocial well-being in the Black community.

Introduction

There is a strong correlation between family stability and the family's social and economic well-being. Two-parent, married families are touted as the ideal environment for raising children. Research shows that stable, two parent married households are connected to various positive outcomes for child well-being. In addition, there are various positive psychological, emotional and economic outcomes for adults who

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are in healthy marriages. This is true across various racial and cultural groups. Despite the decline in marriage among African Americans, marriage has historically been and continues to be important to the social fabric of African American communities.

This Tip Sheet shows marital trends within the African American culture and offers strategies for establishing healthy marriage initiatives at the state and local levels in African American communities.

Background Statistics and Trends

Marriage is a vital source of economic security and greater psychosocial well-being in the Black community. Today, Blacks (referred to interchangeably with

the term African Americans) have lower rates of marriage and marital stability than all other ethnic groups. They also have higher rates of single-headed families than other groups.

- The African American community represents the lowest percentage of married couples (32%), compared to Whites (54%), and Hispanics (46%).
- African American individuals are far more likely than Whites and Hispanics to be divorced (in 2007, 11% of Blacks were divorced, versus 10% respectively for Whites and 7% for Hispanics).
- Single-headed families are far more likely in Black homes than in all other groups' homes (60%) By contrast, Whites (20%), and Hispanics (26%) have lower percentages of single headed families.
- More than 70% of African-American children are born out of wedlock. The majority of those children born out of wedlock are raised by single mothers.



These trends are recent and conflict with the historically high value placed on family in the African American community. One author, Bettie De Ramus, documented the stories of couples in the Slave experience who risked life, limb, and liberty for the sake of their spouses and families.¹ One of the most powerful points made through this book is the reiteration of the commonly known reality that the post Civil War era afforded African Americans opportunities to commit themselves to permanent bonds in holy matrimony. During this era members of the African American community surpassed even the White community in marriage rates.

“Even in the face of concerted and persistent discrimination, including economic discrimination, and the harsh inequalities of Jim Crow, many Black families maintained two-parent households well into the 1960s, when rates of out-of-wedlock births began to escalate dramatically. In 1960, 22 % of all Black babies were born to unmarried mothers. By 1996, that figure had jumped to 70 %.” (DeRamus)

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Data shows that most African Americans still value and desire marriage. One survey found that 77% of Black adults age 19-35 reported that they wished to get married. In a 2006 Gallup Poll, Blacks were more likely than Whites to say that marriage is very important.

Overview of African American Healthy Marriage Initiatives

African American Healthy Marriage Initiatives are

¹ Forbidden Fruit Love Stories from the Underground Railroad. Simon & Schuster 2005.

about adding to the range of services available to families by teaching skills and offering other supports leading to family stability. They are also about creating awareness of the unique challenges to marriage within the African American community. The following presents a comprehensive approach to establishing and supporting African American Healthy Marriage Initiatives.

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A healthy marriage initiative to support African American families must address cultural trends and barriers (such as high out-of-wedlock birth rates, high incarceration rates, and low marriage rates) that may prevent marriage and support divorce. Positive influences and role models in the community must also be identified and highlighted. These leaders can help encourage changes in cultural patterns, promote personal responsibility, and discourage out of wedlock births.

The potential benefits of an African American Healthy Marriage Initiative include:

- Overall improvement in the well-being of African American children by an increase in the number of children raised in healthy, two-parent married households
- Increase in the number of healthy marriages within the African American community

- Awareness of the overall importance of sustaining healthy families
- Discourage out-of-wedlock births

Strategies for Supporting Healthy Marriage in African American Communities

Engaging the commitment of the whole community is necessary to sustain a healthy marriage initiative. Stakeholders must know their community and should represent a diverse group such as those from faith-based organizations, businesses and local government. It is necessary for leaders involved to ensure that there is a general understanding of the cultural roots and historical trauma of African Americans. In addition, strategies to promote economic stability should be addressed within any healthy marriage and family strengthening initiative. Involve the media in any way your means allow.

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Let's look at an example. An African American healthy marriage initiative was started by a respected member of the community. She understood that "marriage" was not part of the community culture, so the initiative was titled: "Healthy Relationships, Happy Marriages, and Wholesome Families." This community leader created a prototype for cultural transformation by incorporating these techniques. This model is the foundation of a grass-root effort.

In this initiative, many important lessons were learned:

- *Identify the barriers in the community* that inhibit

healthy marriage. This can be done by conducting focus groups and meeting with leaders in the faith, business and government sectors.

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- *Market your program* in a way that is appealing to your community. If you are in a community where marriage is uncommon, use words in your marketing messages like "relationships" and "families" rather than "marriage." Engage the local media (see Resources section).
- *Coordinate with local fatherhood programs* to address public and private sector policies that affect fathers. Work together to increase economic opportunities for African American men (see Resources section).
- *Engage role models, clergy and pastors, and local leaders* by contacting black intellectual leaders, community activists, colleges and churches and spending time with them discussing the issues in the community. Together, determine ways to partner with one another.
- *Establish connections with social services* such as employment assistance, TANF, education, healthcare and childcare. Identify their program areas that can be enhanced to support African American healthy marriages.
- *Engage Black Youth*

Conclusion

Many practitioners and policymakers are exploring

ways to strengthen families in the African American community. Healthy marriage initiatives are one strategy to accomplish this. By recognizing the barriers to strong relationships within the community and highlighting the strengths of African Americans, an initiative focused on relationship education can bring the necessary tools to couples to achieve their goal of a healthy marriage.

Additional Resources

AAHMI Roundtable Report

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/AAHMI_RT.pdf

Center for Marriage and Families at Institute for American Values

<http://center.americanvalues.org/>

Federal Fatherhood Initiative

<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>

African American Healthy Marriage Initiative

<http://www.aahmi.net/>

Wedded Bliss Foundation

<http://www.weddedblissinc.com/>

Black Marriage Day

<http://www.blackmarrieday.com/>

Center for Urban Families

<http://www.cfuf.org/>

Writing PSAs: Radio tip sheet (NHMRC)

<http://healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/radiopsas.pdf>

Getting Free/Low Cost Media Coverage for your Program tip sheet (NHMRC)

<http://healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/writingapressrelease.pdf>

Writing PSAs: TV tip sheet (NHMRC)

<http://healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/televisionpsas.pdf>

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