

## A Personal Perspective in Talking With Your State Legislator About Marriage and Relationship Education: Tips from the Field

By Maggie Russell, Family Services of Greater Houston

I was delivering healthy marriage and relationship programs (MRE) in Houston, TX and saw what a value these services were to my community. I wanted to see marriage and relationship education become commonplace throughout the state. It made sense to me to seek legislative support with the purpose of securing government funding (and gaining buy-in) for marriage and relationship education services. With that in mind, I decided to take a trip to the state capitol and started knocking on doors. Nine months later, a bill was passed to offer marriage and relationship education.

Based on my experience with the Texas legislature, here are some tips to get you started in the process of engaging your state's legislature to encourage marriage preparation and relationship strengthening services.

### Know your legislators

Conduct research on all members of your state legislature to find supporters of similar legislation or who may already be champions of social services

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programs. It is also imperative that you know who sits on the committees responsible for the budget and human services. You will need to have bi-partisan support, so make sure you talk to legislators from both parties. Also, speak to the legislators from your district - regardless of what their platform is — to share your ideas. Finally, take the time to meet with the people you believe may block the bill.

### Know the lobbyists

First, if you currently have a federal or state grant, make sure it is okay with the terms of the grant to be involved in any type of lobbying. If not, do this on your own time! Next, find out which lobbyists are active in social services-related issues. Contact them to get their support and keep in mind that some lobbyists will work pro-bono. Explain to them that this funding will not take money away from single mothers or children. Communicate clearly that this is simply a supplementary program, not a replacement program.

It is critical to provide supporting research in order to make your proposal credible. Be prepared to share information about marriage and divorce in your state in a succinct way. Remember your legislator only has so much time to give!

## **Before you pick up the phone or meet with anyone - do your homework**

It is critical to provide supporting research in order to make your proposal credible. Be prepared to share information about marriage and divorce in your state in a succinct way. Remember your legislator only has so much time to give! The research you gather should concisely demonstrate your state's marriage rates, divorce rates and out-of-wedlock birth rates as well as a breakdown of the demographics across each of these categories. The research that you present must illustrate the general benefits to society when families are strengthened by effective MRE. Make it important to your legislator. For example, if he/she is passionate about children, share positive child outcomes. If he/she is focused on education, research the relationship between family structure and school outcomes. Generally speaking, legislators are interested in evidence-based practices and if other states are doing something similar. Use this information to respond to arguments that oppose a marriage education bill. Be prepared with your responses ahead of time.

## **You must be specific about the funding you will go after**

For example, if you are interested in accessing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, understand how your state administers TANF

and how much money is in the state's TANF reserves.

## **Make an appointment**

Call the legislator's office with the goal of getting a face-to-face meeting. Provide

enough information to capture his/her attention; and inform your legislator that you have a solution. The policymaker has very little time and you need to be prepared. It also helps to discuss your issue with the legislator's human services policy advisor. Sometimes this is easier than meeting with the legislator.

## **Help write the bill**

Once you have won support, the next step in the legislative process is to draft the bill. Most of the time, bills are not written by legislators themselves. Find out who will be drafting the bill and offer your help. You may want to include stakeholders in the process of writing the bill by conducting meetings to gather input and critique. This is important because it will create support for your bill by getting stakeholder buy-in.

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## **Review similar bills created in different states and incorporate language from those bills**

Include critical guidance in the legislation. This may include the number of hours of MRE and the department responsible for program oversight. It is also necessary to establish a realistic plan for program evaluation. Remember, it often takes one or two years for social services programs to be operational, so be sure you take this into consideration when constructing your evaluation plan. Results matter, especially when you are dealing with government money. You may want to use this resource to help guide the language in your bill: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/policy/legislation.cfm>.

When the bill is at hearing, your bill's sponsor will have time to present it and answer questions. It is always powerful to include third parties to testify on the bill's behalf at hearing. For example, if you want to have workshops for couples, you should invite a couple who has been through a MRE class to share their experience.

Becoming involved in the legislative process takes time and persistence. It is important to know who to talk to and what information to present. Stay engaged by helping draft the bill and recruiting witnesses at the hearing. You must engage others to keep the momentum going and achieve the desired results.

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