

FACILITATING *forever*

A Feasible Public Policy Agenda to Help
Couples Form and Sustain Healthy
Relationships and Enduring Marriages

**A Report for the National
Marriage Project**

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Many of the photos used in this report are of couples participating in relationship education programs supported by federal funding. We are grateful for the permission of the program administrators and the participants to use these photos. Design by Bree Morris.

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Executive Summary

High levels of divorce, cohabitation, and fragile unions, especially among the less educated in the United States, mean that unprecedented numbers of children are growing up in families without two parents in a healthy, stable relationship. This family instability poses increased risks to children's well-being and healthy development.

Federal and state governments have been aware of the challenges of family instability for decades. Recently, this concern has cut refreshingly across party lines. The Bush and now Obama administrations have funded programs to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages. These programs support "*relationship literacy education*" initiatives, consisting of voluntary, community-based educational programs that teach youth, young adults, cohabiting couples, and engaged and young married couples what healthy relationships look like and the skills to make them work.

This report documents federal and state policy experiments designed to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages. It reviews the research to date on how effective these efforts have been and responds to legitimate concerns about them. We also suggest ways these policy efforts can be improved. As these efforts go forward, we advocate specifically for the following:

- Transferring direction of healthy marriages and relationships initiatives (HMRI) from the federal government to states to support a federalist experiment in state-by-state efforts to increase family stability.
- Downsizing the current policy that awards federal grants to a variety of community organizations delivering educational services and reallocating most of those funds to reimburse states (up to 1% of their federal TANF block grants) that want to invest in their own HMRI.
- Supplementing TANF funds by setting aside \$10-20 of each marriage license fee.
- Using state-directed funds to support a strategic set of relationship education services delivered by community organizations targeted primarily to young at-risk individuals and couples, including:
 - *relationship literacy education* for youth and young adults to help them avoid the dangerous detours that make it difficult to form healthy marriages;
 - *relationship development education* for cohabiting couples and unmarried parents with aspirations for marriage to help them assess and improve the prospects of their relationships;
 - *marriage preparation education* for engaged couples to help them strengthen the foundation for an enduring marriage; and
 - *marriage maintenance education* for married couples to counter the forces of marital entropy.

If an increasing number of at-risk individuals participate in these programs early in their lives, they will be better able to form healthy relationships and enduring marriages, ultimately helping to improve child well-being and reduce poverty in our society.

Introduction

Family Instability: Everyone's Concern

Writer Michael Potemra once set out on a cross-country bus ride from New York to Los Angeles, and his experiences, described in the article, “The Greyhound Archipelago,” chronicle “tale after tale of divorce, crime, drugs, imprisonment, and failed relationships” that characterize the socioeconomic bottom 15 to 20 percent of America. He draws several conclusions, chief among them that, although touted as a remedy for underclass problems, marriage may not be the antidote for deep-seated family instability plaguing today’s disadvantaged neighborhoods.

“Think of two drowning people, each holding an anchor,” Potemra suggests. “Will they be less likely to sink if they hold onto each other as well?” He looks around the bus and wonders, “If we had policies to force, cajole, or otherwise inveigle these people into pairing off—to get married and stay married—would that make them or their kids better off?”¹

But what if Potemra’s metaphor is off? What if those struggling with volatile relationships—relationships that beget vulnerable children likely to experience more academic failure, poverty, and failed relationships—can learn how to cut the anchor rope and swim better? And what if the optimum life-saving stroke is indeed tandem, i.e., marriage, which then becomes a lifeboat for children and generations to come? Would it be preferable to offer water-safety lessons or let people burdened by their anchors go ahead and drown? And what if poor swimming skills are creeping up the socioeconomic scale, threatening now a majority of Americans, not just the most disadvantaged? While we continue working to lessen the burdens weighing them down, can we also give them more skills to keep their heads above water and more hope for getting to shore?

High levels of divorce, births to unwed parents, and fragile unions afflict the less educated in the United States, with unprecedented numbers of children now growing up without a mother and father in a healthy, stable relationship. Once thought to be confined to low-income families, a high level of family instability is now making itself at home in less educated middle-class neighborhoods.² Such family instability correlates markedly with academic failure, economic immobility, and emotional distress. It also debilitates other valiant, and valid, efforts to assist impoverished communities educationally and economically. How many educational documentaries feature ambitious teachers who nevertheless can’t make headway because the students’ families provide not support but havoc? How many young, inner-city males fail to benefit from job corps training perhaps because they’re deprived of role model fathers who live at home and go to work?

Law- and policy-makers have been aware of the missing puzzle piece of family stability for quite some time—and of the economic, civic, and psychological toll it takes on individuals, families, communities, and the country. The concern has, and should, cut refreshingly across party lines. The Clinton, then Bush, and now Obama administrations have funded programs

¹ Potemra, M. (2012, October 1). The Greyhound Archipelago: What I learned in the ‘real’ America. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/316745/greyhound-archipelago>.

² Wilcox, W. B. (2010). When marriage disappears: The retreat from marriage in middle America. In W. B. Wilcox & E. Marquardt (Eds.), *The state of our unions: Marriage in America 2010* (pp. 13–60). Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project & Institute for American Values.

to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages. These programs promote “*relationship literacy education*”: voluntary, community-based educational programs that give youth, young adults, cohabiting couples, and engaged and young married couples solid, research-based information on what healthy relationships look like and the skills to make them work.

*This report, synopsized from the book **The Forever Initiative: A Feasible Public Policy Agenda to Help Couples Form and Sustain Healthy Marriages and Relationships**,³ reviews the what, why, and how of government-supported Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives (HMRI) and presents an overview of early research showing mixed and modest but encouraging results. It also responds to legitimate concerns about this policy experiment from across the ideological spectrum and suggests ways to improve these policies. Ultimately, we advocate for a state-by-state implementation of HMRI funded through federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families grants to states, supplemented by a set-aside of \$10 to \$20 of each marriage license fee. Virtually all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic position, aspire to grow old with the love of their life. But it's getting harder and harder to do, at least for disadvantaged Americans. Here we describe a feasible policy agenda to facilitate forever in order to help children flourish and build a stronger nation.*

Before outcries about mandating morality or expanding government drown out the proposal, here are some critically important realities for those on both the left and the right to consider: growing family instability is one of the most dangerous social problems facing us today. High rates of nonmarital childbearing, fragile unions, and divorce diminish our most vulnerable children's prospects of growing up in a stable family with a mother and father. The more than 40% of children now born to unmarried parents face significantly higher risks than children from two-parent homes academically, economically, socially, and emotionally. A divorce rate also north of 40% leaves less resilient children at much greater risk of these same problems.⁴

For the left, resolving family instability can appeal to a sense of fairness and concern for the disadvantaged—particularly women and children, those most negatively affected by volatile relationships. In a recent *Atlantic* piece on liberals and family values, Emma Green points out that “college-educated, wealthier Americans who identify with the left are overwhelmingly raising their kids in two-parent households,” a correlation that is consistent with research showing that family stability and partners who marry before having children go hand-in-hand with higher incomes and social mobility.⁵ Green points out, however, that “stable marriage and community are the secret sauce of economic well-being that nobody on the left wants to admit to using,” echoing Charles Murray's thesis in his recent book, *Coming Apart*.⁶

Fortunately, some progressives realize that striving for racial, educational, and income equity requires concern with family instability. “Family structure patterns have effects on an entire community,” writes David Leonhardt in a *New York Times* piece that notes the lack of upward mobility in metropolitan areas with large numbers of single-parent families.⁷ Columnist E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* concedes that “those of us who are on the more progressive side

³ Hawkins, A. J. (2013). *The forever initiative: A feasible public policy agenda to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships*. North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

⁴ Wilcox, W. B., Anderson, J. R., Doherty, W., Eggebeen, D., Ellison, C. G., Galston, W., ... & Wallerstein, J. (2011). *Why marriage matters, third edition: Thirty conclusions from the social sciences*. New York: Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project.

⁵ Green, E. (2013, July 13). Why is it hard for liberals to talk about 'family values'? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/events/archive/2013/07/why-is-it-hard-for-liberals-to-talk-about-family-values/278151/>.

⁶ Murray, C. (2012). *Coming apart: The state of White America 1960–2010*. New York: Crown Forum.

⁷ Leonhardt, D. (2013, July 22). In climbing income ladder, location matters. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/business/in-climbing-income-ladder-location-matters.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.



should be willing to engage in the conversation about family [and] personal responsibility.”⁸ And President Obama, in a highly personal commencement address at Morehouse College, the all-male historically black alma mater of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., praised his single mother while admitting, “I still wish I had a father who was not only present, but involved. And so my whole life, I’ve tried to be for Michelle and my girls what my father wasn’t for my mother and me.”⁹

Conservatives, meanwhile, wary of government intrusion and expansion, must be willing to concede that family values aren’t the sole purview of the right, and that conservative ideals of upward mobility, economic opportunities for all, and a strong middle class cannot be realized without fostering two-parent households. Those who get involved with Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiative programs, moreover, voluntarily participate without governmental coercion. The programs provide valuable research-based information that an educated populace absorbs through examples at home and in stable communities, but that a growing share of the population no longer has access to at home, school, or via the media. And if individual liberties and government spending remain a stumbling block, conservatives should ruminate on the government

⁸ Green, E. (2013, July 13). Why is it hard for liberals to talk about ‘family values’? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/events/archive/2013/07/why-is-it-hard-for-liberals-to-talk-about-family-values/278151/>

⁹ Peralta, E. (2013, May 19). Two excerpts you should read from Obama’s Morehouse speech. *NPR*. Retrieved from: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/05/19/185348873/two-excerpts-you-should-read-from-obamas-morehouse-speech>.

intrusion of courts deciding when divorced parents can see their kids, of child-support agencies garnishing the paychecks of biological parents, and of the massively expansive public assistance programs involved when families break up and single parents can't fully support their children. Public policies that strengthen marriage mean less need and demand for government involvement in our lives and more self-sufficiency and independence.

For those at any point on the political spectrum, marriage constitutes not just a private relationship, but also a public good that supports the general welfare of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable—children.¹⁰ Many of the country's least privileged citizens are currently confronting in a combination of poverty, crime, and academic failure—problems each exacerbated by family instability. What our society currently spends on social and economic policies attempting to remedy the situation currently dwarfs the fraction of federal and state dollars invested in Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives. In fact, modest funding for preventative HMRI could barely be considered a rounding error to the reactive social programs designed to help the disadvantaged barely stay afloat. Relationship literacy education can help some youth and young adults avoid dangerous detours that make forming healthy marriages difficult, provide useful knowledge and skills for cohabiting couples and unmarried parents with aspirations for marriage, support engaged couples trying to strengthen the foundations of their relationship, and help married couples stave off the forces of relationship entropy that pull at all marriages. Is it time to throw up our hands in hopeless frustration with high levels of family instability or is it time to roll up our sleeves and see if better education for healthy relationships is a component in the ongoing fight against economic and social poverty?

Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives: What and How

First Things editor R.R. Reno often writes about the sinking working class and the middle class compatriots joining their ranks. He refers to them as “the weak”—hit hard not just by economic stagnation and regression, but also battered by a culture bereft of guidelines and rules that foster discipline and achievement. “For the most part, the new mode of social control works for the strong....They clump in super-wealthy neighborhoods, often for the express purpose of protecting their children from the negative influences of behaviors they refuse to condemn.” This is why elite Americans, the “strong,” according to Reno, “are largely functional and relatively happy, while those on the bottom live increasingly dysfunctional, unhappy lives.”¹¹ A 2012 *New York Times* story backs up Reno's premise, revealing that educated Americans' life expectancies are increasing while those of Americans without a high school diploma are collapsing.¹² “This is by any means a social catastrophe,” writes Reno, and blames a dominant culture which refuses to uphold what University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax describes as “clear rules” that all people need, but especially vulnerable, socially disconnected ones.¹³

Making relationship literacy education more accessible to the less educated, in a sense, levels the playing field by offering clearer rules and research-based guidelines for creating healthy and stable families. And it needs to start early. For youth and young adults, discussions on “What does a healthy relationship look like?” include dating danger signs, such as violence or coercion, as well as instruction on basic interpersonal and communication skills. On his Greyhound Archipelago sojourn, Potemra listens to someone describe a fight between a mother's bat-wielding ex-husband

¹⁰ Nock, S. L. (2005). Marriage as a public issue. *Future of Children*, 15(2), 13–32.

¹¹ Reno, R. R. (2013, August-September). War on the weak. *First Things*, 5-6.

¹² Tavernise, S. (2012, September 20). Life spans shrinks for least-educated whites in the U.S. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/21/us/life-expectancy-for-less-educated-whites-in-us-is-shrinking.html?pagewanted=all>

¹³ Wax, A. L. (2008). The family law doctrine of equivalence. *Michigan Law Review*, 107, 999-1017; especially p. 1012. Retrieved from: [https://www.law.upenn.edu/cf/faculty/awax/workingpapers/107MichLRev999\(2009\).pdf](https://www.law.upenn.edu/cf/faculty/awax/workingpapers/107MichLRev999(2009).pdf)

and her knife-wielding current boyfriend within the confines of her oldest son's bedroom. Potemra, with reason, comments: "Now, I have heard, *very* many times, the phrase, 'Every kid deserves a dad.' But I have a follow-up question: *Which* dad—the one with the baseball bat or the one with the knife?"¹⁴

Adolescents exposed to "**youth relationship literacy education**," according to early research, come to understand better that neither knife- nor bat-wielding constitutes acceptable behavior—from a father, mother, boyfriend, or girlfriend. Violence might erupt, and erupt with frequency in some families and relationships, but relationship literacy education teaches that it isn't healthy, shouldn't be tolerated, and signals danger. Perhaps in decades past, teenagers and children from dysfunctional homes might regularly catch a glimpse of Mike and Carol Brady or Steve and Elyse Keaton—however dated the hair and social norms—dealing with conflict in measured, communicative terms. Maybe they also got exposed to healthy family interaction in friends' and relatives' homes. For too many youth now, this exposure is non-existent, and youth relationship literacy education offers a better way to learn higher, though attainable, standards.



For unmarried couples who aspire to marriage, "**relationship development education**" helps participants make more realistic assessments of their prospects for a healthy, long-lasting relationship. These programs also provide important communication skills instruction, reinforce the importance and value of commitment, and explore realistic marriage expectations. Moreover, programs like these that receive federal funds must deal explicitly with the problem of violence in romantic relationships and have a protocol for identifying and helping victims. Thus, a peaceful end to an unhealthy relationship—positive instability—is a successful outcome of these programs. Educated Americans, explains Reno in his analysis of "the strong," keep abreast of "super-subtle analysis" examining the issues surrounding dating, cohabitation, commitment, marriage, and child rearing: "Consult the *Atlantic* for the latest iterations," he advises.¹⁵ But what of those oblivious to the *Atlantic's* informative pages? Or to *New York Times* op-eds like "The Downside of Cohabitation" from clinical psychologists pointing out sobering statistics for those who "slide" into relationships rather than "decide" and commit?¹⁶



When couples gain the confidence in their relationship to get formally engaged, "**marriage preparation education**" helps them take that step and build a stronger foundation for their marriage. While pre-wedding education forms a routine part of getting ready for many educated couples, less educated couples at greater risk for unhealthy marriages and divorce need these services even more. Educators can help them see their strengths and work on their specific weaknesses, especially improving their communication skills with very specific issues that could harm their marriage down the road. The courses also align couples' expectations and goals, helping partners surrender unrealistic assumptions that undermine many marriages. Importantly, some will uncover evidence before they exchange rings that they are unprepared for the long journey ahead or are in a dangerous vehicle unlikely to get them to forever in one piece.

¹⁴ Potemra, M. (2012, October 1). The Greyhound Archipelago: What I learned in the 'real' America. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/316745/greyhound-archipelago>.

¹⁵ Reno, R. R. (2013, August-September). War on the weak. *First Things*, 5-6.; see p. 6.

¹⁶ Jay, M. (2012, April 14). The downside of cohabitation before marriage. *The New York Times Sunday Review*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/opinion/sunday/the-downside-of-cohabiting-before-marriage.html?pagewanted=all>.

Married couples, too, benefit from their own “**marriage maintenance education**” that focuses on fighting relationship entropy. However, this is not marriage counseling, in which couples work privately with a therapist. Instead, marriage maintenance education offers a prevention-oriented curriculum of ideas and skills on how to sustain healthy romantic relationships and keep marriages on track. A typical program provides about 12 hours of instruction taught by a male-female team, some professionally trained as therapists, but some not, who work with a small class of couples. Participants regularly say the most valuable aspect of the curriculum teaches more effective communication and problem-solving skills. Most programs, though, go beyond communication skills to deal with misaligned expectations, strengthen commitment, enrich intimacy, increase empathy, and work on co-parenting issues.

Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives: History and Rationale

Policy-makers and lawmakers have been concerned about family instability and its impact on children, communities, and the country for decades. Because economically distressed marriages are more likely to end in divorce than affluent ones, and the public costs of family instability have been conservatively estimated at \$112 billion a year,¹⁷ the government has been drawn into action. Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a few states and the federal government began exploring policy initiatives intended to help more couples form healthy, stable relationships. These initiatives targeted primarily less educated and lower income individuals and communities at greater risk for family instability. Funded primarily through additional funds attached to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, federal grants to community organizations enable them to deliver relationship literacy education to disadvantaged individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to get them. TANF’s legislated purposes include strengthening marriages and two-parent families and reducing nonmarital childbearing.



TANF emerged out of welfare reform efforts during the 1990s that included some lawmakers’ gnawing sense that government welfare policy might be contributing to family instability, and offered a method by which government could do more to promote stability. Reforms intended to strengthen families actually were less controversial than parallel reforms to replace welfare entitlements with complex work requirements and enact time limits on receiving welfare benefits. During the Clinton administration years, a handful of states explored using a small fraction of their TANF block grant dollars to strengthen marriage and two-parent families. Government efforts gained momentum under President Bush, who stated that “my administration will give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages. Many good programs help couples who want to get married and stay married.”¹⁸ His Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, Dr. Wade Horn, was the driving force behind this new and controversial anti-poverty strategy, and began using bits and pieces of his budget to support educational services designed to help disadvantaged individuals form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships. In 2006, more direct funding

¹⁷ Scafidi, B. (2008). *The taxpayer costs of divorce and unwed childbearing: First-ever estimates for the nation and all fifty states*. New York: Institute for American Values and Georgia Family Council. See also: Schramm, D. G., Harris, S. M., Whiting, J. B., Hawkins, A. J., Brown, M., & Porter, R. (2013). Economic costs and policy implications associated with divorce: Texas as a case study. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 54, 1–24.

¹⁸ Bush, G. W. (2002, February 26). *President announces welfare reform agenda*. Retrieved from: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/02/20020226-11.html>.

arrived with a Congressional reauthorization of the TANF program (that also included a responsible fatherhood education component), providing 5-year grants for community organizations offering relationship literacy education programs. This grants program extended from 2011-2014 under the Obama administration with minor modifications.

Contrary to claims that government should not interfere with families, government has always, directly or indirectly, been involved in sustaining, or hampering, family stability. Economic policies create, or impede, viable career prospects for men whom many women won't consider marrying without a job. Educational policies further foster, or thwart, healthy marriages because a good education correlates with a stable marriage. Government also supports marriages and families indirectly through such things as substance abuse programs that enhance personal prospects for forming healthy relationships. Conversely, sentencing laws that result in incarcerating large numbers of low-income young men for minor violations of the law indirectly affect family formation and stability by decreasing the number of potential committed partners and involved dads in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives obviously take a more direct approach by offering classes to help couples form healthy relationships and enduring marriages. Among the least educated lower income Americans, as well as among all women under 30, more than half of children are born to unmarried parents, and working class parents are rapidly approaching this figure.¹⁹ More than 40% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages are ending in divorce, with lower income and less educated couples especially at risk.²⁰ Ominously, this relationship dissolution often begins a process of extended instability. Children are exposed to what the distinguished family sociologist Andrew Cherlin labeled "family churning," a process marked by parents' multiple romantic relationships and break-ups over a relatively short period of time:

"This merry-go-round property of American families is more than a statistical curiosity," Cherlin writes. "We should be concerned about it, both as parents and as a nation, because it may increase children's behavioral and emotional problems. Simply put, some children seem to have difficulty adjusting to a series of parents and parents' partners moving in and out of their home."²¹



Family stability is also important to the American dream of economic mobility. An unusual feature at Pew's Economic Mobility Project website allows users to better understand "Faces of Economic Mobility" by selecting a race, education level, and family structure to gauge whether the composite individual will surpass, maintain, or fall short of his or her parents' income level. The interactive feature, explains Erin Currier, director of the project, illustrates that "education and race and family structure each individually matter for mobility." The project, unsurprisingly, finds that single men and women are much less mobile. Along with education, says Harry Holzer, professor of public policy at Georgetown University, "marriage is also pretty highly correlated with income in America."²²

¹⁹ Wildsmith, E., Steward-Streng, N. R., & Manlove, J. (2011). Childbearing outside of marriage: Estimates and trends in the United States. *Child Trends Research Brief*, #2011-29. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

²⁰ Copen, C. E., Daniels, K., Vespa, J., & Mosher, W. D. (2012). First marriages in the United States: Data from the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth. *National Health Statistics Reports: No. 49*. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics; Bramlett, M. D., & Mosher, W. D. (2001). *First marriage dissolution, divorce and remarriage: United States*. (Advance data from vital and health statistics, No. 323.) Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

²¹ Cherlin, A. J. (2009). *The marriage-go-round: The state of marriage and the family in America today*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 5.

²² De Groote, M. (2013, September 18). Moving up: How marriage and education affect the face of economic mobility. *Deseret News*. Retrieved from: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865586674/Moving-up-How-marriage-and-education-affect-the-face-of-economic-mobility.html?pg=all>.

Overall, nearly \$800 million of public funding has been expended for HMRI between 2000 and 2012. Washington, D.C has received by far the most per capita funding for HMRI, followed by Oklahoma. Fortunately, despite the lack of hard data on total numbers reached, early research has been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of relationship literacy education programs. With the social and economic prospects of so many children and adults at stake—and with public dollars so precious and scarce—do these publicly supported programs really help people form stronger relationships and stay married?

Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives: Early Evaluation Research Results

Often when important public policy initiatives are launched, rigorous research on their effectiveness lags years or even decades behind. Fortunately, HMRI prove an exception to this rule. Even during the initial pilot efforts, researchers arrived early on the job, with some of that work supported by significant levels of federal funding. This early work is now helping law- and policy-makers, academics, and opinion leaders examine the potential of these policy initiatives. While the first wave of research is by no means definitive and evaluation research continues, a fair summary and analysis of the early returns is worthwhile. The evidence for HMRI is mixed and modest, but offers some encouraging signs. The following summaries only briefly capture this early body of research.²³

The first set of studies to consider deal with **implementation**—how well the programs attract and appeal to the desired, voluntary participants—not with hard-nosed outcomes or impacts. Studies found that many program providers learned effective strategies for recruiting lower income individuals and couples to participate in relationship literacy education services, although retaining participants over a series of classes was a bigger challenge. Further, participants overwhelmingly reported enjoying the programs and learning valuable skills. In other words, people who enroll want to be there, want to stay (though struggle to do so), relate to the material, and find it worth their time. Results from implementation studies also found that program curricula and methods have been successfully adapted to appeal to diverse lower income and less educated individuals—i.e., the courses spoke to participants in a way they understood and responded to.²⁴

The rest of the studies measure outcomes and impacts. Yes, maybe the participants had a positive experience, but did it make any measurable difference in their lives and their relationships? Are unmarried individuals still deluded by faulty beliefs, like “love is enough” or “soulmates shouldn’t have to work at a relationship,” that engender unrealistic expectations for marriage? And are married couples still as likely to communicate or problem-solve effectively as the class recedes in the rearview mirror? Initial research on the effectiveness of the (pre-marital) relationship development side of relationship literacy education, while not as advanced as the marriage maintenance side, suggests that these early relationship literacy education programs have potential.

- A solid evaluation of one well-designed youth program analyzed extensive data from more than 1,400 **high school students** in 39 public schools across Alabama, half of the students non-white and more than half eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches. Significantly, participating students still held a more realistic approach to marriage one year after the program, exhibiting decreased faulty beliefs and also displaying greater conflict-management skills than comparison-group students who did not participate in the program.

²³ For more depth, see Hawkins, A. J. (2013). *The forever initiative: A feasible public policy agenda to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships*. North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

²⁴ For a summary, see Hawkins, A. J., & Ooms, T. (2012). Can marriage and relationship education be an effective policy tool to help low-income couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships? A review of lessons learned. *Marriage & Family Review*, 48, 524–554.

Improvements in letting go of faulty beliefs occurred across the board, regardless of race/ethnicity, income, or family structure. Perhaps even more important, the conflict management skills primarily helped the more disadvantaged students, with students from stepfamilies particularly benefiting. A separate study found that students who took the program increased their disapproval of using aggression in dating relationships, and this disapproval manifested itself in less dating physical aggression two years later.²⁵

- Of the studies examining relationship development programs for **cohabiting parents with aspirations for marriage**, the most rigorous, called *Building Strong Families*, recruited more than 5,000 lower income, unmarried parents in eight different locations across the country, half of whom were randomly assigned to participate in an intensive program meant to strengthen their relationships, and half of whom received no intervention. Unfortunately, program drop-outs were the norm; only about 10% of the couples who participated in the relationship education program received a significant “dose” of the curriculum, a sobering finding. (Other programs, however, have shown much higher participation rates.) High early drop-out rates, then, might explain the overall findings, at one and three years after the program, that no significant difference existed between the couples who participated and those in the control group who did not. An important exception to these disappointing results, however, existed in the site with the highest levels of participation: Oklahoma City. Nearly half of the Oklahoma City participants received a strong dose of the program (24+ instructional hours). Significantly, Oklahoma City program couples were 20% more likely to be together continuously for three years following the program than control-group couples (49% vs. 41%).²⁶
- Fairly extensive research on the effectiveness of marriage preparation education for **engaged couples** found, in a synthesis of 50 studies, that these programs have a strong effect on improving communication skills.²⁷ Unfortunately, though, only a few studies have followed these couples for more than six months after the programs, raising the question



²⁵ See Kerpelman, J. L., Pittman, J. F., Adler-Baeder, F., Eryigit, S., & Paulk, A. (2009). Evaluation of a statewide youth-focused relationships education curriculum. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 1359–1370; Kerpelman, J. L., Pittman, J. F., Adler-Baeder, F., Stringer, K. J., Eryigit, S., Cadely, H. S., & Harrell-Levy, M. K. (2010). What adolescents bring to and learn from relationship education classes: Does social address matter? *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 9, 95–112; Kerpelman, J. L. (2012). “Relationship Smart” youth: A statewide study of relationship education for high school students. Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, October 31, Phoenix, AZ.

²⁶ Wood, R. G., Moore, Q., Clarkwest, A., Killewald, A., & Monahan, S. (2012). *The long-term effects of Building Strong Families: A relationship skills education program for unmarried parents*, OPRE Report #2012-28A. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

of their long-term effectiveness. A classic study followed couples assigned to a formal marriage preparation program for more than five years and found they had higher levels of positive communication and lower levels of negative communication than couples who never took a formal class.

However, this body of research focuses mostly on well-educated white couples, not the couples most at risk for marital problems and divorce.²⁸ So, researchers need to undertake more rigorous, long-term studies of marriage preparation education with low-income couples to gain more confidence in their potential.

Fortunately, more advanced research on **marriage maintenance education** offers evidence that those most in need of family stability can, with help, better their chances of staying married.

- A large, rigorous study, *Supporting Healthy Marriage*, recruited more than 6,000 **lower income married couples** across the United States and, similar to the *Building Strong Families* study, randomly assigned half to receive a marriage-strengthening curriculum and half to be in the no-treatment control group. This study's participants had substantially



higher rates of involvement in the program and received a higher dosage of the curriculum than those in *Building Strong Families*. The results showed a small but statistically significant difference between the couples who participated in marriage education and those who did not, with program-educated couples scoring higher on a variety of relationship outcomes one year after enrolling in the program.²⁹

- A rigorous study of **mostly married, lower income Hispanic couples** in California also found significant positive impacts from the *Supporting Father Involvement* program, a course intended to promote fathers' engagement with their children and strengthen couple relationships. Participants

were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a fathers-only educational intervention, a couples program with mothers and fathers receiving almost the same curriculum, and a no-treatment control group. Compared to the control group, both the fathers' and couples' groups showed modest, positive changes in not only father engagement, but also in couple relationship quality and children's problem behavior. Interestingly, the couples' group surpassed the fathers' group in several significant areas: reductions in parent stress, increased marital stability, increased relationship quality, and more consistent, longer-term positive outcomes. Two further studies of the *Supporting Father Involvement* program replicated these results and also found that participants reduced their tendency for violent problem-solving behavior.³⁰

²⁷ Fawcett, E. B., Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., & Carroll, J. S. (2010). Do premarital education programs really work? A meta-analytic study. *Family Relations*, 59, 232–239.

²⁸ Markman, H. J., Renick, M. J., Floyd, F. J., Stanley, S. M., & Clements, M. (1993). Preventing marital distress through communication and conflict management training: A four- and five-year follow-up. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology*, 61, 70–77.

²⁹ Hsueh, J., Alderson, D. P., Lundquist, E., Michalopoulos, C., Gubits, D., Fein, D., & Knox, V. (2012). *The Supporting Healthy Marriage evaluation: Early impacts on low-income families*. OPRE Report 2012-11. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

³⁰ Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., Pruett, K., & Wong, J. J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventative interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 663–679; Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., & Pruett, K. (2012). Supporting Father Involvement: A couples group approach to enhancing family well-being. Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, October 31, Phoenix, AZ.

- Researchers studied **couples with one spouse in the military**, a group especially at risk for divorce and high-stress marriages, and found that those who participated in the marriage-strengthening program *Strong Bonds* were significantly less likely to be divorced, two years later, than couples who did not participate. Interestingly, the positive difference actually was stronger for minority couples who participated, with 5% of African American couples who took the course divorcing after two years versus 18% of African American couples who did not participate.³¹
- One important study provided a **satellite view of the impact of HMRI policy** by examining the impact of these initiatives on key family demographics such as family structure and child poverty rates—rather than relationship satisfaction and communication skills—at the population level. Overall, state-by-state variation in per-capita funding for HMRI between 2005 and 2010 significantly predicted small, positive changes in the percentages of married adults and children living with two parents in the population, and small decreases in the percentages of children living with one parent, nonmarital births, and children living in poverty. Washington, D.C., had by far the highest level of per-capita funding for HMRI and demonstrated some of the largest positive changes in family demographics during the decade. However, when the analysis removed this influential outlier, it diminished the overall results. Still, the study suggests that government-funded initiatives could be an additional tool in the fight against family instability and child poverty.³²

Not included in this summary of evaluation studies is research on the effectiveness of **divorce orientation education** designed to help couples at the crossroads of divorce evaluate the best path forward when a marriage is in serious trouble. Given that Utah is the only state that mandates this kind of class (in addition to the more common co-parenting education for divorcing parents) and that the implementation of Utah’s mandate needs significant improvement, it’s not surprising that informative evaluation research has not been conducted yet. However, research indicates that, nationally, perhaps 10% of divorcing couples—both husband and wife—still want to repair the relationship and avoid divorce, even near the end of the legal divorce process.³³ Divorce orientation education could possibly aid this 10% or more in getting support to repair and save their marriages.

This overview of marriage and relationship education research indicates that, while encouraging signs exist, these early initiatives need to improve. Fortunately, we believe they will. Dedicated practitioners and skilled researchers continue experimenting with new ideas, approaches, and curricula that portend improvements in HMRI. Perhaps it is not too optimistic to make an analogy to the advancements cars have undergone in the last few decades. Just as safety and efficiency components like child safety seats, air bags, anti-lock brakes, lighter composite materials, and fuel-saving tires have made today’s automobiles superior to their predecessors, relationship literacy education continues to undergo a long-term development process enhancing its ability to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages.

Critics’ Concerns: Review and Responses

Initial research offers policy-makers and opinion leaders throughout the political spectrum

³¹ Stanley, S. M. (2012). The impact of marriage education on Army couples. Presentation at the Annual National Association of Relationship and Marriage Education Conference, July, 23, Baltimore, MD.

³² Hawkins, A. J., Amato, P. R., & Kinghorn, A. (2013). Are government-supported healthy marriage initiatives affecting family demographics? A state-level analysis. *Family Relations*, 62, 501-513.

³³ Doherty, W. J., Willoughby, B. J., & Peterson, B. (2011). Interest in marital reconciliation among divorcing parents. *Family Court Review*, 49, 313–321. For a summary of related research, see Hawkins, A. J., Harris, Fackrell, T. A., S. M. (2013). *Should I try to work it out? A guidebook for individuals and couples at the crossroads of divorce*. North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

reasons to continue to experiment with Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives. But just as observers from diverse ideologies have reason to support the programs, many from left to right have reasons for skepticism. The Greyhound Archipelago sojourner opines about the inability of the institution of marriage itself to heal the “broken hearts and unfortunate choices”³⁴ he hears about on that long bus ride, and others echo his skepticism with their own political, philosophical, pragmatic, and even existential doubts about the efficacy of government-supported educational initiatives to strengthen marriages and relationships. In this section we will describe and respond to several common lines of criticism.

The Marital Ecology Critique argues that relationship literacy education, however well-intended, essentially misses the point. People are poor and less educated because they lack better socioeconomic conditions. Ergo, the best policies to strengthen marriages—and all relationships—are aimed at fixing unemployment, education, healthcare, drug abuse, domestic violence, and other problems. In other words, marriages are stressed when the social and economic soil in which they are planted is barren or hostile to their thriving. Unstable couples need fertile social soil and healthy economic conditions, not relationship skills and information, to achieve family stability.³⁵

Obviously, a large array of public policies trying to improve social and economic conditions already exists. Funding HMRI need not be an “either/or” option but can constitute an “also/and” in the arsenal of federal and state initiatives aimed at improving the lives of disadvantaged citizens. Whether we can afford support for relationship literacy education alongside other traditional policies poses a valid concern; however, as a society, we continue to spend billions and billions of dollars on socioeconomic policy. Adding the comparatively minuscule funding of marriage and relationship education to this large-scale spending on social programs at least directly addresses what the British policy expert David Halpern calls the “hidden wealth of nations”: the “affiliative economy” of family and human relationships. Family structure impacts the chances that children escape or remain in poverty, and a downturn in the affiliative economy exerts its own very real effects, too, on society. For this reason, Halpern calls for greater public support for developing key human skills—parenting and couple relationship building among them.³⁶

Even if we can agree that it’s a good idea to address family stability at the relationship level along with trying to improve the social and economic conditions that make healthy and stable relationships easier to achieve, the big question remains: are these efforts likely to bear good fruit at all? This is an equal-opportunity concern; traditional policies to improve social and economic circumstances for families must meet the same pragmatic effectiveness test as new policies to promote relationship stability and quality. **The Pragmatic Skepticism Critique** comprises several variations on the theme “It just won’t work” and resonates with people of all political persuasions. Some critics, like Michael Potemra, whose bus ride appears in the pages of the conservative *National Review*, argue that relationship literacy education programs don’t address the deep-seated issues that create problems in relationships: family-of-origin experiences, personality disorders, etc. Echoing similar themes advanced by some skeptical scholars,³⁷ Potemra asserts, “America’s families don’t lack stability because marriage is weak; marriage is weak because the people in our

³⁴ Potemra, M. (2012, October 1). The Greyhound Archipelago: What I learned in the ‘real’ America. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/316745/greyhound-archipelago>.

³⁵ For an illustration of this point, see: Cahn, N., & Carbone, J. (2010). *Red families v. blue families: Legal polarization and the creation of culture*. New York: Oxford; Karney, B. (2011). What’s (not) wrong with low-income couples: Maintaining intimacy in more and less affluent marriage. Presentation at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, November 19, Orlando, FL.; Trail, T. E., & Karney, B. R. (2012). What’s (not) wrong with low-income marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 413–427.

³⁶ Halpern, D. (2010). *The hidden wealth of nations*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

³⁷ For a more detailed illustration of this critique, see Huston, T. L., & Melz, H. (2004). The case for (promoting) marriage: The devil is in the details. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 943–958.

³⁸ Potemra, M. (2012, October 1). The Greyhound Archipelago: What I learned in the ‘real’ America. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/316745/greyhound-archipelago>.

families are unstable.”³⁸

The same argument could be used against other educational interventions such as employment training or teen pregnancy and drug prevention programs. Efforts to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships share a similar burden with other policy efforts aimed at helping human beings who are neither infinitely malleable nor fully autonomous. The fact that all people have underlying issues comes with the territory of educational efforts, and relationship literacy efforts should not be singled out because of this widespread challenge. Moreover, isn't the point of education not to change the past but help us understand it and shift the future? Good marriage and relationship education programs help participants understand how early experiences, like family instability and family violence, create commitment and trust issues that put them at greater risk for relationship problems. Through relationship literacy education, these individuals can understand their experiences and reframe them. "I know I'm a greater risk," the successful participant would say. "That's why I'm here trying to learn to do it better and overcome the odds so my kids have it better."

Other pragmatic skeptics point out that people who have chosen a bad marital partner are unlikely to improve their poor selection through learning communication skills.³⁹ Undoubtedly, healthy matches are crucial to marital success.⁴⁰ People all over the socioeconomic spectrum, not just the low income or disadvantaged, fall prey to less-than-optimal choices that a class on communication and problem-solving skills may not be able to overcome. No less than America's academic guru on marital success and failure, John Gottman, notes that Americans usually ignore the prosaic indications of a potentially successful marriage. Americans tend to fixate on Hollywood distortions of lasting love, Gottman says, like "watching Humphrey Bogart gather teary-eyed Ingrid Bergman into his arms."⁴¹ Such starry-eyed approaches to marriage obscure a realistic assessment of marital success for the rich and poor alike. And the tendency of premarital cohabitators to "slide into" marriage through a kind of "mission creep," that is, without having made what marriage researcher Scott Stanley calls crucial steps of conscious commitment along the way, greatly endangers their chances of making a wise choice.⁴²

But that's part of the point of relationship literacy education: promoting wiser choices and helping prevent bad matches. While the educated elite has its *New York Times* "Modern Love" feature along with the *Atlantic*—not to mention a large number of extended family and community marriage-models to learn from—the less educated need more advice and even more examples, but have less of either. Relationship literacy education teaches young adults what a healthy relationship looks like, how to spot danger signs, and how to choose a marriage partner wisely. Moreover, formal marriage preparation programs help engaged couples evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, with about 10 to 15% of couples deciding not to marry after considering their prospects for success.⁴³

A common critique that also belongs in the "pragmatic skeptic" category consists of the concern that marriage and relationship education programs are not designed to be effective for lower income couples who need them the most, nor are HMRI practitioners reaching enough disadvantaged individuals.⁴⁴ While this criticism could be considered accurate regarding the first generation of relationship education programs, a great deal of effort and money has been invested

³⁹ See Huston, T. L., & Melz, H. (2004). The case for (promoting) marriage: The devil is in the details. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 943–958.

⁴⁰ See Glenn, N. D. (2002). A plea for greater concern about the quality of marital matching. In A. J. Hawkins, L. D. Wardle, & D. O. Coolidge (Eds.), *Revitalizing the institution of marriage for the twenty-first century: An agenda for strengthening marriage*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

⁴¹ Gottman, J. M., & Sivler, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Crown, pp. 79-80.

⁴² Stanley, S. M. (2005). *The power of commitment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁴³ See Stanley, S. M. (2001). Making a case for premarital education. *Family Relations*, 50, 272–280.

⁴⁴ See Johnson, M. D. (2012). Healthy marriage initiatives: On the need for empiricism in policy implementation. *American Psychologist*, 67, 296–308.



to help rectify the situation. Adapting programs, content, and methods to be more effective for at-risk couples and people of color—whose lives are often much different from and more stressful than those of affluent and well-educated white couples—has brought these intervention programs to more and more disadvantaged couples. Some early evidence suggests that these programs may be even more effective for less educated, lower income African-American and Hispanic couples, along with other at-risk groups, than for advantaged groups.⁴⁵ And these programs, furthermore, are reaching increasing numbers of needy individuals and couples as practitioners learn how to market, recruit, and retain people in various at-risk populations.

A final pragmatic skeptic's argument worth mentioning consists of a somewhat pessimistic view of society's ability to shift social-historical forces. Trying to change family dynamics at this point, goes the reasoning, would consist of nothing more than a little movement north on an iceberg floating relentlessly south. However, in defense of public concern for helping couples form stable and healthy families, past causes—such as abolition, child-labor laws, or even anti-smoking efforts—also seemed futile in the face of major political, corporate, or cultural obstructions. An

⁴⁵ See Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., Pruett, K., & Wong, J. J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventative interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 663–679; Hawkins, A. J., & Fellows, K. J. (2011). *Findings from the field: A meta-analytic study of the effectiveness of healthy marriage and relationship education programs*. Washington, DC: The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. Available at: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/resource-detail/index.aspx?rid=3928>; Hawkins et al., (2013). Hawkins, A. J. Stanley, S. M., Cowan, P. A., Fincham, F. D., Beach, S. R. H., Cowan, C. P., Rhoades, G. K., Markman, H. J., & Daire, A. P. (2013). A more optimistic perspective on government-supported marriage and relationship education programs for lower income couples. *American Psychologist*, 68, 110-111; Hsueh, J., Alderson, D. P., Lundquist, E., Michalopoulos, C., Gubits, D., Fein, D., & Knox, V. (2012). *The Supporting Healthy Marriage evaluation: Early impacts on low-income families*. OPRE Report 2012-11. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;

institution as beloved and embedded in human history as the family is worth fighting for even when the socio-historical chips are down. Increasing the odds that children grow up in a stable, two-parent family stands as good a chance of survival as other “lost” causes that surprisingly won.

The Family Diversity Critique supplements the marital ecology and pragmatic skepticism concerns by leveling the criticism that we are now living in, or at least headed toward, a new normal. Just as families changed during the transition from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrial one, families are changing in the new millennium, and along with that adjustment comes a dramatic change in the institution of marriage.⁴⁶ This isn’t bad, the argument goes; it’s just change. A new normal will mean the flourishing of many different and fluid family forms that work not by virtue of their structure, but by effective interpersonal processes and supportive contexts. Adjusting to trends of increasing individualization, sexual freedoms, and prosperity, people will construct families in many different functional forms that will more fully meet the contemporary needs of women, men, and children.⁴⁷ Change is inevitable but we are good at adapting to change and riding it to a better place.

Well, simply put, we are not as optimistic about a natural and sanguine end to the changes that are leaving fewer children in stable families with two responsible, caring, and involved parents. We are certainly less patient. If a better day is just over the horizon, that horizon still seems a long, long way away. A strong tide of research over the past 30 years supports the conclusion that a stable marriage is the optimal setting for children’s positive growth and development and that family instability of various kinds is associated with poorer outcomes.⁴⁸ The negative trends in family stability, evident now for nearly two generations, are not abating yet. The prudent course, it seems to us, is to assume that we need to act now to facilitate greater family stability and healthy relationships. And if we do this in a way that is voluntary, does not impose choices on people, and provides participants with valuable knowledge and skills to help them achieve what they already want—a healthy, stable marriage and family—then most people will support it.

Moving Ahead: Improving HMRI with Strategic Funding and State-by-State Administration

The crucial question of how to fund, implement, and evaluate Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives must be addressed, and addressed with specificity and detail, in order to improve the programs and justify the expenditures. While we appreciate the efforts of federal law- and policy-makers over the past 10 to 15 years, we can improve on the initial policy experiment. Early efforts have focused on demonstrating what may be possible. The next agenda, informed by early lessons, can be more strategic and effective. The following recommendations facilitate such an agenda and offer realistic funding and implementation guidelines.

⁴⁶ For reviews of how marriage and family life have changed over time and “survived” dramatic changes in the social organization of life, see, for instance, Coontz, S. (2005). *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage*. New York: Penguin Books; Cott, N. F. (2000). *Public vows: A history of marriage and the nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

⁴⁷ For an illustration of this line of argument, see Solot, D., & Miller, D. (2002). *Let them eat wedding rings: The role of marriage promotion in welfare reform*. Albany, NY: The Alternatives to Marriage Project. Retrieved from <http://www.unmarried.org/let-them-eat-wedding-rings-report.html>.

⁴⁸ For a summary, see: Waite, L. J., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The case for marriage*. New York: Doubleday; Wilcox, W. B., Anderson, J. R., Doherty, W., Eggebeen, D., Ellison, C. G., Galston, W., ... & Wallerstein, J. (2011). *Why marriage matters, third edition: Thirty conclusions from the social sciences*. New York: Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project.

First, the full range of MRE services should be implemented where possible because the long-term effectiveness of a one-time-only dosage will likely be limited. Promoting the integrated set of curricula described in the following list, beginning early, is more likely to help couples form healthy relationships, sustain strong marriages, and yield better outcomes for their children:

- *relationship literacy education* for youth and young adults to help them avoid unsafe detours and poor choices that endanger healthy relationship formation;
- *relationship development education* for cohabiting couples and unmarried parents with aspirations for marriage to improve their prospects for an enduring marriage;
- *marriage preparation education* for formally engaged couples to help them strengthen the foundation for a lasting marriage; and
- *marriage maintenance education* for married couples to help them fight the forces of ongoing marital entropy.⁴⁹

Second, HMRI programs should be promoted and supported on a state-by-state basis rather than administered by a single federal agency. Currently, support for the vast majority of these educational efforts comes directly from the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the form of direct grants to community organizations providing the MRE services. We believe a state-based implementation would promote a healthier diversity of and experimentation with HMRI programs: fifty-one different sets of people with distinct perspectives could create a robust laboratory for effective public policy fitted to local circumstances, needs, and preferences. The resulting variation could also prove a potential goldmine of valuable information for researchers anxious to know what works well. A support role, however, still exists for the federal government, with ACF funding rigorous evaluations, which are challenging and expensive. ACF also should continue to lead in efforts to disseminate research findings and best practices.

HMRIs will also stand a better chance of political longevity if they are administered at the state level. Federal HMRI programs withstood the transition from a Republican to a Democratic administration, but their ability to survive much longer in an era of massive budget deficits, necessary cutbacks, and bare-knuckle politics may be dubious. Rather than ACF doling out grants directly to support community organizations, we advocate that ACF use most of these legislated funds to reimburse states that want to build and maintain their own educational initiatives. We recommend that states that choose to direct their own initiatives be reimbursed by ACF up to the level of 1% of their federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block-grant funds. In a small state like Utah that has a state-directed HMRI but is perpetually struggling to fund the initiative, this would amount to about \$700,000 of funding a year. The purposes of TANF explicitly include strengthening two-parent families and marriage; **states' investments of just 1% of TANF block grant funds each year to support relationship literacy education efforts** will make the other 99% of funds more effective by preventing problems that contribute to family dissolution and poverty. Obviously, if ACF reimburses states' investments, many more states are likely to build their own HMRIs. Not all states will choose to direct their own initiatives, of course, and that is their prerogative. As a result, it may be good for ACF to hold onto some funds for direct federal grants to comprehensive community programs in states that do not operate their own HMRI.

⁴⁹ Although we have not discussed it much in this report, we also call for *mandatory divorce orientation education* for couples at the crossroads of divorce to help them make careful decisions about the best path forward. Evaluation research on this form of education is in its infancy, although other research indicates that some divorcing couples still want to save their marriages and are interested in help to do so. For a summary of this research, see Hawkins (2013), Chapter 8.

Third, states should pursue a second source of funding by setting aside \$10 to \$20 from each marriage license fee (or adding a surcharge) to support state-directed HMRI efforts. This set-aside recognizes the public value of healthy, stable marriages, and states could reasonably ask those entering the institution of marriage to make a small contribution to its future “upkeep.” The average marriage license in the United States costs between \$25 and \$35. Again, in a small state like Utah, with about 25,000 marriages a year, a \$10 to \$20 set-aside would generate \$250,000 to \$500,000 additional funds each year. California issued about 218,000 marriage licenses in 2011, which would generate an additional \$2.2 to \$4.4 million a year to support a state-directed initiative in the most populous state. A California organization—Healthy Relationships California—currently has a federal grant of approximately this amount that it uses to build educational services across the state.

Fourth, if TANF funds are the primary funding source, then the state agency that directs the TANF program should logically oversee and administer HMRI programs. A lean staff of civil servant administrators could run the day-to-day operations, but they would benefit from the expertise of an active advisory board of state and national experts to set strategic directions. Clearly, civil servants require strong leadership support from a government hierarchy that affirms the rationale for setting aside a fraction of funds for preventative educational services. Researchers could certainly help them by doing more to make a hard-headed empirical case for the value and cost-effectiveness of these kinds of programs. Organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures, guided by a nonpartisan mission to promote policy innovation among state legislatures, could also better support this kind of prevention policy.

We believe a state-by-state effort to strengthen the institution of marriage with adequate funding from federal TANF dollars and state marriage license fees will energize a federalist laboratory of local innovation that will eventually produce more effective programs than are apt to develop under the current federal administration of HMRI.

Conclusion

HMRI: A Lifeboat for At-Risk Americans

W. Bradford Wilcox and Amber Lapp of the Institute for Family Studies provide a stark illustration of the collapse of marriage among working class Americans in the form of “Kelly,” a pseudonymed real-life resident of Maytown, Ohio. In their *National Review* cautionary piece, “The Privilege of Marriage,” Wilcox and Lapp describe Kelly’s trajectory from happily married mother of two to not-yet-divorced girlfriend whose multiple cohabiting partners in the years since the marriage fell apart have included a registered sex offender and a married man. Kelly and her ex-husband’s trailer park share the same zip code as a subdivision full of million-dollar homes. Still, they remain “ghettoized,” according to the authors, “rarely seeing marriages where spouses manage to make it through the thick and thin of married life, as do most upper-middle-class couples today.”⁵⁰

A national survey of high-school-educated Americans reports that 76% of them consider marriage extremely important, but as Lapp and Wilcox point out, “Whereas a flourishing marriage culture once existed for both high-school-educated and college-educated Americans, a growing marriage gap now divides the two groups”—with infidelity, divorce, unmarried births and their respective complications plaguing those who never make it past high school.⁵¹ The authors

⁵⁰ Wilcox, W. B., & Lapp, A. (2013, September 13). The privilege of marriage. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationareview.com/nrd/articles/358324/privilege-marriage>

⁵¹ Wilcox, W. B., & Lapp, A. (2013, September 13). The privilege of marriage. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationareview.com/nrd/articles/358324/privilege-marriage>.

propose public policies to remedy this widening chasm, among them set-asides in real-estate developments that allow lower-income families to live among more stable families, reformed divorce laws, and improved school choice and vocational prospects that improve chances for both economic and family stability. Another policy they recommend is “relationship education classes like those that *Marriage Works! Ohio* teaches in public high schools,” because confidence in marriage “cannot be built on Hollywood-style dreams of romantic love or a naïve faith that marriage will fix a troubled relationship. Confidence, to be deep-rooted, must be based in reality.”⁵²

Relationship literacy education makes that confidence available to couples and individuals drowning in a culture of family instability—those most in need of reality-based information. In the *Atlantic’s* “Why Is It Hard for Liberals to Talk About ‘Family Values?’” Emma Green points out that progressives must realize that issues with religious overtones, like marriage, need not threaten their sense of pluralism and tolerance. As Green points out, “when people follow the mores advocated in religious communities, it turns out, they are less likely to experience poverty or commit crimes.”⁵³ Relationship literacy education provides needed (and wanted) education that may hold promise for improving the likelihood of healthier families. Moreover, conservatives should welcome a low-cost policy initiative that has the potential to decrease poverty and crime while increasing upward mobility and family stability.

The Case of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative

Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives are something all sides can support, and the state of Oklahoma offers a living example of how public policy with bipartisan support can work to help families. While other states, most notably Utah, have launched sustained state-directed initiatives, Oklahoma has the most far-reaching approach to date. It began in the late 1990s when Governor Frank Keating became concerned about the state’s rising poverty level and charged a commission to analyze the reasons. The commission identified a high rate of family instability as one of the leading causes. Leaders from across the state came together to discuss these issues and set a goal to substantially reduce the divorce rate and increase the number of children in two-parent families over the next decade.

Since 1999, Oklahoma has devoted steady resources to the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI), about \$2.5 million a year. The state contracted with an innovative public relations firm for day-to-day operations. After carefully studying the challenges and opportunities and developing the educational infrastructure to deliver MRE services, OMI has managed to make a 12-hour set of curricula available for free to virtually all interested individuals and couples in the state.⁵⁴ Participating private and public sectors include education, corrections, health, social services, military, schools, and churches—with curricula adapted to many specific populations in need or at-risk. The OMI also put special efforts into building workshops in specific geographical areas and among certain groups such as Latinos, Native Americans, and foster and adoptive parents. Also, they invest significant resources into marketing workshops, and sometimes even provide childcare for participants to make it easier for them to attend classes.

⁵² Wilcox, W. B., & Lapp, A. (2013, September 13). The privilege of marriage. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/358324/privilege-marriage>.

⁵³ Green, E. (2013, July 13). Why is it hard for liberals to talk about ‘family values’? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/events/archive/2013/07/why-is-it-hard-for-liberals-to-talk-about-family-values/278151/>.

⁵⁴ Each curriculum is derived from the basic Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (or PREP) curriculum developed at the University of Denver Center for Marital and Family Studies. It is the most evaluated and refined relationship curriculum in the world.

The results? From 1999 to 2013, the OMI has directed about \$40 million to the kinds of relationship literacy education services we have advocated in this report. More than **337,000** individuals, including **170,000** youth, have participated in a significant educational experience. That's nearly 10% of its population, at an estimated cost of about \$12.50 per participant. The investment seems to be paying off. Research suggests that these efforts may be mitigating negative population trends, with an estimated 3% increase in the proportion of Oklahoma children living with two parents (than would be predicted without the OMI), a 3% decrease in children living with one parent, nearly a 3% decrease in children born to a single mother, and a 1.4% decrease in children living in poverty.⁵⁵ According to one economist's calculations, a 1% decrease in family instability in Oklahoma translates into a public savings of \$43 million a year, potentially yielding a return-on-investment that would impress even Warren Buffet.⁵⁶

Increasing family stability and decreasing poverty, Oklahoma has shown, is not a chimeric political fantasy, but a feasible public policy goal. Perhaps there are some unique cultural features of Oklahoma that make these policy efforts more feasible and positive results more likely than in other states. Perhaps, but we doubt it. Indeed, we think that the Oklahoma model is readily replicable.

While Healthy Marriages and Relationships Initiatives cannot mend all the broken hearts and make up for all the unfortunate choices Michael Potemra encountered on his journey across America, they can improve many at-risk Americans' prospects for healthier family formation. The progress is slow, plodding, and prosaic, but state-based relationship literacy education can help sustain one of the most fundamental institutions in our society. Those who refrain from casting lifelines, removing anchors, or offering spots on the lifeboat to struggling couples and individuals will find that creeping family instability and poverty no longer remain problems confined to a small sector of society. Those who offer the lifelines of information, instruction, motivation, encouragement, and support to those with aspirations of life-long love will find that helping at-risk families helps future generations, and all of us.

⁵⁵ Hawkins, A. J., Amato, P. R., & Kinghorn, A. (2013). Are government-supported healthy marriage initiatives affecting family demographics? A state-level analysis. *Family Relations*, 62, 501-513. Note that these estimated positive changes were not large enough to offset the general increase since 2000 in single-parent homes, nonmarital births, and child poverty; they only diminished the negative trends.

⁵⁶ Scafidi, B. (2008). *The taxpayer costs of divorce and unwed childbearing: First-ever estimates for the nation and all fifty states*. New York: Institute for American Values and Georgia Family Council. See Table A.5, p. 38.