

United State Senate Finance Committee
Thursday, May 16, 2002
10:00 A.M. Room 215 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Issues in TANF Reauthorization: Building Stronger Families

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the privilege of appearing today to share the genesis and status of Oklahoma's strategy to strengthen marriages and reduce divorce. In Oklahoma, we are spending TANF funds for this purpose because the research clearly shows that child well-being is enhanced when children are reared in two parent families where the parents have a low conflict marriage.

1. The Beginning

In 1998, Governor Frank Keating asked economists from the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University to conduct a joint study on what Oklahoma needed to do to become a more prosperous state. He got the usual economic analysis relating to tax issues and regulatory reform, but there were also some surprising results. The economists also found certain social indicators hurting Oklahoma's economy. They mentioned Oklahoma's high divorce rate and high rates of out-of-wedlock births. One OSU economist wrote in an editorial, "Oklahoma's high divorce rate and low per-capita income are interrelated. They hold hands. They push and pull each other. There's no faster way for a married woman with children to become poor than to suddenly become a single mom."

The study prompted Governor Keating to unveil a strong social agenda in his 2nd Inaugural (1999) and his 1999 State of the State address, in which he said:

"There's something wrong with a good people in a good society when it is easier to get a marriage license in Oklahoma than it is to get a fishing license and it is easier to get out of a marriage with children than it is to get out of a Tupperware contract. We have to take significant steps to change our culture of divorce."

Governor Keating followed up. He hosted the nation's first "Governor and First Lady's Conference on Marriage" in March, of 1999. Based on the information learned there, Oklahoma's Marriage Initiative was launched. The Governor took key steps to ensure that the goal of reducing divorce and strengthening marriage was more than simply a political statement. Specifically the governor:

- Took the bold step of setting a specific, measurable goal - to reduce divorce in Oklahoma by 1/3 by the year 2010.
- Committed to broad public involvement through a multi-sector strategy.
- Requested and secured an allocation of significant TANF funding.
- Provided on-going leadership, operational management, and education to keep marriage on the public agenda.
- Committed to delivering meaningful and relevant services that provide couples with the skills needed to form and sustain healthy relationships.

2. The Multi-Sector Strategy

After the 1999 Governor and First Lady's Conference on Marriage, several sectors were identified as necessary to the development of a strategy for improving marriage and reducing divorce. The sectors identified were: religious, business, education, government, legal, media and providers. The religious community focused primarily on the need for premarital counseling. To date, over 800 ministers have signed a commitment that they will uphold certain minimum standards for the marrying of couples in their religious institutions. Those standards include:

- a. Requesting a four to six month preparation period
- b. Conducting four to six marriage preparation sessions during the preparation period
- c. Encouraging the spiritual formation of the couple

- d. Encouraging the training of mentoring couples to assist younger couples during the first years of marriage.

Other sectors took on other initiatives with varying degrees of success. Over time, a consensus was developed that research should play a more prominent role in the development of the strategy. It was believed that we would benefit from a panel of researchers who had already reviewed the literature, evaluated curriculum, studied data and knew the subject from a researched perspective.

3. Research and the Beginnings of a Service Delivery System

a. The value of research

For a subject about which most of us has an opinion or an anecdote from personal experience, it is remarkable how much is known, but unused, in understanding how to make better marriage choices, to strengthen existing marriages, to cope with stress and reduce conflict, and to avoid divorce.

As our efforts to confront this problem have matured (and they are still very young), we resolved to hold ourselves to some fairly high standards for our work. First, we agreed to measure the effectiveness of our combined efforts in improving marriage and reducing divorce. The way we chose to measure our effectiveness is to construct a baseline of the current attitudes toward and demographic characteristics of marriage, divorce and family formation in Oklahoma. We intend to measure these factors over time to determine whether we are in fact being effective.

b. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Statewide Baseline Survey

In partnership with Oklahoma State University's Bureau for Social Research, the first, comprehensive, state-of-the-art statewide survey on marriage was designed and completed. This survey consisted of 123 questions delivered in an approximately 15-minute phone interview with Oklahoma households, with a margin of error of +/- 3%. To

ensure that the data were representative of low-income families, additional interviews were completed with state Medicaid clients. Residents of neighboring states were also surveyed, to form a comparison group. It will provide a baseline for long-term evaluation. The survey has four major themes: (i) provide reliable demographic data on marriage, divorce, patterns of cohabitation, and intent to marry/remarry; (ii) learn Oklahomans' attitudes about intimate relationships, marriage, family, and divorce; (iii) obtain qualitative information on couples' relationship; and (iv) assess the knowledge and acceptance of prevention education. The full survey report will be released in late June or early July, but preliminary findings include:

- A large majority of Oklahoma adults (82%) feel a statewide initiative to promote marriage and reduce divorce would be a good or very good idea.
- A majority of currently married and romantically involved Oklahomans (65%) said they would consider relationship education to strengthen their relationships.
- Over 2/3 of Oklahoma adults (69%) think divorce is a very serious national problem.

c. The Beginnings of a statewide Marriage and Relationship Education Service Delivery System

One of the challenges that seemed apparent almost from the beginning was the lack of access to marital education with a curriculum that had been thoroughly researched and the efficacy of which was documented. Our research of marriage education materials led us to conclude that marriage is a skill-based relationship with certain core values. To deliver relationship education services to couples, both married and unmarried, we needed a curriculum that is skills-based and research-based. We believe that marriage success can be learned, and that there are tools available that will help couples

communicate effectively, resolve conflict constructively and handle other problems that, if unchecked, can lead to divorce. We selected PREP® (the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) as the state's curriculum because of its research basis and its evaluation record. It is a curriculum that has been used in the military for many years. PREP can be tailored to a variety of constituencies and the long-term efficacy of the twelve hours of education has been validated in a variety of research settings.

We are presently in the training stage of implementing the service delivery system. These skills are beginning to be offered in workshops throughout Oklahoma. The training includes identifying substance abuse risks and presentations by the Oklahoma Coalition against Domestic Violence. The ultimate goal is to have services available in all 77 counties. Health Department guidance counselors, OSU Cooperative Extension educators, service professionals, pastors, and others are being trained to deliver workshops. Staffs with the Department of Human Services, Head Start, and other referral sources or gatekeepers are being trained to make appropriate referrals to the services. Our goals are to increase the stability and quality of these relationships.

Low-income families, including TANF recipients, benefit from these relationship workshops. A curriculum advisory group has been formed to make the sessions helpful and relevant to a variety of populations. Participation in these marriage education workshops should provide Oklahomans with the tools and encouragement they need to build stronger and healthier marriages, improve child and parental well-being, and reduce divorce and the negative consequences that often follow.

4. Conclusion

Oklahoma has demonstrated its ability to implement welfare reform. We have received two TANF bonuses for our efforts in getting TANF recipients to work. We believe our

strategy to strengthen marriages and reduce divorce will strengthen Oklahoma families, and help couples form and sustain healthy marriages. Based on what we've learned so far, we continue to support the use of TANF funds to fund activities that strengthen families by growing healthy marriages.