

# How Can a State Policymaker Build Support for a Strengthening Marriage Agenda?

Within the last decade, initiatives to strengthen marriage, reduce divorce, and encourage individuals to make healthy relationship choices have become a strategy for strengthening families in many states. You may already have the foundation laid for one, both, or all of these strategies or you may be considering starting such an initiative in your state. Either way, you will need to garner support to move your agenda forward. There are many activities state policymakers and advocates can do to build support for an initiative. These activities can include establishing a state-wide campaign to create public awareness; conducting statewide surveys to gauge your state's beliefs and attitudes about marriage; creating a task force to examine issues and policies that are putting your state's families at risk; building bridges with potential allies or opponents through meetings and other events; and conducting outreach activities like making presentations to organizations and events.

**Establish a state-wide campaign to increase public awareness of the benefits of healthy relationships and marriage for children and adults.** Creating public awareness regarding the social and individual benefits of healthy relationships may raise interest and consciousness in the community. This, in turn, may encourage proactive support for an environment of healthy marriage. Supporters believe it helps to create publicly stated goals and priorities that policymakers can reinforce with programming or changes in law. Examples may range from setting up billboards advertising the importance of healthy



relationships to producing state guidebooks and brochures for individuals and couples, to using public service advertising and social media outlets. (See [examples of what many states have done](#)).

**Conduct a state survey about healthy marriages and divorce.** Surveys on the attitudes and beliefs about marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and healthy intimate partner relationships (among other related issues) can help guide your decision-making on related policy. For example, learning that couples in their community marry for the first time, on average, at age 22 may encourage policymakers to create the opportunities for premarital preparation services delivered on college campuses. (See related survey instruments created by [states](#)).

**Create a commission or task force on strengthening families.** Bring a group of diverse stakeholders together to examine issues and policies that put marriage or families at risk and to make recommendations regarding potential solutions. These entities also can serve as oversight or coordinating bodies, funding

mechanisms, or funding repositories for program operations targeted toward strengthening marriage. Convening a formal or informal group with diverse representation is ideal and might include:

- various racial and ethnic groups
- religious organizations from different faiths
- governmental entities such as education, courts, social services, criminal justice, youth services, employment assistance, pregnancy prevention, Early Head Start/Head Start
- state health, education and human service agencies
- civic leaders
- research/academic community
- the domestic violence community
- parenting, fatherhood and life skills programs
- families

**Sponsor a hearing, meeting, workshop, or conference** to educate your colleagues and/or the general public about the value of marriage and strategies that can support healthy marriage. Use these forums to obtain information from stakeholders about the barriers or challenges states or communities face in supporting healthy marriage. Be sure to include organizations that are not existing supporters of healthy relationship efforts. Stakeholders may not understand that they share common ground and may even have a history of advocating opposing viewpoints, but policymakers can forge collective problem-solving to bring progress toward a collective goal. Convening stakeholders may be as informal as a breakfast meeting or as formal as a conference. For example, the Texas Health and Human

Services Commission sponsored a Healthy Marriage Summit that gathered practitioners together to network and share promising practices. By bringing together individuals with varied and credible backgrounds, you can build consensus and support for marriage services. Providing a forum for the exchange of information and ideas helps connect stakeholders and generate awareness for issues.

**Use your leadership position to create awareness.** Using a public position to raise awareness about an issue can help create a more informed constituency and clarify misinformation. When leaders talk and write about issues, it raises the profile and visibility. This is also an opportune time to identify others with like-minded views and other spheres of influence to champion your cause. Engage the media whenever possible to attend your events. If you are a strong writer, you can write a letter to an editor or blog to reach a wider audience. Or, if you are a gifted orator, many local radio, television, and cable programs will be interested in hearing about innovative programs and ideas that affect families. Be sure to have facts to support your statements (See [What Should Policymakers Know about Marriage and Relationship Education?](#)).

**Participate as a speaker or group member when asked.** Leadership involves supporting like-minded groups in their endeavors. It may also involve engaging potential opponents. Accept invitations to make presentations, participate in panels, or join coalitions focused on supporting families. These events may be opportunities to network, gain support, or share your policy-related ideas. As a policymaker, your participation may draw others to attend. This will help you build a broader support network. Events hosted by community groups with

beliefs similar to yours provide opportunities to gain grassroots' support for the issues you care about.

**Build bridges with policymakers and advocates involved in Domestic Violence and Fatherhood initiatives.** Emphasize that domestic violence, fatherhood, and strengthening marriage programs have several underlying goals in common—such as fostering safe and healthy intimate partner and parent-child relationships—that strongly suggest they would benefit from working together. When the fields operate in silos, they reduce their effectiveness and may sometimes, inadvertently, do serious harm. They may also miss opportunities to do good. Policymakers involved in domestic violence and fatherhood initiatives may be unaware that their policies are serving different members of the same families and may often be working toward cross-purposes. Collaborate with other policymakers involved in leading these initiatives to look for ways to enhance these policies.

**Sustain your interest and stay connected.**

Participate in an advisory committee or similar group to monitor changes so you can ensure that the initiative is moving in the appropriate direction. When your time is constrained, have one of your staff members attend. Implementation is rarely as easy as originally thought and communication between policymakers and front-line workers is essential. Staying connected also gives you the opportunity to recognize any unintended consequences resulting from your initiative as they occur so the issues can be addressed immediately.

In summary, creating and maintaining support for healthy marriage in your state can be conducted through various means such as creating statewide outreach activities and using your leadership and communication skills to dispel myths and define the importance of healthy relationships. Some

states have begun to utilize these methods and have experienced promising results. You may also want to consider creating laws, regulations and procedures that will strengthen relationships and marriages (see *What Can State Policymakers do to Strengthen Relationships and Marriages in Their State?*) There are many additional resources available to help you with your effort at [www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org).

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