

Been There, Done That - Sharing Lessons Learned as a State Administrator

Author: Dana Reichert Alfred, former Executive Director, TANF Executive Office of Oversight and Evaluation, Louisiana Office of the Governor

So you want to start a marriage initiative?

Been There...

Been there—the excitement and gratification of feeling like you’ll really and truly make a meaningful impact into the lives of people, in a way that is felt fairly immediately. At the time when I was a state administrator, the idea of anything “marriage” was pretty new, and met with a fair bit of skepticism. What I didn’t have back then, were very many colleagues that were interested in starting their own marriage initiatives with which I could share ideas, learn from

At the time when I was a state administrator, the idea of anything “marriage” was pretty new, and met with a fair bit of skepticism.

mistakes, or even just commiserate! My hope is that by sharing some of my experience, you can avoid my mistakes. There were also a few things I did right, I’d like for you to learn from those too.

Done That...

As a state TANF administrator, I had the benefit of at least including marriage-related initiatives in the first iteration of my state’s TANF budget. But, I also had to defend the items I had chosen [and the amounts I’d chosen] before the legislature. After all was said and done, I funded a variety of marriage-related items—statewide study on marriage attitudes for low-income, never-married parents, marriage cur-

riculum for African-American couples, public service announcements, services for couples, handbooks for married couples, handbooks on marriage for singles, and probably a few other things that I’ve forgotten. So, there is a good chance I’ve had some experience trying something you’re now considering.

As I’ve had some time to reflect on these experiences, I’ve attempted to group them into some digestible portions that will hopefully provide some nuggets of wisdom that you can apply to your own situation. But first, let me tell you about my failures. By knowing the pitfalls to avoid, I think it will be easier to understand how they apply as you read through some of the other aspects of my experience.

But Don’t Do This

By the end of their term, any good state policymaker will have developed a list of accomplishments—and ruffled a few feathers along the way. I’m sure if you asked some folks that served with me, or under me,



they might have a different list of the things I didn't do so well. So, as you read the following, understand that this is my own self-centered list of things I felt I failed at. I'm quite sure it isn't exhaustive, but I think it's also the most useful and transferable list of "lessons learned"—things I'd wish someone had shared with me, *before* I'd made a public investment in marriage initiatives.

- **Is it really a good idea, or just your idea?**

If you are reading this, chances are, you're already on the bandwagon for thinking that a public investment in marriage is a good idea. It's easy to relish the idea when you read about the research and go to conferences where you

I made a mistake in thinking that once people understood what was to be accomplished by the initiatives I was funding, they too, would think it was a good idea.

can meet with like-minded people. I made a mistake in thinking that once people understood what was to be accomplished by the initiatives I was funding, they too, would think it was a good idea. What I discovered [too late, I might add] is that as important as it was to come up with the idea, I needed to build collective ownership over the idea. In other words, the people around me needed to believe in it as much as I did—and not just because the research said so, or because I said so. But because I didn't do this, many of my *great ideas* left when I did, rendering them just *my great ideas*.

- **Be sure people know how to utilize or apply your good idea or services.**

While everything I developed got implemented, they got implemented because I knew how they should connect in the community, not because people understood how what we developed connected to anything. Said differently, all the parts of the contracts I had with people were fulfilled, but people didn't understand the fundamental reason for why and how we created and connected to the places we did. I had envisioned that once things were launched people would "get it" and what we'd created would become an institutional part of the way that people did things. But, I learned that people didn't understand *how* to incorporate a curriculum, *where* marriage handbooks could be distributed, *what* would trigger people to attend a particular service. Largely as a by product of my first point [creating buy-in] we were left with useful products that no one knew how to use.

- **Grow champions.**

I ended up being the only champion of this work. The people around me did what was needed to launch all of these activities, but they did that because I asked them to, not because they believed in it. A lot of policymakers make this mistake—they forget to groom leaders that believe in the effort enough to carry on the effort even after they are gone. This means building up credibility in people that are likely not a part of your immediate team, but rather those that will be a part of the landscape when you leave. Growing these champions involves more than just teaching someone about an issue, it involves showing them *how* it works, and *why* it works. That way, it becomes less about whose idea it is, but more

about the fact it's a good idea. And, if you have an army of champions, they will be able to apply those ideas, not because they are your ideas on your agenda, but because they believe the ideas to be in the public good.

• Document success.

There were many positive things that I did to advance the field of marriage. At the time, I had invested more proportionate amounts of my TANF grant than any other state aside from Oklahoma. I'd tried and accomplished things other states hadn't started. But, all of this remained largely evident only in the minds of those that were there [if they remembered]. It isn't documented anywhere. Whether or not my efforts actually helped foster any healthy marriages is unknown. It's unknown because I didn't plan for a way to capture my success—success even in small ways like

That I didn't document my success turned out to be my biggest failure.

whether or not those that received the handbooks thought they were helpful. That I didn't document my success turned out to be my biggest failure.

Mastering the “Its”

Using the benefit of hindsight, I've come up with a three-step approach as a guideline to help your thinking as you begin the process of developing your own marriage initiative. This three step concept ought to shed additional light on the subject—**Understand It, Package It and Grow It**. This approach should be transferable regardless of the type of marriage initiative you are planning.

- *Understand it*. Understand exactly what and how you want to do.

- *Package it*. Package your efforts to position what you are trying to do.
- *Grow it*. Have growing your effort in mind as you work to actually get it off the ground.

While I didn't have a snappy name for those steps at the time, each of the ones that I am describing were used with a fair degree of success in moving my marriage initiatives along. Of course the list is not exhaustive—there are many more not discussed here. But, those I am mentioning are some critical steps that will get you started in the right direction. Just keep in mind the list of “don'ts” discussed in the previous section.

Understand It

• Understand what you are trying to achieve.

Seems like a no-brainer, right?

The field of *marriage* is pretty vast—you'll need to narrow in on the specifics of what you are trying to accomplish. Especially if you are just beginning, its best to be deep and not wide—do a few things well, rather than a bunch of things that are just so-so. One way to think about this is to determine how your efforts will change or enhance an overall circumstance in your state. Are you trying to reduce the divorce rate, help more people to consider marriage, offer support to those already married? While all of these items are not necessarily mutually exclusive, each does have its own specialized approach. What you'd do for a couple on the brink of divorce is a bit different than what you'd do to help those not yet married; and different still if you want to change public perception about the value of marriage. Your approach must be focused to the specifics of what you want to impact, so think carefully about this step as everything else you do, must contribute towards this goal.

- **Think about the tactics you'll use to accomplish your overall goal.** This is the “how you'll get it done” part. Do you want to offer a service, create a coalition, offer training, develop a public message? You may think your answer is yes to it all, but before you answer, consider carefully the landscape and climate of your state. Learn about the issues related to marriage in your state—is the divorce rate high, low, or in the middle? Are there demographics in your state [mostly old, blue collar, white collar, mostly young, etc] that would influence the way you approach or interpret the issue? Are their particular social issues that are important to your state like high or low teen pregnancy rates, health ratings or other social values? For example, in my state, we enjoyed the third lowest divorce rate, so developing an initiative around the issue of reducing divorce wasn't the way to go. But we had a high out of wedlock pregnancy rate, which let me develop an initiative that began a conversation about considering marriage, and learning more about

If you lack information on these issues, maybe you'll want to ease into things by doing a study or sponsoring some research.

why people weren't getting married. If you lack information on these issues, maybe you'll want to ease into things by doing a study or sponsoring some research. If you choose this route, don't forget to *do* something with the information once you receive it—it can be a nice foundation to build upon.

- **Fit your effort into the landscape of your state, rather than trying to reshape the landscape to fit marriage initiatives.** Regardless of the landscape in your state, you'll want to fit your initiative into the context of what's important to your state. If you are reading this, you already

Regardless of the landscape in your state, you'll want to fit your initiative into the context of what's important to your state.

know how far reaching investing in healthy marriages can be—it will be easier to make the case if it's connected to something that already matters to your state. It will also be easier for would-be skeptics, or those undecided, to interpret your idea if viewed through the lens of something already important to the social climate in your state. However, be cautious about stretching things too far. For example, suggesting that strengthening marriage is an immediate way to deal with the crime rate might be a bit of a stretch to defend, even though we know in the long term, it will make a difference. Think of something more manageable and tangible for the short term. You want a long-term investment and commitment to the issue, so be sure what you are selling is realistic.

Package It

- **Develop an approach and a related message that you can “sell”.** Your message is essentially the communication of what you are doing, whether it's offering or building a service, or initiating a public

awareness campaign. Deciding how to position what you are trying to do is often as important as what you are trying to do. Make certain that you develop a position that resonates with those in which you are trying to target. In some cases this means your message is targeted to stakeholders who might need to give you money, or policy help; in other cases it may mean messaging that is targeted to those that might potentially access what you try to develop; and in all cases, you should think of messaging that is appropriate for those who may potentially oppose what you try to do. This may mean you don't lead with the words *marriage initiative*. Take a cue from fast food in the following example. Leading fast food chains essentially sell hamburgers—meat patties, with ketchup, mustard and pickles sandwiched between two pieces of bread. They may call it a *Quarter Pounder*, *Big Mac*, or a *Whopper*, not because it's not a hamburger, but because it allows them to package it and sell it differently. Some hamburgers contain more meat, some have extra ingredients like cheese and special sauce, but they are essentially hamburgers. Marriage initiatives are no different, as long as they contain the elements that make it about marriage, it doesn't matter what its called, it matters that it gets

Bottom line, develop and package a message that you can sell.

funded and implemented. Bottom line, develop and package a message that you can sell.

- **It's okay if not everyone is on the Marriage "Bandwagon."** Even if your idea or initiative is a great idea, not everyone will think so, and not everyone will think its something to spend money on—especially public money.

Even if your idea or initiative is a great idea, not everyone will think so, and not everyone will think it's something to spend money on—especially public money.

Knowing this, ensure your message is something that will not immediately cause opposition to those people or groups that are the most likely to oppose what you do. Not everyone has to support what you do, but they don't have to oppose what you do either. Messaging can be a key part of neutralizing opposition. For example, in my state, there were many advocate groups that opposed virtually anything they thought took money away from helping single parents or children. While I could make the intellectual argument that *marriage strengthening* was about supporting parents and children, doing so was dependent upon them giving me the opportunity to explain this. In messaging, you may not get that chance before the opposition mounts an attack on your idea. Once this happens, its an uphill battle and you end up using your energy climbing back up the hill, rather than gathering supporters. So, I called my initiatives *Family Strengthening*, this took the "sting" out of something they would have likely opposed just by looking at the name. Further, it gave me time to be pro-active about what it was, rather than be defensive about what it wasn't.

- **Use local data to reinforce your message.** To win support for your initiative, you'll need to convince those that are uninformed, or those that are opposed to what you do, of the value of what you propose. While it's notable to use general statistics or national

statistics, this is often too removed for people to understand how this new idea can create benefit locally. By showing a connection to local information, stakeholders are more likely to engage in at least discussing or learning about how your initiative will impact the scene locally. Further, it will be much harder to dispute fact-based information locally, it's much easier to be dismissive of something that "comes out of Washington" or from another place. In my own experience, this local information helped to win the support I needed because the people that opposed it were afraid to argue against it for fear they'd be accused of opposing a local solution to out-of-wedlock childbearing—heaven forbid there be too many good ideas! It also helped local officials see how we were being *trendsetters* by taking an issue of national attention and crafting a localized solution for it.

- **Be sure your message is credible.** Not only do you want to win support for what you are doing, you want to build champions and believers for what you do. You'll need support from those that you might think of as "outside" the marriage world. To do that, you'll need to craft a message that is credible, and tangible, something that fits in their world. As I mentioned,

I purposely avoided using the term *marriage initiative*, but rather *family strengthening*.

I purposely avoided using the term *marriage initiative*, but rather *family strengthening*. This allowed me to work with groups like human service agencies who traditionally viewed their role as one of serving mothers and children [my state issue of choice], making it a natural alliance. If I'd

have gone in as waiving the marriage flag first, I'd have spent a lot of time defending what I was trying to do, rather than explaining what I was trying to do. Remember, you need to build champions, so getting people on your team is an important element to helping them take ownership over the issues and not just be compliant partners.

Grow It

- **Expect trade-offs and compromises.** Particularly as it relates to funding, be willing to give a little, to get a little [well, hopefully get a lot!]. I learned quickly that there are many, many competing ideas for what stakeholders believe should be funded with public money. I had the added advantage of at least including marriage initiatives in my budget. But, it didn't save me from having to cut out some of what I wanted in order to fund other things that I had no interest

The point being, in my experience it wasn't so much that people didn't want to fund my ideas as much as it was they feared funding my idea would mean cutting theirs.

in. The point being, in my experience it wasn't so much that people didn't want to fund my ideas as much as it was they feared funding my idea would mean cutting theirs. So, the easiest way to protect what I wanted was to give them a bit of what they wanted. I know, it sounds very simple, and it is. Its just one of those things that is easy to forget when we become passionate about our cause.

- **Stay involved with details and implementation.** Receiving funding for

your project is only the beginning, now the real work begins. As state leaders, it's common to get distracted by other things, but in order to ensure that your message and vision are maintained, you've got to stay involved with the details all the way through the launch and operation of your initiative. You can't find out after the fact that the wording on your brochures isn't right, that the pictures on your public service announcements aren't representative of your target population, or that your curriculum is being taught during the day when your target population is at work. While you don't need to micro-manage the details, or execute the details yourself, being a constant presence and upholding accountability will ensure that your vision is launched as expected.

- **Build in a way to track progress.**

Creating long-term believers of your efforts only comes if you can prove a benefit. The only way to prove a benefit is by having the numbers on paper to show that your program, service or product had an impact in some way. It is won-

The only way to prove a benefit is by having the numbers on paper show that your program, service or product had an impact in some way.

derful if you can afford a large, random-sample evaluation or similar research. For most, this isn't feasible. But smaller things like surveys and focus groups can help lend credibility to your efforts. Even just simply documenting your steps, observing your success, writing it down and releasing it can be enough to show progress. You'll need to show this progress to make certain of receiving ongoing funding and support for your efforts. It's often easier to win support for some-

thing the first time. After that, stakeholders look for results, be ready to have some.

Parting Thoughts

Nothing I've said can replace the experience of actually living it. It is however exciting to try it and figure out what works for you. I'm hopeful some of what I'm sharing can be useful in helping you. If you are like me, you'll forge ahead because you know in your

If you're like me, you'll forge ahead because you know in your heart what you're doing is for the public good.

heart what you're doing is for the public good. But, as a public official, you also know you are charged with doing the public good even if it pulls at your heart-strings a little in the opposite direction. What I mean is that it is a delicate dance to do something you truly believe in, but not forget it has to be a shared vision. The good news is that it only needs to be your vision once. If you play your cards right, it can be an institutionalized way that people think about the field of marriage strengthening. Be better than I was, make it last.