

# Tying marriage vows to welfare reform [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

White house push for state strategies to promote family ignites dispute

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EXCERPTS:

In six Michigan counties, single women on welfare who have a baby are required to take 24 hours of classes on how to be a good parent and "create a stable family." In West Virginia, 1,800 welfare families are being paid a \$100 monthly bonus because the children are being raised by married parents.

And Utah gives every couple that applies for a marriage license a free 20-minute video on "the three C's" for a strong relationship: commitment, communication and conflict-resolving skills.

Such new state strategies to encourage marriage, all paid for with federal subsidies, would proliferate across the country under one of the most ambitious -- and divisive -- parts of President Bush's proposal for renewing the nation's welfare laws.

The administration has defined the promotion of healthy marriages as an essential, unfinished piece of the welfare reforms the federal government set in motion in the mid-1990s. "Stable families should be the central goal of American welfare policy," Bush declared at an Anacostia church where he announced his welfare plan in February. "So my administration will give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages."

To accomplish that goal, the president is asking Congress to devote \$300 million a year for states to experiment with programs that try to increase the proportion of children growing up in "married-couple families."

The White House also wants to require states, for the first time, to include in the welfare plans they must submit to the federal government "explicit descriptions of their family-formation and healthy-marriage efforts." And in a subtle but potent shift, the administration proposes rewording part of the 1996 law that overhauled the welfare system, amending a basic purpose of the program, "formation and encouragement of two-parent families," so that it contains the extra words: "healthy, two-parent married families."

In addition to those changes, which require congressional approval, the administration is considering whether to funnel more money to states to conduct marriage campaigns through a program created to help single parents collect child support.

These ideas have ignited considerable dispute. They delight social conservatives -- who regard Bush's plan as the first significant infiltration of their "marriage movement" into federal policy. Liberals, including women's groups, are horrified.

The controversy has many strands: Is it the government's business to advocate marriage? Is marriage an effective route away from poverty? Is it proper for states to spend welfare money to try to improve relationships among more affluent people, as well as the poor? And do programs intended to produce sound marriages really work?

The dispute has reached into Congress, as lawmakers discuss how to renew the welfare law, set to expire this fall. Many Republicans endorse the White House's proposal.

"As a father of nine children myself, I know how difficult it is to be raising children with two parents, let alone one parent," said Rep. Wally Herger (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Ways and Means subcommittee that handles welfare. "I believe we should be doing everything we can to be encouraging . . . children to be growing up . . . with two parents at home."

The issue has put Democrats in an awkward position -- uncomfortable with the president's plans but reluctant to sound as if they oppose marriage. It is unclear how much political capital they will expend on an issue that is divisive but, budgetarily, relatively minor.

Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.), one of the party's most influential members on the subject of welfare, gave a tepid reaction to Bush's marriage proposal, saying, "I'm not ready to condemn it." Cardin said he would like to offer states the opportunity to use subsidies to strengthen families for broader purposes than the administration envisions -- such as for programs that focus purely on fathers, regardless of whether they want to marry. He also said any such subsidies should be entirely new, not -- as the administration intends -- a recycling of funds that have been used for other welfare purposes.

Other congressional Democrats, particularly women and the party's strongest liberals, are more vehemently opposed. Rep. Fortney "Pete" Stark (D-Calif.) said marriage is less important in determining whether families escape poverty than education. He accused Bush of latching onto an idea that is popular with the GOP political base, including conservative Christians, in an election year. "I can't help but believe this is a program sold at the prayer breakfasts around the country," Stark said.

Bush's aides portray their ideas as modest and common sense. They emphasize that the money for marriage experiments would be a

fraction of total welfare funds -- mainly \$16.5 billion a year in state grants -- for temporary cash assistance, job-training, child care, transportation and other ingredients to wean families from government dependency.

Wade F. Horn, the assistant secretary who oversees welfare at the Department of Health and Human Services, said the programs would be voluntary -- for states and for individuals -- and are not intended to pick out mates, trap women in abusive relationships or penalize anyone who is single.

"I just want to know why this is such a controversial idea," said Horn, who founded the National Fatherhood Initiative and was a leading advocate of promoting healthy marriage before joining the administration last year.

Horn and others in the administration borrow the arguments of conservative researchers and think tanks that say marriage can be a powerful tool to reduce poverty and improve children's well-being. "The welfare system has largely grown up as a response to the collapse of marriage," said Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

In particular, the administration has been intrigued by research suggesting that a baby's birth creates a kind of "magic moment" at which unmarried couples can, with proper coaching and encouragement, be drawn into successful marriages. When they give birth, the research suggests, four-fifths of those single women are romantically involved with the fathers and half are living together.

This "magic moment" idea has prompted Michigan's new \$500,000 effort on classes for unwed mothers of infants. The classes are mandatory for such women on welfare. They include lessons on parenting skills and the importance of fathers in children's lives, in addition to "marriage exploration." Janet Strobe of Michigan's Family Independence Agency said: "We hope to catch them at a time they are still in love and thinking about the future and how they are going to raise the child."

Such reasoning, though, is rejected by more liberal researchers and leading feminists. Kim A. Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women, says the money could be better used to shore up scarce subsidies for mothers on welfare to get child care and train for jobs.

"The idea that the way to secure the economic stability of women and children is to get mom married to somebody, rather than to ensure mom's economic self-sufficiency, is very wrong-headed," Gandy said. "Some of them are on welfare because they were married to men who were abusive or irresponsible. That's how they got there in the first place."

Researchers across the ideological spectrum agree with the administration's basic premise: Children raised in stable environments with both parents tend to fare better than those who are not. But liberals say there is no guarantee that government efforts to nudge people toward marriages -- even if they succeed -- will lift them from poverty or produce stable households.

Isabel V. Sawhill, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said poverty among mothers and children appears to be caused less by a failure to marry than by teenage births. "So I just feel all this talk about marriage is a little bit off-tune," she said.

Administration officials acknowledge they are unsure exactly what methods will foster skills that can make marriages succeed. That, they say, is precisely why the government should pay for experiments across the country to see what might work.

Officials in the few states that have begun to use welfare subsidies for marriage initiatives say they are trying to evaluate their worth. Oklahoma is especially energetic, using \$10 million in welfare subsidies in a gubernatorial initiative intended to promote marriage and reduce the state's high divorce rate. The state has been training people at social service agencies, religious groups and health departments to detect those who might benefit from marriage workshops. It also has trained 175 people across the state to teach the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, a 10-hour class that focuses on how to communicate clearly, argue constructively and keep fun in marriages.

Classes have started in the past few months, and the goal is to teach perhaps 3,000 Oklahomans by the year's end. The lessons are open to any parent in the state, and people on welfare are not required to sign up. But the state gives welfare parents an incentive by allowing them to count the marriage workshops toward the time they must spend in "work activities" to qualify for cash assistance.

The tensions such efforts may stir within states, if Congress agrees to Bush's plans, are being foreshadowed in places where they are being tried. The governor of Arizona, for instance, was uncomfortable when a state legislator proposed two years ago using more than \$10 million in welfare subsidies on a multi-pronged marriage program.

Gov. Jane Hull (R) "is a Goldwater conservative. She thinks government ought to stay out of people's lives," said Jodi Beckley, the governor's policy adviser for human services. Besides, with welfare caseloads rising after years of decline, Hull was reluctant to divert welfare money from more traditional welfare services such as job-training and transportation, Beckley said.

In the end, Arizona compromised on a \$1 million project that would create a marriage commission, a 27-page pamphlet that -- like Utah's video -- is being handed to couples that apply for marriage licenses, and marriage workshops.

Beckley said Bush's proposal is appealing because it would be a special subsidy, eliminating the choice whether to devote welfare money to marriage programs or other purposes. "As long as we can feel comfortable that you are not spending bread-and-butter money on social experiments, we're fine with it."

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**Region:** United States <sup>[2]</sup>

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