



WELFARE PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Healthy Marriage Forum

Oakland, California

January 29, 2004

Short Report

Background

The Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) is an organization of 13 Bay area county social service agencies, 2 local foundations, and 5 Bay area social work programs. They work together to serve as a catalyst for new ideas that have legislative, administrative, public education, and training implications in the Bay area. The consortium also provides a forum for innovative regional programs related to research, training, and policy development.

As a collective group, BASSC requested technical assistance (TA) from the Welfare Peer TA Network. The request outlined BASSC's desire to explore innovative policies and best practices in promoting two-parent families. This area of interest was in response to the President's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program goal "to encourage the formation and maintenance of healthy two-parent married families and responsible fatherhood." As a result, the Welfare Peer TA Network hosted a one-day workshop that highlighted best practices and model programs that encourage the development and sustaining of healthy marriages. This TA event was a collaborative effort between the TA requestors and Region IX Administration for Children and Families (ACF) office staff. Event speakers represented various sectors and groups, including the Federal government and national non-profit organizations. The following Bay counties were represented at the workshop:

- Alameda County;
- Contra Costa County;
- Monterey County;
- Napa County;
- San Francisco County;
- San Mateo County;
- Santa Clara County;
- Santa Cruz;
- Solano County;
- Sonoma County; and
- Stanislaus County.

Throughout this event, information and resources were gathered that addressed Federal, State, and local strategies and approaches to healthy marriage promotion. Likewise, speakers identified the benefits and anticipated challenges to implementing healthy marriage programs on a State, local, or community level. The event began with a welcome from John Horejsi, TANF Program Specialist/Welfare Peer TA Network Federal Project Officer, on behalf of Wade Horn, Assistant

Secretary, ACF, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). He identified the primary purpose of the Welfare Peer TA Network as the provision of linkages, lessons learned, and best practices to local and State TANF programs. He also shared that meeting reports, online newsletters, and other pertinent information can be found on the Welfare Peer TA Web site.

Below is a brief summary of a few presentations delivered during the 1-day TA event.

Importance of Marriage Strengthening Programs

Grant Collins, II, Chief Program Officer, Office of Family Assistance, HHS

Encouraging two-parent families and preventing out-of-wedlock births are two of four TANF goals outlined in legislation. Mr. Collins summarized the Administration's aims and strategies to support States in their efforts to promote child well-being and healthy marriages. He began by presenting existing data that supports the need for healthy marriages and the correlation with child well-being. Coupled with other resources, this presentation offered federally supported creative approaches to designing policy/programs/practices that promote and sustain healthy marriages. They are:

- Public advertising campaigns;
- Marriage education in schools;
- Marriage education for adults;
- Premarital education;
- Enhanced divorce reduction;
- Mentoring programs; and
- Reducing marriage disincentives.

Howard Hendrick, Oklahoma Cabinet Secretary, Oklahoma Department of Social Services

Following Mr. Collins's Federal perspective, Secretary Hendrick outlined Oklahoma State's perspective and rationale for the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI). According to Secretary Hendrick, Oklahoma was focused on child well-being prior to the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative. As a result, the State conducted its own longitudinal study to examine several early childhood interventions. These findings helped motivate OMI design and implementation. Many in Oklahoma view the OMI as a strategy to meet Federal TANF goals.

Secretary Hendrick shared existing data to illustrate the need for healthy marriage initiatives and why such initiatives are beneficial to States and families. He presented the following reasons:

- There is a better financial foundation for families.
- There is better health.
- There is overall happiness in life.
- There is emotional health.
- There is better sex.
- Married men are more productive.
- Married people save more money together.
- Divorce shortens life expectancy for men.
- Violence is less prevalent.

Lessons From the Field

Theodora Ooms, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

The Healthy Marriage Initiative is a very important and controversial topic. Ms. Ooms stated that the institution of marriage is in a state of turmoil for various reasons. Moreover, the solutions created to combat the high percentage of divorce are rather complex. Multifaceted reasons that explain why the union of marriage is a difficult relationship to maintain. However, due to the increased emphasis on healthier marriages, the institution of marriage is being transformed into a healthier union.

In her full presentation, Ms. Ooms addressed the following questions surrounding the Federal marriage agenda:

- Why is the discussion of marriage such a controversial and sensitive issue?
- What kinds of activities are taking place around the country to address the Healthy Marriage Initiative?
- How is the Healthy Marriage Initiative relevant to the poor?

The Northwest Marriage and Family Movement (Local Model II)

K. Jason Krafsky, Community Strategies Director, Families Northwest

Families Northwest (FN) is a non-profit organization located in Bellevue, Washington. Several sponsors of FN include Eddie Bauer, Microsoft, and local area businesses. FN has been involved with the marriage initiative for seven years with a goal to advance marriages on the community level. FN has also implemented a ten-year cultural campaign mission with an aim to increase the rate of marriage success, enhance the relational health of couples and families, and turn the tide of family breakdown. The FN vision is to enable the Northwest to become the world's premier region for marriage, family life, and children.

Additional goals outlined by FN are:

- the increased rate of marital success;
- increased marital satisfaction and health;
- increased premarital education participation; and
- decreased cohabitation rates.

Downloadable information regarding Families Northwest can be found at the Web site: www.familiesnorthwest.org

The Importance of Healthy Marriage Research and Evaluation Models

Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education, ACF, HHS

One of the missions of ACF is to increase the percentage of healthy marriages for those individuals who choose marriage as a personal option for their lives. For ACF, education is seen as one of the keys to building strong families. Unfortunately, the secrets of building strong families have remained undisclosed. The question lingers as to how couples can successfully

develop interpersonal competence. In order to develop and maintain strong relationships, the development of interpersonal skills is essential. The existing documented work in this area involves data related to relationship enhancement. ACF embraces and supports research strategies and models that capture and examine marriage, rather than solely addressing relationships, as an important component to research and literature. Other topics that were discussed in this presentation included:

- marriage education as a primary prevention tool;
- funding allocation to low-income families;
- three essentials of a couple's primary coping system; and
- research on marriage and family outcomes.

Additional discussion topics and highlights included the importance of marriage strengthening programs, local marriage initiative models, and next steps to building stronger relationships with community partners. At the conclusion of the workshop, the attendees were further encouraged to work together on developing program models for implementation. A more detailed summary of this workshop, including the agenda and speaker contact information, will be available on the Welfare Peer TA Web site in the near future.

For more information about this event, please contact Chandra Robinson at 301-270-0841 or e-mail crobinson@afyainc.com.