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## **Domestic Violence: The Hidden Peril of Marriage Promotion**

President Bush wants Congress to amend the federal welfare law to provide hundreds of millions of dollars for government marriage promotion and to force all states to use some of their scarce welfare funds to promote marriage. While most states now use welfare funds only to aid the poor and to help them to work, Oklahoma has already diverted millions of the state's federal welfare funds to a marriage promotion initiative whose goal is to reduce the state's divorce rate by at least one third, and twice in the past year the Bush Administration has helped arrange for the Director of Oklahoma's welfare program to testify to Congress in favor of government-sponsored marriage promotion.<sup>1</sup>

Both times that he testified, the Oklahoma Director told Congress about a survey of Oklahoma families whose results, in his view, support the state's effort to discourage spouses from divorcing. However, the Director left out a crucial survey finding: almost half (44%) of the state's divorced women cited domestic violence as a reason for their divorce.<sup>2</sup> More than half (57%) of Oklahoma's divorced welfare mothers, the prime target of government marriage promotion efforts, cited domestic violence as a reason for their divorce.<sup>3</sup>

Oklahoma is by no means unique. Around the country, in survey after survey, low income women report high double digit domestic violence rates.

Should the government encourage women to get married or stay married to men who abuse them? Certainly, proponents of government marriage promotion do not intend this. But common sense suggests that this will be the inevitable result of a government "get married and do not divorce" message, especially when success is measured by superficial statistics such as the divorce rate.

If additional federal funds are available, wouldn't it be better to use them to strengthen efforts to stop domestic abuse? Perhaps fewer wives would divorce if fewer were targets of domestic violence.

(Revised, May 6, 2003)

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Howard H. Hendrick, Director, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, at March 12, 2003 Senate Finance Committee Hearing on "Welfare Reform: Building on Successes," available at <http://finance.senate.gov/hearings/testimony/2003test/031203hhtest.pdf>; and at May 16, 2002 Senate Finance Committee Hearing on "Issues in TANF Reauthorization: Building Stronger Families," available at <http://finance.senate.gov/hearings/testimony/051602hhtest.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> "Marriage in Oklahoma, 2001 Baseline Survey on Marriage and Divorce," at 16, available at [http://www.okmarriage.org/pdf/survey\\_report.pdf](http://www.okmarriage.org/pdf/survey_report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Private communication to NOW Legal Defense & Education Fund from Oklahoma official; copy available upon request.