



**NOW LEGAL DEFENSE  
AND EDUCATION FUND**

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## **LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES THE CASE AGAINST GOVERNMENT MARRIAGE PROMOTION**

The Administration is pushing Congress to include at least \$1.5 billion in welfare spending for government marriage promotion programs. Why wouldn't that money be well spent? Why wouldn't marriage programs help welfare recipients escape poverty? Four basic reasons make up the case against government marriage promotion.

### **REASON ONE: DIVERTS PRECIOUS FUNDS AWAY FROM WHAT WORKS**

There is an urgent need in America to defeat poverty and create jobs again. According to the Census Bureau, from 2000 to 2002, 3.5 million more Americans became poor (below 125% of the poverty line), for a total of 47 million.

**And there's only one failsafe way to escape poverty: a good-paying job. You can be married and poor, but with a good-paying job, you can't be poor.**

Ninety percent of the adults receiving welfare assistance through the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) are women with children. For these women to escape poverty, we know what's needed to be done:

- Offer job training and education, so they will have the skills to get good-paying jobs.
- Provide sufficient child care, so they will be able to work and raise a healthy family.

The Administration, however, has offered a different approach:

- Cut funds for job training, education and child care.
- Spend \$1.5 billion on government marriage promotion.

Why marriage? The stated explanation is that children in married households are less likely to live in poverty. That may be true, but it doesn't logically follow that marrying any two people will result in enough household income to escape poverty. Without good-paying jobs, married families will remain just as poor as single-parent families.

**In fact, no advocate of marriage promotion can point to a single, audited marriage promotion program that has helped alleviate poverty, let alone improved the rate of healthy marriages.**

When facing half-trillion dollar deficits as far as the eye can see, we need to be extra careful how we spend taxpayer money. Throwing it at unproven schemes is not what one would call "fiscally conservative."

## **REASON TWO: CAN COERCE WOMEN INTO BAD, DANGEROUS MARRIAGES**

Marriage is a widely valued institution, partly because it is built on a choice by the two people who enter into it. And for some, religion plays a strong role in that free will decision.

However, if government intrudes on the institution -- pressuring single people to marry, or married people not to divorce -- the institution becomes corrupted and the results can be dangerous. Even fatal.

The reality is that as many as 60% of women welfare recipients are survivors of domestic violence. (See the NOW Legal Defense report *Surviving Violence and Poverty* at [nowldef.org/html/issues/wel/Surviving.pdf](http://nowldef.org/html/issues/wel/Surviving.pdf).)

And, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one-third of the female murder victims in the U.S. are killed by an intimate partner (the same is true for only 4% of male murder victims). If those women have chosen not to marry someone, or leave their husband, there probably is a very good reason.

The Administration loudly protests that it would never pressure someone to marry, or remain with, her abuser. But its original marriage promotion proposals included no provisions to ensure that officials would screen out couples in abusive relationships.

Furthermore, we have seen examples of pressure in some of the marriage promotion programs already in place.

The most brazen example is in West Virginia, where welfare recipient couples who do not marry have received \$100 less – a loss of more than 25% for most recipients – in their monthly welfare check. Additionally, a U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services report titled “Strengthening Healthy Marriages: A Compendium of Approaches” suggests offering \$2000 bonuses to poor people who marry, and reducing welfare payments for those that don’t.

Another example is in Allentown, PA, where a federally funded and approved marriage promotion program has set a formal goal of extracting marriage pledges from half of its participants. Not meeting performance goals can always lead to a program losing its federal funding, which may put pressure on program operators to coerce participants into marriage.

Trying to escape an abusive relationship can be one of the hardest things for a woman to do, particularly when she is financially dependent on her abuser. Women in that situation need to hear about how to leave the relationship, not get lectures on how to work through typical marital strife or cash incentives that risk further danger.

Hearing the wrong message about your relationship from the government is simply unconscionable.

## **REASON THREE: HAMSTRINGS THE STATES**

The goal of many conservatives has long been to transfer power to the states. The initial welfare reform law was based on this premise: that “block grants” to the states with looser requirements would lead to fruitful experimentation.

But when it comes to their social values agenda, suddenly for some conservatives, federal mandates become more appealing.

In the welfare bills that cleared the full House and the Senate Finance Committee in 2003, all 50 states would be, in effect, required to create marriage promotion programs and show improvement in their marriage rates.

Specifically, both bills shift \$200 million of TANF funds per year (for five years in the Senate bill, six years in the House bill) into two grant programs of equal size dedicated to promoting marriage. For one of the grant programs, states would have to provide equivalent matching funds, making the total annual price tag \$300 million of state and federal taxpayer dollars, or \$1.5-\$1.8 billion over the course of the program.

In addition to taking away funds that would be better put to use in programs that directly combat poverty, both bills force states to draw up a “state plan” that includes “specific” and “measurable performance objectives” to “encourage the formation and maintenance of healthy 2-parent married families.” The only plausible “measurable” objectives are marriage and divorce rates.

There is no proven method for government to impact those rates. Therefore, the most likely result is that these precious funds will be wasted.

If a state government would rather spend the money elsewhere, it is out of luck. The state has to come up with a marriage promotion plan, and can't use the marriage promotion grant money for anything else. With so many states suffering from a fiscal crunch, many will likely chafe at the onerous and misguided federal requirements being placed upon them.

But there is nothing they can do about it if we let government marriage promotion become the law of the land.

#### **REASON FOUR: ENCOURAGES WOMEN TO BE DEPENDENT ON MEN**

As part of the federally funded marriage promotion program already being implemented in Allentown, PA, employment services are made available, but only to the male participants, not to the women. Furthermore, the program has an “outcome objective” of 90 percent of the participating men finding employment. No such goal exists for the women.

(NOW Legal Defense has filed a complaint with the federal government on this matter. More information is available at [nowldef.org/html/news/pr02-05-04.shtml](http://nowldef.org/html/news/pr02-05-04.shtml).)

**This reveals the true intent of marriage promotion that targets poor women: to tell women it's more important to find a good man than find a good job.**

To leave poor women without job skills, and treat marriage as some sort of elixir to poverty, takes away from those women any control over their own economic security. Marriage promotion is not just outmoded thinking, it's dangerous policy.

*For more information on marriage promotion, please visit [nowldef.org/html/issues/wel/marriagepromotion.shtml](http://nowldef.org/html/issues/wel/marriagepromotion.shtml)*