

STATEMENT BY

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Grassley and members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today to discuss healthy marriage and family formation in the context of the next phase of welfare reform. Together our work has had a profound impact on our nation's most vulnerable families. We have exceeded the most optimistic expectations by assisting millions of families in moving from dependence on welfare to the independence of work. I am confident that by focusing on critical issues like family formation and healthy marriages that directly impact child well-being, our work will lead to even better outcomes for vulnerable children in the future.

President Bush has laid out a clear path for addressing all of the programs impacted by the historic, comprehensive Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). That path begins with a commitment to work supported by a renewed focus on strengthening healthy marriages and families. As the President has stated,

"My Administration is committed to strengthening the American family. Many one-parent families are also a source of comfort and reassurance, yet a family with a mom and dad who are committed to marriage and devote themselves to their children helps provide children a sound foundation for success. Government can support families by promoting policies that help strengthen the institution of marriage and help parents rear their children in positive and healthy environments."

While we may spend some time debating the proper role for government in promoting healthy marriages, I do not think any of us would argue with the President's underlying premise—that all things being equal marriage is the most stable and healthy environment for raising children. I would like to spend my time with you today providing a brief overview of our welfare reform proposal, with a more lengthy discussion of the provisions related to marriage and family formation, as requested by this Committee.

The Next Phase of Welfare Reform

As you have heard recently from Secretary Thompson, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, or TANF, has been a remarkable example of a successful Federal-State partnership. States were given tremendous flexibility to reform their welfare programs and as a result, millions of families have been able to end their dependency on welfare and achieve self-sufficiency.

But even with this notable progress, much remains to be done, and States still face many challenges. The Administration's proposal to reauthorize TANF would build upon our stunning success by:

- Strengthening the Federal-State partnership by maintaining the Federal financial commitment to the program and by making policy changes on the use of funds that will provide States increased flexibility in managing their programs;

- Requiring States to help every family they serve achieve the greatest degree of self-sufficiency possible through a creative mix of work and additional constructive activities;
- Enabling far broader State welfare and workforce program integration by establishing new State program integration waivers to improve the effectiveness of these programs; and
- Supporting efforts to improve child well-being by promoting healthy marriage and family formation.

Promoting Child Well-Being and Healthy Marriages

Promoting healthy marriages is not a new issue to the welfare discussion. Rather, PRWORA included promoting marriage as a major goal in addition to the economic goals such as work and self-sufficiency. Indeed, three of the four original goals of TANF directly or indirectly concerned promoting marriage. Despite this, since PRWORA was enacted, the focus of Federal attention and the bulk of States' activities to implement the law have emphasized the goals associated with work and have, until recently, largely ignored the family formation goals.

It is time to step back and focus on what still needs to be done. In so doing, I am not suggesting that we undercut the focus on work, a focus that is retained and strengthened in the Administration's welfare reform proposal. But rather, we must all work to find ways to strengthen our focus on healthy marriage and family formation efforts. The concerns that motivated the Congress to include TANF goals related to the importance of families in 1996 remain critical as we contemplate reauthorization today.

The empirical literature is quite clear that healthy marriages convey a multitude of benefits for children and adults. Men and women who are married and stay married have been shown to be happier and healthier, and create more wealth over time, than their single counterparts. Moreover, communities with a large percentage of households headed by married couples are beset by fewer social ills, such as crime and welfare dependency, than communities where marriage is less prevalent. For children, growing up in the context of a healthy marriage is associated with better school performance and reduced likelihood of dropping out, fewer emotional and behavioral problems, less substance abuse, less abuse or neglect, less early sexual activity and fewer out-of-wedlock births.

From the research we know that children who grow up in healthy marriages do better than those who grow up in unhealthy marriages. What we seek to do in our proposal is increase the number of children who grow up in healthy marriages, and decrease the number of children who grow up in unhealthy marriages. Because healthy marriage is so

strongly correlated with child well-being, we ought to establish a clear mechanism for promoting healthy marriages as part of welfare reform reauthorization. Before describing how the Administration proposes building such a mechanism, let me make clear what promoting marriage should not be about, and is not about under our proposal.

First, promoting healthy marriages is not about forcing anyone to get married. Choosing to marry is a private decision. The government should not and will not get into the business of ordering people who, or even whether, to marry.

Second, promoting healthy marriages cannot, intentionally or otherwise, result in policies that force people to enter into, or remain in, abusive relationships. We must be clear on the distinction between the benefits of a good marriage and the consequences of a bad marriage. Healthy marriages are good for children and adults but abusive marriages are not good for anyone. Indeed, abuse of any sort -- by a spouse or parent -- cannot be tolerated under any circumstance.

Finally, and critical to the welfare reform discussion, healthy marriage does not mean withdrawing supports and services from single-parent families. Many single parents make heroic efforts, often with great success, to raise their children well. Promoting healthy marriages and supporting single parents are not, and must not, be mutually exclusive. Rather, together they are part of an integrated effort to promote child well-being.

Healthy Marriage and Family Formation Proposal

That said, what is supporting healthy marriage about? **First, it is about securing an environment that fosters child well-being.**

We must find ways to focus attention on child well-being and actions that ensure their well-being. Our proposal would accomplish this task in several ways. First, we would establish improving the well-being of children as the overarching purpose of TANF and we would clarify and underscore that the fourth goal of TANF is to encourage the formation and maintenance of healthy, two-parent, married families and responsible fatherhood. Again, our emphasis is on "healthy" marriages -- not marriage for the sake of marriage, not marriage at any cost -- but healthy marriages that provide a strong and stable environment for raising children.

Second, it is about the government striving to remove disincentives to marriage.

In our proposal we seek to remove disincentives to marriage under the welfare system that punish rather than support low-income couples who choose to marry. We would, for example, require States to describe in their State TANF plans their efforts to provide equitable treatment for two-parent married families.

We also would remove the current disincentive to equitable treatment of two-parent families by eliminating the separate two-parent family work participation rate. Under our proposal the same participation rate would apply to both single- and two-parent families. In two parent families, either adult's creditable work activities would count toward the proposed 40-hour requirement.

Finally, it is about providing funds dedicated to supporting activities that promote healthy marriage and family formation efforts.

While acknowledging that there is much to learn about effective strategies for promoting healthy marriage, government ought not to be paralyzed by a lack of perfect knowledge. Indeed, there is much we do know now.

Recent research has shed more light on what we know about marriage. For example, research is debunking the myth that low income, inner-city men and women who have children out-of-wedlock are not linked romantically and have no interest in marriage. A recent study by researchers at Princeton and Columbia Universities revealed that at the time of an out-of-wedlock birth, 80 percent of these unmarried, urban couples were involved in an exclusive romantic relationship. And half believed their chances of marrying each other were "certain" or "near certain." Marriage is clearly important to low income couples, and we have to support activities that will help couples who choose marriage to develop the skills necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.

We also know that pre-marital and marital education services work. We know for example, that couples who receive premarital education services report having happier more satisfying marriages and are less likely to divorce. In addition, pre-marital education diverts 10-15 percent of couples from marrying; thus preventing bad marriages from starting. Further, research tells us that the level and frequency of conflict in marriages that last 25 years is the same as those that end in divorce. The difference is how couples deal with the conflict. The good news is that we can teach these conflict resolution skills and negotiations skills.

Together we should support efforts to implement what we know works while continuing to build on this knowledge base. Therefore, our proposal requests funding for States to develop and implement innovative programs to support healthy marriage and family formation activities. First, we would target the \$100 million from the proposed elimination of the Illegitimacy Reduction Bonus for broad research, evaluation, demonstration and technical assistance, focused primarily on healthy marriage and family formation activities.

Second, we redirect \$100 million from the current-law High Performance Bonus to establish a competitive matching grant program for States and Tribes to develop innovative approaches to promoting healthy marriages and reducing out-of-wedlock births. Expenditures would be matched dollar for dollar and Federal TANF funds could

be used to meet the matching requirement. Given the matching requirement, this proposal would make available a total of \$200 million for these activities.

Conclusion

I would like to close with a personal perspective. I am a child psychologist by training. I have devoted my professional life to promoting child well-being. Healthy marriages are important for many reasons, but most importantly, they are good for children.

Enhancing child well-being is the bottom line for measuring the success of welfare reform. Indeed, it is the bottom line for measuring our success as a society.

I look forward to working with the members of this Committee in reauthorizing the TANF program, addressing the key issues described in my testimony today, and enacting legislation addressing the other important programs included in PRWORA that made welfare reform a success -- child care and child support.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on this extremely important issue, and for your abiding interest in improving the lives of all our children. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.