

Marriage-penalty relief pilot for poor
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Sen. Sam Brownback is working on a marriage-promotion plan for the District of Columbia that could boost public assistance to married city residents.

The Kansas Republican has not settled on the details, but he hopes to eliminate or reduce federal-benefit cuts incurred by poor people who marry in Washington, a city that Congress has often viewed as a policy laboratory.

A possible 2008 presidential candidate, Brownback has used his post as D.C. Appropriations Subcommittee chairman to crusade for marriage incentives - an effort highlighted by last year's establishment of federal matching funds for low-income married couples in the District who save to purchase assets.

Marriage is a hot topic among the social conservatives who would form Brownback's support base, should he launch a presidential bid. But any plan that would increase federal welfare payments would likely produce the opposite reaction - outright scorn - from economic conservatives.

Brownback and others say that welfare laws create a powerful disincentive to marry, particularly for single mothers, because increased post-nuptial household income makes recipients eligible for fewer benefits from various federal programs for the poor. That, they say, creates a perception among the poor that the benefits of marriage are outweighed by a "penalty" and has, in turn, resulted in fewer marriages and fewer two-parent households.

"Cohabiting or not getting married has become the tax shelter for the poor," C. Eugene Steuerle, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, told Brownback at a hearing earlier this month.

"Given the enormous benefits that accrue to children who are reared by their married parents, it is a moral and societal imperative that we esteem, support, foster and indeed encourage the institution of marriage," Brownback said at the hearing.

Sen. Wayne Allard (R-Colo.), sponsor of a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, also backed federal intervention in the District's marriage rate.

"Government should be promoting healthy marriages by easing the regulatory burden on couples that want to spend the rest of their lives together," Allard said.

Brownback typically advocates smaller government, a position that can be at odds with his role as an appropriator. Brownback's tenure as chairman has been notable, in part, because he has not used the city's spending bill to advance a raft of socially conservative policy ideas, as some had expected when he took the gavel last year.

But his focus on establishing marriage incentives continues a long tradition of senators testing pet projects in the nation's capital.

Brownback said this week that his goal is to alter the system "to support marriage rather than penalize" those who wed but emphasized that his plan is still in the "development stage."

He acknowledged that he is working to draw up a plan to counteract benefit reductions for married couples "for a period of time." Brownback does not have jurisdiction over

federal welfare laws, but he could authorize direct payments to residents to offset the costs of benefit cuts through the annual D.C. appropriations bill.

It is not yet clear how much Brownback's developing proposal would cost the government.

Ron Haskins, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former White House adviser on welfare, said that such a plan would incur "quite a modest cost in the District" - probably several million dollars - because of the city's relatively small population.

"Everything hinges on how many people get married," Haskins said.

At the hearing in early May, Brownback asked a recently married District resident, Saundra Graham, whether a five-year moratorium on benefit reductions would entice single mothers to get married.

"I think so. I can tell you definitely, from my standpoint, if that was in place, I probably would have done this a long time ago," Graham said. "Just knowing financially it was going to hurt in some way, it just wasn't even - I didn't even want to think about it or encounter it."

But other single mothers will have to wait.

For now, Brownback is still putting the plan together.

"We don't have it formed yet," he said.