

Senate to Consider Brownback's Marriage Bonus Plan for Nation's Capital
Associated Press by Sam Hananel

WASHINGTON - More than half the children in the nation's capital are raised by single parents and, in response, Congress is considering a controversial plan to pay a marriage bonus for low-income couples who tie the knot.

The measure, proposed earlier this year by Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback, would provide up to \$9,000 in federal matching contributions to qualified Washington, D.C., couples to buy a home, start a business or pay for a child's college education.

A Senate committee has already approved the bill and the full Senate could vote on it this week.

"One of the most important ways we can help is to encourage stable, intact families, which is the best environment to raise children," Brownback said Tuesday.

Brownback, a Republican, is chairman of the Senate subcommittee that oversees spending for the local government in Washington, D.C. A leading social conservative, he considers the plan a pilot project that might be adopted in other areas if it works.

Under the plan, couples making up to \$50,000 a year would get \$3 for every \$1 they save in specified accounts. Single residents ages 16 to 22, without children, also could receive up to \$4,500 - if they get job, education and financial counseling.

The bill provides \$1.5 million a year for federal contributions to the "marriage development accounts" and another \$1.5 million to the East Capitol Center for Change in Washington and the National Center for Fathering in Kansas City, Mo., to provide counseling.

Some Washington, D.C., leaders have applauded the proposal. The District's delegate in Congress, Eleanor Holmes Norton, said the surge in female-led households in the city has had a negative effect on children, particularly boys.

"I certainly think we don't have anything to lose given the downward spiraling of marriage in the African-American community, which is at total odds for our survival in this country," Norton said.

Kathryn Edin, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania who has studied economic barriers to marriage, said the program has the right ideals in mind, but she worries that it could have a coercive effect.

"We know that stable two-parent families are good for kids, but we also know that very high conflict relationships are really bad for kids," Edin said. "You don't want to push those people into marriage because you might actually increase the risk of violence and risk to kids."

Edin suggests the program simply focus on getting unmarried couples into relationship counseling programs, then let them decide whether to marry.