

Promoting Marriage Only Part of the Solution to Poverty, Experts Find  
September 20, 2005 - The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy by Anne Farris

Strengthening marriage was a key goal of the federal welfare reforms enacted in 1996. However, efforts to meet this goal fell far short, with much more emphasis being placed on moving people off welfare rolls and into jobs. This was largely because employment training programs were already widely in place and available, while a similar infrastructure did not exist to encourage healthy marriages.

Now, the government is seeking to renew marriage promotion, and to enlist the aid of faith-based organizations in this effort. The main thrust of this collaboration is the Bush administrations' "Healthy Marriage Initiative," which would be funded through a five-year, \$1.5 billion appropriation contained in the proposed reauthorization of "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families" -- better known as "TANF."

Supporters of the initiative say the benefits of marriage include more stable families, greater wealth, and a healthier atmosphere for the well-being of children. Opponents fear that some women will become trapped in abusive or submissive relationships, while others say marriage is an intensely private matter that should not involve the government.

Scholars, journalists and various advocacy groups have raised these questions and a host of others about the government's marriage promotion initiative, including: Is it government's role to promote marriage? Should tax dollars be spent on marriage training programs when government resources are shrinking? Would poor people be better served by other programs, such as those that make them more likely to get a job?

In addition, the government's interest in partnering with faith-based institutions to promote marriage poses other concerns: Are faith-based groups effective at delivering marriage education programs? Will the low-income groups targeted for such programs attend them? What role, if any, do religious elements play in the effectiveness of these programs? How far should a government-sponsored faith-based program go beyond teaching secular skills like conflict resolution and parental disciplining techniques?

To help address these questions and further a more informed debate about this important public policy issue, The Roundtable offers this digest of resources on the "Healthy Marriage Initiative."