



## Conservatives Push for Marriage Promotion Programs

By Betty Holcomb

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### Byline:

Betty Holcomb

(WOMENSENEWS)--A key bargaining chip in the debate over whether to extend the 1996 federal welfare laws is \$300 million in grants to promote marriage among low-income women.

The proposal, pushed by the Bush administration, would allot the funds to states that create programs to reduce out-of-wedlock births and promote two-parent families. It's likely the Democrats will sign onto the marriage proposal as a way to ensure that millions of families continue to receive the cash grants, food stamps and medical benefits that are scheduled to expire on Dec. 31.



Jackie Payne

"Marriage is a very, very successful road out of poverty for women," says Robert Rector of The Heritage Foundation, one of the leading advocates of the plan. "From what I see in the research, the best thing a young woman can do is graduate high school, get married and have children. Then if her marriage runs into trouble, she can use one of these programs to save it."

Feminists are on the offensive. "The idea that a woman has to be married to be economically secure is outrageous," says Kate Kahan, executive director of Working for Equality and Economic Liberation. "What women need are opportunities to gain economic independence, so they can choose whether to marry or not. We feel that women's interests are being sold out in this deal."

Negotiations over extension of the welfare law have been stalled for months. The Republican-led House passed a bill this summer that included \$300 million for marriage promotion and new requirements for welfare recipients boosting the number of hours they must work to receive a temporary grant. Another bill, which cleared key committees in the Senate, includes more funding for child care, benefits for legal immigrants and flexibility on the work requirements. But the ongoing debate over war with Iraq is likely to preclude a full Senate debate over that bill before Congress adjourns on Thursday.

Many lobbyists, including the National Conference of State Legislatures, are trying to convince Congress to extend the law for three more years before the end of the congressional session. They want to assure a stable stream of welfare funding as states struggle through one of the worst fiscal years ever. Many are facing huge deficits and are already cutting back eligibility for welfare and child care benefits.

But with control of the Senate now up for grabs in the November elections, the Republicans have no clear incentive to make such an extension. "The three-year extension is our best-case scenario right now," says Mark Greenberg, senior staff attorney at the Center for Law and Social Policy. "But it's true that no one believes the Republicans see an advantage in that right now. If they do gain the Senate, they can push through any policy they want."

It's also possible that Congressional leaders may call a lame duck session to consider all the issues, including welfare reform, that have been put on the back burner during the debate over Iraq. But prospects for that also remain uncertain.

A spokesman for the Bush administration says a short extension is the likeliest scenario. "We expect to see only a short extension on the welfare bill, maybe into the winter," says Steve Barbour, spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services. "And we would expect to see marriage promotion in any bill coming out of Congress."

## States Win Cash for Lower Illegitimacy Rates--Regardless

The push for marriage promotion springs directly from the 1996 welfare law, known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. In passing the law, Congress declared the promotion of two-parent families and prevention of out-of-wedlock births to be top priorities.

Since then, federal officials have earmarked \$100 million annually to be awarded to five states that "made progress in lowering the number of out-of-wedlock births, without increasing their abortion rates," Barbour says. The five states with the lowest rate of out-of-wedlock births take the prize, whether they currently have a marriage promotion plan in place or not.

That was the case for Alabama, Colorado, Michigan, Texas and the District of Columbia, all of which received about \$20 million for lowering their out-of-wedlock birth rates, considered a key part of "marriage promotion" efforts. The Virgin Islands received another \$888,500. The money enables "our state partners to continue this important work by emphasizing the importance of marriage," says Wade Horn, assistant secretary for Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and chief architect of the marriage-promotion efforts.

"Unfortunately, few states have focused on these issues," Barbour concedes. "Most states focused on getting welfare recipients to work. Now that we have made progress there, we hope to see more attention paid to these marriage issues."

Yet few outside the Bush administration and its supporters advocate the marriage programs. Poverty-rights groups maintain that the cash awards for reducing the out-of-wedlock births stigmatizes single-parent families and their children. The drops in out-of-wedlock births were not statistically significant in any state--the highest was 3.5 percent last year in the District of Columbia, according to a press release from the Department of Health and Human Services.

"I think most people are just thinking this is a silly idea," says Carol Sharlip of the West Virginia Economic Justice Project, one of the few states to start a formal "marriage promotion" program under welfare reform.

West Virginia created a "marriage bonus" in 1997, and now adds \$100 a month to the checks of married welfare recipients. Yet the state has showed no progress in reducing out-of-wedlock births or promoting marriage since then. Last month state officials decided to drop the program to save up to \$2 million annually.

"Virtually no one in the state has been able to verify that it has any useful effect," says Sharlip.

## Critics Say Marriage Promotion Is Not in Best Interests of Women

Critics worry that the "bonus"--along with the stepped up "marriage promotion" efforts--stands to hurt women.

"Many of the women we work with don't want to turn down the extra money because they need it," says Evelyn Dortch, head of Direct Action Welfare Group, a grassroots welfare rights organization in West Virginia. With most grants running to just \$400, the bonus is like getting a 25 percent raise. "But they also hate the idea that it is being used to promote marriage as the best way or the only way for women to survive. They know single moms who've left bad marriages, and they know what that \$100 bonus can mean. They say it's making people make choices, like 'Do I take the money and feed my kids or leave my husband and be safe?'"

That question is worrisome, Dortch says, given a range of studies showing that 50 to 80 percent of all women receiving federal assistance are in the process of escaping domestic violence.

"The research shows what we already knew from experience," says Anne Menard of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. "Welfare is often a bridge out of family violence. It provides a way out for many women." That is one of the main reasons women's groups are outraged that taxpayer money is used to sell women on marriage.

"There's the question of economic coercion here," says Jackie Payne of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. "When you have a population where domestic violence is common, it is wholly foreseeable that those unions or reunifications are going to result in injury or even death for women."

The pressure a woman might feel to get married or stay married could even be seen as a violation of her right to privacy, Payne argues. "A woman should be able to freely decide about whether to be married, without economic coercion."

Such criticism is one of the reasons that the administration has changed the way it talks about "marriage promotion," if not such programs' substance.

Rather than put the spotlight on out-of-wedlock births, Wade Horn, from the Department of Health and Human Services, talks about the \$300 million as money that will encourage "healthy families." With that opening, Senate Democrats have tried to include language that addresses a range of issues that affect unhealthy families, including funding for programs that address domestic violence. But to date, the administration resisted such specific proposals.

## Marriage Promotion Is Bargaining Chip

"Even as we encourage healthy families, we don't want to lose the emphasis on out-of-wedlock births," Barbour says. "We just want to expand the funding and allow a broader effort."

Advocates of marriage promotion also say Payne's concern over coerced marriage is unfounded. The emerging programs will be voluntary and states will be free to design their own programs.

"No one will be forced to get married or stay married," says Barbour. "The idea is to give people the tools they need to have healthy marriages."

Still, the administration will have the final authority to approve state proposals. And that is what has many poverty-rights and women's advocates worried.

"We would be happy to see this money allocated if we believed that it would really be addressing the issues that undermine marriage, like poverty and domestic violence," says Jose Quinonez, director of public policy for the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support. "But what has us worried is that it is the administration, through HHS, that will make the determination on who gets these grants. And the administration has not shown any real interest in looking at the real issues that promote healthy marriages."

Kahan raises an even broader concern for low-income women. Why, she asks, should marriage promotion be a bargaining chip at all in the welfare debate?

"You just have to ask why marriage is seen as the best solution to poverty for women. No one goes into marriage not wanting it to work out," Kahan says. "But when it fails, whether you're poor or not, you want to have the skills and training to survive and support your children. That's all we want, programs that improve women's skills, not marriage promotion programs."

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