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POLICY WATCH

BUSH DANGLES WEDDING BELLS AS THE PROVERBIAL CARROT

JESSICA BAKER

President Bush unveiled a new plan earlier this year to get single mothers off of state welfare rolls in an effort to promote work and family values. In order to implement this plan, the President needs the cooperation of these women—but first, he'll need to convince them to marry the fathers of their children.

The plan, which is part of the President's proposal to revise the landmark 1996 welfare law, increases work requirements for people who receive government assistance, gives states new subsidies to encourage marriage, and continues a ban on welfare payments to immigrants.¹ The question of marriage, and what the federal

government should do to support it, is expected to be front and center in the welfare debate this year in Congress, as it reviews and reauthorizes the 1996 law.² Bush said he would make up to \$300 million a year available for programs that work to lower welfare rolls and stabilize poor families.³ Specifically, the federal government would use the money to subsidize state and local experiments for counseling, education, and research to foster sound marriages.⁴ The money could also be used to give tax credits or rebates to couples that get married or take advantage of marriage-building courses.⁵ The plan calls for spending \$200

¹ Dana Milbank & Amy Goldstein, *Bush Welfare Plan Would Increase Work Requirements*, Washington Post, February 26, 2002, at A5.

² Robin Toner, *Welfare Chief Is Hoping To Promote Marriage* (February 19, 2002), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/national>.

³ Associated Press, *Bush Welfare Plan Stiffens Work Requirements* (February 26, 2002), available at <http://www.cnn.com/allpolitics>.

⁴ Milbank & Goldstein, *supra* note 1.

⁵ Charity Vogel, *Family Matters*, The Buffalo News, February 7, 2002, at A1.

million in federal money and \$100 million in state funds.⁶

Bush unveiled his plan before the congregation in St. Luke's Catholic Church in the nation's capital.⁷ He said, "stable families should be the central goal of American welfare policy. Building and preserving families are not always possible—I recognize that—but they should always be our goal."⁸ Bush defended his proposal saying his administration will give "unprecedented support to strengthening marriages," which in turn will improve the lives for millions of children. "We will work to strengthen marriage. The most effective, direct way to improve the lives of children is to encourage the stability of American families."⁹

The President's plan, outlined in his proposal

"Working Toward Independence", details the past achievements of welfare reform and redefines it's future goals. Central to the Administration's plan is a focus on strengthening families.¹⁰ The Executive Summary explains that one of the hardest jobs in America is being a single parent, and even though policies will continue to support single parent families, national policy must do a better job of promoting healthy marriages.¹¹

The Administration's proposal will establish a \$100 million annual fund to conduct research and demonstration projects which focus on family formation and healthy marriage activities.¹² It also proposes to create a competitive \$100 million grant program, that would require states to match federal funds dollar-for-dollar, to promote healthy marriage and reduce out-of-wedlock births.¹³ The funds used to decrease non-marital

⁶ Working Toward Independence, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/feralpage> (link to White House Welfare Reform Proposal).

⁷ Associated Press, *Bush Welfare Plan Promotes Marriage, Work* (February 27, 2002), available at <http://www.cnn.com/allpolitics.cnn>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Working Toward Independence, *supra* note 6.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

births and increase children born to married couples will be redirected from other similarly-oriented programs because the Administration considers the proposed plan to be a more effective use of the money.¹⁴ In order to ensure the states' compliance, however, each state will be required to explain what methods it is employing to achieve those ends and also report statistical data.¹⁵

A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said the marriage funding would work in the following way: A \$100 million pot of money, if approved, will be included in the federal budget for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families—the renamed fund for public assistance, or welfare. Then, the Office of Family Assistance in the Department of Health and Human Services will write guidelines for the use of the money, which will then be available to private organizations and other groups who want to apply for funding social programs. The programs

must be geared toward the overall goal of marriage and the building of strong two parent families.¹⁶

Many conservatives have made the issue of how to get single moms on welfare to marry the fathers of their children their top priority, arguing that two-parent families are better for children and key to escaping poverty.¹⁷ While statistical reports vary, it is generally reported that families of single mothers are four to five times more likely to be poor than the families of married couples.¹⁸ The President's proposal explains that research shows both adults and children are better off in two parent families, and that children reared by married parents in intact families are more likely to complete high school and are less likely to be poor, commit crimes, or to have mental health problems than are

¹⁶ Vogel, *supra* note 5.

¹⁷ Associated Press, *Bush Wants \$100M to Urge Welfare Moms To Marry* (January 27, 2002), available at www.usatoday/washington/politics.

¹⁸ Ellen Goodman, *Marriage As Poverty Cure*, *Boston Globe*, March 7, 2002, at A13.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

children reared in single parent families.¹⁹

The marriage proposal has even gained support from Western New York lawmakers. Republican Erie County Executive Joel A. Giambra said, “anything we can do to reunite families and have the ability to prevent children from being raised in a single-parent family situation is an advantage.”²⁰ Representative Jack F. Quinn, the Republican Congressman from Hamburg, echoed the County Executive’s opinion, saying the concept is worth a try.²¹ “Whenever the president is trying to increase family values, that’s a very positive thing,” Quinn said. “Let’s take a look at it.”²²

In Oklahoma, home of the nation’s second-highest divorce rate, Gov. Frank Keating launched an initiative nearly three years ago to slash divorce rates.²³ Keating pushed for hard-to-

sever “covenant marriages” and asked churches to require premarital counseling.²⁴ The initiative also funded things like relationship-skills education for welfare recipients and pro-marriage rallies led by hired “marriage ambassadors.”²⁵ The program, however, hasn’t shown much progress yet.²⁶ Critics call Keating’s program a conservative version of big-government social engineering, but the Oklahoma Department of Human Services chief Howard Hendrick calls this nonsense.²⁷ He said the state spends millions on services like child support enforcement, so if divorce falls, so do the enforcement bills.²⁸ Hendrick also said that divorce can drive middle class couples onto welfare rolls.²⁹ “Maybe they wouldn’t be a client”, he says, “if they stayed married.”³⁰

¹⁹ Working Toward Independence, *supra* note 6.

²⁰ Vogel, *supra* note 5.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ Michael Schaffer, *Marriage Proposal*, U.S. News and World Report, March 11, 2002, at 26.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Michael Schaffer, *Marriage Proposal*, U.S. News and World Report, March 11, 2002, at 26.

³⁰ *Id.*

Not everyone agrees that Oklahoma's plan is sensible though. State Senator Kevin Easley thinks fighting poverty by fighting divorce is a case of putting the cart before the horse.³¹ "Economic difficulty breaks up many struggling marriages, it seems to me ridiculous that we're spending money on marriage consultants when we should be helping people pay gas and electric bills."³²

On the national level, scholars say there's no evidence that promoting new marriages cuts poverty.³³ Even the Bush administration isn't so sure. It wants to use the \$100 million pot to "figure out what works."³⁴ Central aspects of Bush's proposal were challenged immediately by House and Senate Democrats, who questioned whether it would give poor people enough opportunity to prepare for jobs or enough help with child care once they are

employed.³⁵ Others maintain that simply easing the economic distress on low-income, two-parent families would do more to strengthen marriages than any class on relationship skills.³⁶ But Maryland House Representative Ben Cardin suggests that the value of the programs to promote marriage should be tested against the value of helping the poor meet basic needs—in health care, job training, child care, vocational education and transportation to work.³⁷

Some critics are dismayed at the notion of government entering such an intimate realm.³⁸ "This is a crowd [supporters of Bush's plan] that says it wants to get government out of people's lives," said Kim Gandy, President of the National Organization for Women, "and here they are pushing people they don't even know

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Toner, *supra* note 2.

³⁵ Amy Goldstein, *Welfare Reform Plan Unveiled*, Washington Post, February 27, 2002, at A4.

³⁶ Toner, *supra* note 2.

³⁷ E.J. Dionne Jr., *The Welfare-Marriage Wars*, The Washington Post, February 26, 2002, at A21.

³⁸ Toner, *supra* note 2.

to get married.³⁹ Ms. Gandy said that if the administration wanted to improve the economic lot of women and children, it should provide them more assistance.⁴⁰ “To say that the path to economic stability for poor women is marriage is an outrage.”⁴¹

Advocates for the poor worry that “a flash-point war between cultural liberals and cultural conservatives” could distract attention from what should be the central issue this year: how to make welfare reform into a stronger vehicle for reducing poverty.⁴² However it works out, the debate over whether government should ring wedding bells has turned politics upside down.⁴³ Those against Bush’s plan are vocal about why they oppose the marriage proposal, after all, do poor women really need the federal government to tell them why, when and to whom to get married?⁴⁴

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Dionne, *supra* note 37.

⁴³ Bill Press, *Bush’s Marriage Push Turns Politics Upside Down* (March 1, 2002), available at <http://www.cnn.com/allpolitics>.

⁴⁴ Press, *supra* note 43.

What about the fact that half the children born out of wedlock are born to teenagers—Is the best solution for them to hurry up and get married at age 14, 15, or 16?⁴⁵ Forcing pregnant teens to get married just creates more problems, and more demands for taxpayer dollars down the road.⁴⁶ Opponents of the proposal tout that there is a smarter solution: help families increase their earnings. Whether or not they have a marriage license, parents who are able should get more education so they can compete for jobs that pay well.⁴⁷ The fact is, only 1 percent of all the single mothers with a college education and a year-round job live in poverty.⁴⁸

What about the basic assumption that children are better off in two-parent families? The fact is millions of single moms and dads are doing an excellent job raising their children today.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Editorial, *Bush’s Family Plan*, *The Boston Globe*, March 4, 2002, at A14.

⁴⁸ Goodman, *supra* note 18.

⁴⁹ Press, *supra* note 43.

Instead of suggesting that they are somehow inferior parents by staying single, and pressuring them to get married, Bush should give them the help they really need, like childcare and a job.⁵⁰

If the [Bush] administration cares about the ability of the poor to sustain healthy family lives, it has to worry about their ability to get jobs and earn income to support their children.⁵¹ In their public arguments about welfare, members of the pro-marriage lobby need to acknowledge what they know to be true in their own lives: It's easier to love, to honor, and to cherish when you can pay the bills.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ Dionne, *supra* note 37.

⁵² *Id.*