

Government Mandated Marriage Promotion

Speak Out!

Tell Congress to stop paying for marriage billboards with welfare dollars!

The Alternatives to Marriage Project opposes marriage promotion because it stigmatizes unmarried people and institutionalizes discrimination against singles and diverse family forms. We believe that policies designed to help children should focus on supporting all the types of families in which children really live. We believe that people who care for one another should be supported in their efforts to build healthy, happy relationships.

AtMP strongly opposes taking taxpayer dollars out of anti-poverty programs to pay for marriage promotion. There is no evidence that it is an effective way to help people escape poverty. It diverts funds from poverty-fighting programs that have been proven to work. The public overwhelmingly opposes state interference in private family decisions.

AtMP also opposes mandated "marriage education" in public schools. While all children can benefit from learning how to create and maintain strong relationships, marriage is only one type of relationship and should not be the focus of a child's education.

In this section you'll find:

What marriage promotion is, and is not.

Government funding for marriage promotion, plus links to more information about government funded programs.

Let Them Eat Wedding Rings, AtMP's detailed critique of marriage programs funded by welfare dollars. Read the whole report or just the executive summary.

More AtMP critiques - we've been speaking out against marriage promotion for ten years!

Criticism of marriage promotion by outside experts - we're not alone in seeing how wrong it is.

What Marriage Promotion Is

Marriage promotion is a major current in today's river of public policymaking. It includes laws, budget allocations, administrative regulations, think-tank recommendations, and operating programs - within the public sector (federal, state and local legislatures and agencies), and the private sector (nonprofit organizations and faith institutions). Marriage promotion says that different-sex couples must enter and stay in government-certified marriages to ensure the health of their children, to be economically successful, and to be responsible citizens. Marriage promotion does not tolerate alternatives: it ignores same-sex couples and extended kinship networks; it strongly suggests that single and cohabiting women will always be poor, that single or cohabiting men are irresponsible, and that single and cohabiting parents hurt their children and society. Marriage promotion did recently accept one caveat: extremely violent marriages are no good for anyone.

A US government-sponsored marriage promotion poster spotted on a city bus in Brooklyn, NY.

Is this the best way to give temporary assistance to needy families?

What Marriage Promotion is Not

Programs that teach relationship skills and parenting skills can be effective and can help many people, whether single, married, or in an unmarried relationship. Many relationship and parenting skill-building programs do not promote marriage above all other relationships. Some relationship or parenting classes are open to unmarried people even though they are funded under the umbrella of marriage promotion. However, many exclude unmarried people or devalue them by insisting that marriage is best.

Government Funding for Marriage Promotion

Using anti-poverty funds for marriage promotion started with the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (the bill that "ended welfare as we knew it" and re-labeled welfare as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). The very first lines of text in this immense bill are "The Congress makes the following findings: (1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children."

Since then, marriage promotion language has been inserted into a wide range of federal laws and funding programs. Some programs are specifically named "healthy marriage initiatives" or "fatherhood initiatives" (which always promote marriage), while references to healthy marriages and responsible fatherhood also abound in grants for services to refugees and Native Americans, as well as grants concerning child support and adoption. Whenever these terms are in the grant materials, local governments, nonprofits and faith institutions can use federal funds to actively promote different-sex legal marriage.

To learn more about government programs...

- Portal for healthy marriage initiatives funded by the U.S. government using anti-poverty funds.
- Descriptive list of funded organizations by state, part of a participant-oriented website.
- A 2002 report by The Lewin Group reviewing state-level policies to promote marriage

