



Building Strong Marriages and Families

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“You need only do three things in this country to avoid poverty - finish high school, marry before having a child, and marry after the age of 20. Only eight percent of the families who do this are poor; 79 percent of those who fail to do this are poor.”

- William Galston, Brookings Institution

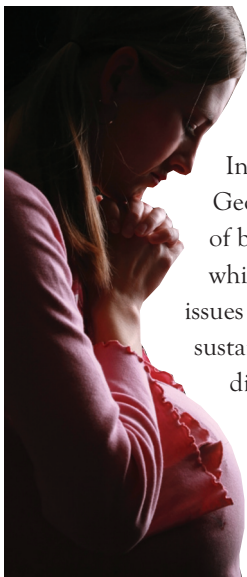
Each year, family fragmentation costs American taxpayers at least \$112 billion dollars. These costs are recurring—that is, they are incurred each and every year—meaning that the decline of marriage costs American taxpayers more than \$1 trillion dollars over a decade. These costs are due to increased taxpayer expenditures for antipoverty, criminal justice and school nutrition programs, and through lower levels of taxes paid by individuals whose adult productivity has been negatively influenced by growing up in poverty caused by family fragmentation.

- The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States.
Institute for American Values, 2008, p. 20.

UNFOLDING COMMUNITY CRISIS

Over the last several decades, Columbus, Georgia has experienced a remarkable transformation from a textile mill town to a financial, educational, military and cultural center. Notable developments include a new RiverCenter for the Performing Arts, Columbus Civic Center, a new main Library, Creation of a world-class downtown Columbus State University fine and performing arts campus and many other public-private partnerships.

For several years, Synovus and Aflac have been listed in Fortune magazine's annual listing of "The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America," and Ft. Benning has been named "The Best Army and Military Installation in the World" numerous times. In many corridors, our community has become known as the City of Servant Leadership.



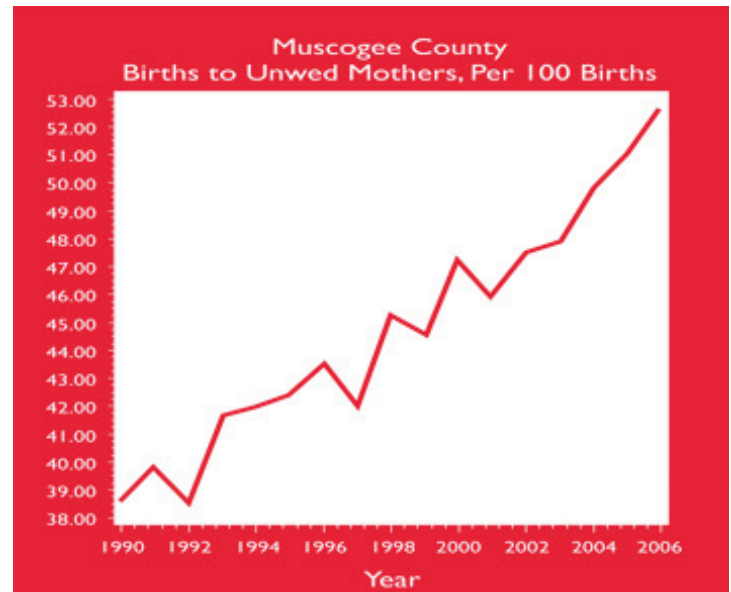
And yet, despite all of our progress, difficult systemic problems endure in our community. Crime, poverty, mental health problems, welfare dependency, failed schools and blighted neighborhoods are issues we must still address.

In 2008, the Building Prosperity in Columbus-Muscogee County Steering Committee asked the University of Georgia to conduct two pieces of research: an analysis of the root causes of poverty in Muscogee County and a study of best practices to address those causes. The researchers identified six factors related to county poverty rates, one of which was marriage. Research shows a compelling correlation between family fragmentation and the core social issues facing our community. “Nearly every major social problem has deep roots in the failure of adults to form and sustain healthy marriages. There are other causes of these social problems, of course, such as economic dislocations and the decline of civic life and social responsibility in the United States, but the disconnection of child-rearing from marriage ranks high on the list of what ails our society and our communities,” writes Bill Doherty in *Reviving Marriage in America*.

Columbus's family health indicators:

- Since 1990 the rate of births to unwed mothers in Muscogee County has risen from 38% to 52.7%. More children were born to unwed mothers than married mothers in 2007.
- The percentage of single parent households in Muscogee County is 44% compared to a national percentage of 24%.
- The Valley Region has one of the highest divorce rates in the Southeast. Over 1,000 divorces were filed this past year in Muscogee County.
- Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Sears stated at a luncheon at the Pastoral Institute for Columbus leaders in February 2008 that 65% of all cases appearing before the Supreme Court are related to domestic issues.

The statistics for Muscogee County are staggering. As you can see, we have reached a tipping point in our community with more than half of our children spending all of part of their childhood in never-formed or broken families.



And these changes have come with a large social cost. Research from across many social science disciplines suggests that family fragmentation greatly increases a person's likely hood of suffering a number of ills, including poverty, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, and early death.

For example:

- Studies reveal that even in high-crime inner-city neighborhoods, well over 90% of children from safe, stable, two-parent homes do not become delinquents. (Richters, John, "Violent Communities, Family Choices, and Children's Chances" *Development and Psychopathology* 1993.)
- Two-thirds of families begun by a young unmarried mother are living in poverty. (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy)
- Approximately 80% of the children living in poverty in the United States occurs among children from broken or never-formed families. (Rector, Robert E. and Melissa G. Pardue. "Understanding the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative." The Heritage Foundation, March 26, 2004.)



There is a tremendous amount of research that confirms what most of us know intuitively: if we knew how to promote healthy marriages, the lives of our children and the well-being of our communities would be improved. This is not to say that every child raised outside of marriage will experience the problems described in the research, but on average, children who are raised in a healthy family by their mom and dad fair better on a number of scales.

And it is important to note that not all marriages are equal. Unhappy marriages do not have the same benefits as the average marriage and divorce or separation provides an important escape hatch for children and adults in violent or high-conflict marriages.

A PROVEN MODEL – FIRST THINGS FIRST IN CHATTANOOGA, TN

Although these statistics seem grim, there are numerous communities around the nation that are taking a proactive approach to helping couples form and sustain healthy marriages by forming community marriage and family initiatives.

In 1997, community leaders in Chattanooga came together to confront the same problem we are currently facing in Columbus - the breakdown of the family, which lies at the heart of so many social concerns. Led by Maclellan Foundation president Hugh O. Maclellan Jr., these leaders began an effort called First things First.

Eleven years later, Hamilton County (where Chattanooga is located), has seen the following statistical changes:

- 28% decrease in divorce filings
- 20% decrease in the divorce rate
- 23% decrease in teen out-of-wedlock pregnancies
- An increase from 48% to 88% of residents who believe that premarital preparation is important



Marriage and relationship skill education has been at the heart of First Things First's success. Early on, leaders made the decision to be proactive, not reactive. By focusing on preventative strategies, the donors hoped to stop family breakups before the worst happened, not just devise ways to aid already distressed families. First Things First is an example of how a community came together to address the need for equipping people to form and sustain healthy marriages.

THE COLUMBUS SOLUTION



In 2008, concerned community leaders came together to launch a community wide initiative designed to strengthen marriages and families in the Columbus Region. This new initiative, called “Right from the Start: Building Strong Marriages and Families” is based on the highly successful Chattanooga model.

The goals for the initiative are to:

Lower the divorce rate

Lower the rate of out-of-wedlock pregnancies

Increase father involvement in the lives of children in the Columbus Region

Right from the Start will:

- Provide relationship skills building educational opportunities for teens, young adults, engaged couples, couples in their first year of marriage and blended families.
- Serve as a resource for those who work with families in the latest research and curricula on healthy marriages and families
- Utilize media and community awareness opportunities to restore a culture of support for healthy marriages and strong families.

Our plan is to initiate a four-phase, ten-year initiative to support healthy families.



PHASE ONE: ESTABLISH A COLUMBUS COMMUNITY MARRIAGE DECLARATION

Our first objective is to help establish a Columbus Marriage Declaration in which pastors, priests and rabbis join together across denominational and racial lines and sign a public document to make healthy marriages a priority in their congregations. We will also encourage judges who do civil weddings to promote premarital education before the ceremony.

We will commit to:

- Encourage engaged couples to participate in at least six hours of premarital education before getting married
- Provide mentoring for newlyweds during the all important first year of marriage
- Enrich existing marriages through ongoing marriage enrichment opportunities
- Equip the next “marrying generation” with the relational skills needed to build healthy marriages and families

So far, more than 200 cities and towns in 43 states have created similar Community Marriage Policies and divorce rates have fallen an average of 17.5%, and cohabitation by a third (Visit www.marriagesavers.org for more information).

PHASE TWO: MARRIAGE EDUCATION AS A PREVENTATIVE APPROACH



In conjunction with the signing of the Community Marriage Declaration, we will host a series of “train the trainer” events designed to equip those working with couples and families in the latest research curricula on healthy marriages and families. Our goal is to mobilize marriage and family educators in a wide array of organizations and congregations serving families in the Columbus region.

Right from the Start will also work with the courts and interested congregations to provide ongoing premarital education classes taught by Right from the Start facilitators.

In a review of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education, researchers found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—to reduce conflict, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness. It is our hope to equip this next marrying generation with the necessary skills to build a healthy marriage, right from the start.



PHASE THREE: MAKING A MEDIA SPLASH

An important ingredient in the success of First Things First in Chattanooga has been its media strategy-to attract attention to the need and also put positive images and messages out about marriage and marriage education. They have utilized television, newspaper, billboards, radio and internet to get their message out. Much of what they have developed is available for us to use free of charge and we hope to utilize this resource and leverage our relationships with media outlets in Columbus to generate a “positive buzz” about the benefits of marriage and marriage education.

NEXT STEPS: ADDRESS TEEN PREGNANCY RATES AND FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN THE HOME

Phases three and four will begin in 2011 & 2012 and will build on our early successes. We will grow our efforts to address teen pregnancy rates and father involvement in the home. Again, following the Chattanooga model, our goal is to utilize marketing and education to raise the dialogue and equip the next marrying generation and new fathers with healthy relationships skills necessary to establish a healthy marriage and family.

OUR FUTURE

In the end, we seek to increase – to a substantial degree- the percentage of children being raised by their moms and dads in healthy families. If we are successful in achieving this objective, fewer children will be at risk and our communities will be safer and better places to live and work.

Imagine that you are standing beside the banks of a river and rescue personnel are snatching drowning swimmers out of the river. You could help with the rescue efforts, or you could go upstream and help teach people how to swim and navigate the rapids – before they enter the river. Marriage education is the same: equipping couples and individuals with healthy relationship skills that have been shown to increase marital commitment and satisfaction.

“Which sounds more romantic?” asks Diane Sollee, Director of Smart Marriages. “Is it more romantic to say, ‘Beloved, I see that the divorce rate is 50%; let’s get married anyway and let’s assume that our love is so special, so passionate, that we’ll make it? That we’ll stay together till death us do part?’ Or, can we get to the place where people will realize that the true romantic would say, ‘Beloved, the divorce rate is 50%. I want to marry you and I love you so much that I want to learn everything the experts know about what makes marriage succeed or fail so that we can work to make sure our love and our marriage last.’ ”

Right from the Start seeks to change our culture and how we think about marriage and relationship education. Any couple can go to the phone book and find the resources to plan a wedding. We hope to provide educational resources to help couples develop the skills to build a healthy family – and that is where the hard work really begins.

