

May 3, 2005



### NCFR Members

The NCFR Board of Directors and the Annual Conference Program Committee, including the section chairs, had their annual meeting in Washington, D.C. the weekend of April 16, 2005. We discussed a number of issues, including the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC). This Center is a contentious and difficult issue, and it is also one that we must continue to discuss together as colleagues. We firmly hope that what some colleagues perceive to be a crisis in our organization can result in greater understanding of our shared goals as family professionals and an enhanced clarity about the purpose of present and future NCFR projects.

The Board deeply regrets that the NHMRC has been a source of pain or distress to some of our colleagues. The fact that any colleagues in NCFR have expressed feeling hurt and marginalized by this activity has been and continues to be a source of distress to us as Board members. From last April (2004), when Michael Benjamin, the Executive Director of NCFR, told the Board he was considering seeking a grant for a Healthy Marriage Clearinghouse that HHS was offering as part of the Healthy Marriage Initiative, and asked for our support if he did so, we have debated and analyzed the potential costs and benefits of even trying to seek funds for such a project. We anticipated controversy surrounding this project, but we regret to admit that we did not anticipate the intensity of the reactions.

Therefore, we want to acknowledge the depth of negative feelings that some members have about the NHMRC. Some NCFR members believe very strongly that their values and those of the organization, particularly values regarding diversity and inclusivity, have been violated by the Center's focus on describing programs and other information about heterosexual, legal marriages only. There are also concerns that the research information to be provided on the Clearinghouse web site (which will become operational this June) could be misused or subject to censorship by HHS officials.

We are aware of these impassioned concerns; we also are extremely concerned that the name of NCFR must be protected as a source of valid and reliable information – as we stated in a letter sent to HHS about another web site (4parents.gov), as an organization “We believe that government sponsored web sites should contain information that reflects the state of the science – and when there is not consensus among scientists, then the diversity of findings should be represented on the site. The information on the web site should accurately reflect what is known, what is not known, and what is disputed.”

We will continue our organization’s commitment to supporting our members in studying, teaching, and working with all families and couple relationships. NCFR's own website will provide clearinghouse information about diverse relationships and family forms.



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We are sorry to see that there has been a deterioration of confidence developing in which members feel that there is a lack of communication and trust with elected NCFR officers. We accept responsibility for not making our process and our decisions more transparent to NCFR members, and we are attempting to open the lines of communication.

We also are actively monitoring the project to the best of our abilities and within the constraints of the Carver Model. We seek your help in this process. For instance, in addition to the use of peer reviewers drawn from the ranks of reviewers for the *Journal of Marriage and Family* and *Family Relations* for Clearinghouse briefs and research summaries, we are developing other methods of monitoring the activities of the NHMRC. Michael has agreed to draw up guidelines for an NCFR advisory committee to the Center that will be composed of representatives of the sections and other constituencies of NCFR. Over the coming weeks, please feel free to contact us and suggest additional monitoring strategies. Developing a monitoring plan for the NHMRC will be one of our most important agenda items for our June board meeting in Minneapolis.

A session is planned for the 2005 Annual Conference in Phoenix, AZ in which NCFR members can discuss all issues pertaining to the NHMRC in an open forum setting. We hope such a session will promote further opportunities for communication between the Board and the membership.

It should be noted that many aspects of the Center are still being developed. Unlike a research grant or a contract that is set for a specific time period, this is a cooperative agreement that can be ended by either HHS or by NCFR. NCFR and its partner institutions in this cooperative agreement must be allowed to provide accurate, state-of-the-science information about marriages, without censorship. In addition, we must continue to convey our values of inclusivity and diversity by engaging in a variety of projects and activities that focus on a wide array of families and relationships.

We continue to welcome your questions and comments about the Center.

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\*\*Below please find Michael L. Benjamin, Executive Director's June 2005 *Report* article which will provide you with additional background information regarding the NHMRC.

## **National Healthy Marriage Resource Center**

The purpose of this article (which will appear in the June issue of the *Report*) is to provide background and progress to date about the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. As many of you know, on September 23, 2004, the National Council on Family Relations received a \$4.5 million award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families (ACF).

This five-year award funds the creation of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. The first phase of this effort will be completed in June 2005 when the Center's Web site "goes live."

### **Cooperative agreement**

The federal government has funded the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center through a cooperative agreement. A cooperative agreement is like a grant, except it consists of direct involvement by federal staff in implementing the project.

The cooperative agreement requires that the Center work directly with federal government employees or its representatives. Work is initiated and carried out by staff of the Center's six partners, or HUBS, but the federal project officers are involved along the way.

### **Operational goals**

The overall mission of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center is to help individuals and couples that choose marriage for them gain the knowledge and skills necessary to build and sustain a healthy marriage. As defined by ACF, the project has an exclusive focus on heterosexual marriages. The Center's operational goals are:

1. To help individuals and couples who choose to marry gain the knowledge and skills to build and sustain a healthy marriage.
2. To provide resources to practitioners and organizations wanting to implement healthy marriage programs and activities.
3. To provide resources and information for organizational leaders interested in building community healthy marriage initiatives.
4. To provide resources and information for policymakers and others working to strengthen marriages through public policy.
5. To provide research findings and reviews about healthy marriage to individuals and couples, practitioners, organizational leaders, policymakers, and scholars.
6. To create awareness about the work of the Center.

The Center will offer academicians and researchers, as well as leaders of local community marriage initiatives, a centralized information hub for the exchange of ideas, as well as providing information about services to individuals and couples.

The Center will also:

- Facilitate cross-fertilization between research and practice.
- Provide family service professionals and community development specialists with access to the latest research.
- Allow researchers to identify emerging trends including those in special or regional populations.

### **Project staff and partners**

The project staff of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center is primarily located in NCFR's Washington, DC, office. Linda Malone-Colon, Ph.D., formerly of Hampton University, is the Project Director, and Derek Gwinn, M.A., CFLE, formerly of the University of Minnesota, serves as Research Associate. Michael L. Benjamin is the Principle Investigator.

The Center consists of six partners or HUBS: five major universities across the United States and a nonprofit in Washington, DC. Here's a listing of the HUBS, their project directors, and their major first-year task responsibilities:

- ***Brigham Young University, Provo, UT***  
Project Director: Alan Hawkins, Ph.D.  
Task responsibility: Collect and summarize research and create research summary database.
- ***Child Trends: Washington, DC***  
Project Director: Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D.  
Task responsibility: Identify and summarize marriage-related legislation and policy for each state including scanning marriage research conducted by think tanks and other research institutions.
- ***Norfolk State University: Norfolk, VA***  
Project Director: Colita Nichols Fairfax, MA, MSW  
Task responsibility: Collaborate with the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative and identify and collect marriage and family syllabi.
- ***Syracuse University: Syracuse, NY***  
Project Director: Alan Taylor, Ph.D.  
Task responsibility: Acquire marriage education curricula and community-based resources.
- ***Texas Tech University: Lubbock, TX***  
Project Director: Dean Busby, Ph.D.  
Task responsibility: Build and maintain the Web site and acquire data on premarital assessment instruments.
- ***University of Minnesota: Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN***  
Project Director: William Doherty, Ph.D.  
Task responsibility: Identify existing and emerging community healthy marriage initiatives.

### **On-going review process**

Our goal is to make available the most current and comprehensive research-based knowledge available, as well as to produce resources and information for organizational leaders and policymakers.

To achieve this goal, we have established a review process for documents developed by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. Alexis Walker, editor of NCFR's *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and Joyce Arditti, editor of NCFR's *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, have agreed to submit all fact sheets and policy briefs generated by the Center to their review process and reviewers.

Reviews of the Center's publications will be consistent with the high quality you have come to expect from NCFR's peer-reviewed journals, and they will be conducted by authorities in the subject area. To ensure integrity of the research findings we are summarizing, we will ask the primary author of the article to be a part of the review process.

In addition, we plan to convene an advisory group of NCFR members nominated through the NCFR Sections. These experts will meet on an annual basis to review the progress of the Center.

### **Progress report**

To date, the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center has completed the following tasks:

- Web site design and structure.
- Development of protocol for approval of materials submitted by each HUB site. Materials will be approved by NCFR, the Center, and the ACF.
- Drafts of 40 research briefs.
- Definitions of key terms: Marriage education, community healthy marriage initiatives, and healthy marriage.
- Summaries of approximately eight pieces of state legislation.
- Summaries of approximately eight research articles.

Please note that we plan to present a forum on the Center during NCFR's 2005 Annual Conference in Phoenix. We look forward to seeing you there!

As always, I welcome your comments and feedback.

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