

**Wedding bells ring untrue;**

**Welfare bill that promotes marriage leaves other knots; untangled, recipients say**

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Chicago Tribune

May 22, 2002

By Connie Lauerman, Tribune staff reporter

As last week's news of a welfare bill that promotes marriage trickled down to the streets, it was often greeted with laughter and disbelief among the women it is targeting.

The U.S. House of Representatives approved Republican welfare legislation Thursday that would impose stricter work requirements and devote \$300 million a year for state experiments aimed at getting recipients to marry. Another \$50 million would go to programs that promote abstinence from sex until marriage. "I wouldn't consider marrying my children's father at all," said welfare recipient Joyce English, 37, the Chicago mother of two children, ages 2 and 4. "That's a crazy idea."

A recovering addict, English is involved in a job readiness and placement program at Strive Chicago Employment Service in Rogers Park in an attempt to turn her life around and become self-sufficient.

She herself was raised by a single mother who she said instilled in her "a sense of courage." The very idea of promoting marriage implies that "a woman is weak" without a man, she added.

While the House has approved legislation, the Senate has yet to pass a bill. Senate Republicans and Democrats differ over such issues as funding for child care. A Senate Democratic proposal calls for spending \$8 billion on child care and other incentives. (The House bill called for \$2 billion for extra child-care payments to states.) A centrist version of the Senate bill is being crafted and it's not certain when lawmakers will vote.

The issue rises to the fore as the 1996 welfare-reform law, which has reduced the rolls from about 5 million families to 2 million, expires this year. Many of those left have health problems or are single mothers, which is part of the reasoning behind marriage incentives.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who voted against the House bill, said marriage promotion ignores "the fact that 60 to 70 percent of women who are receiving assistance have been victims of domestic violence. Fleeing those abusive situations is often the answer for women as opposed to getting into a marriage."

If the goal is to help build self-sufficiency in families, she added, the \$300 million would be better spent on education, training and child care.

Welfare recipient Vicki Cusack, 27, the Chicago mother of a 10-year-old girl, agrees.

"The money would be [put to] better use for helping homeless people or helping people get jobs or child care instead of trying to get people to get married," said Cusack, who had gotten a job but was laid off recently.

She allows that marriage might have been a good idea close to the time of her daughter's birth, although she said neither she nor her child's father were financially prepared for marriage. But it certainly isn't a good idea now.

"I have goals in my life that I want to achieve before I even think about getting married," said Cusack, who has an on-again-off-again relationship with her child's father.

A spokesman for the welfare agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said that "misinformation" is being circulated about the marriage incentive proposal. States will be invited to participate by submitting a proposal for a program to "help couples choose marriage and develop skills [to sustain it]. This is not government matchmaking."

A few states already are trying to encourage marriage among welfare recipients. For example, married couples in West Virginia get an extra \$100 per month in welfare benefits. Oklahoma offers marriage workshops for those on welfare.

A spokesman for the Illinois Department of Human Services said the agency will wait for the final version of the welfare bill before proposing marriage programs.

Many express doubts

Advocates for the poor and others who work in social service have their doubts about the wisdom of promoting marriage.

"Marriage is just not a solution," said Holly Sider, social worker and program coordinator at Strive. "Relationships aren't easy, and to force people possibly to take a step they're not ready to take or wanting to take can only end in disaster.

"Give people \$200 to get married? A lot of people would get married [just] because they need \$200 that badly."

Jenny Wittner, a senior policy associate at Women Employed in Chicago, said, "The real issue is enabling people to access jobs that pay a family-supporting wage. Access to education and training has been shown time after time to do that."

The Senate is sure to debate whether states should be given more money for those causes, as well as for health care.

But Matt Daniels, executive director of the Alliance for Marriage, a research and education organization in Washington, D.C., said family structure is a core issue.

"The key to restoring fatherhood to more than a biological event is marriage, particularly in poor communities," he said. "The economic benefits of marriage are huge and it's one of the most reliable ways out of poverty for people on welfare."

But marriage may not be a realistic option for many women and might not end poverty.

"Most women would want to be in a long-term stable relationship if that were a possibility," said Barbara Gault, research director for the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, D.C. "Many of these women don't see good options out there for them because some of the men that are available are in as bad a situation as they are. Or worse."

Wendy Pollack, an attorney with the National Center for Poverty Law in Chicago, said that it's not bad to have people understand that marriage might be an option for them and be offered help in relationship skill-building, but "this in particular is problematic because it's targeted towards low-income people.

"All kinds of people have problems in terms of relationships and what they think about marriage and divorce. It's not just a low-income person's problem. There is a big problem when we think it's OK to infringe on low-income people's private choices, but not for anybody else."

Real women's choices

Denika Hickman, 19, of Evanston, the mother of a nearly 2-year-old son, works as an order processor for a company that makes uniforms and receives some welfare benefits.

"I don't think it's right [to have an abortion] just because I'm not married, and I don't think it's right to get married just because I'm having a baby," Hickman said. "I have strong values and I know that one day I'll get married, but I'm not just going to get married because [the man] is my son's father. That doesn't work. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce and we would have been part of that because we're not mature enough for marriage. I wouldn't put my son in that situation."

When Valerie Werner, 44, of Oak Park became pregnant at 18, she married the child's father because she said that's what was expected of her as a Roman Catholic.

By age 22, she had two more children. The next year, she said, it became "very clear" that her husband was not a good partner because he was not going to stop using drugs.

So Werner left him, received welfare for a time, raised the children, graduated from college, got a master's degree and is finishing a doctorate in public administration while she works in a program for families with chronically ill children.

She now is happily married to a man she met in California while in graduate school. Two of her children are college graduates and the third soon will finish college.

Werner has conducted research for Chicago Commons Employment Training Center to find out

how participants in its program had fared years later and found that the most successful women mirrored her own experience.

"The women who were doing the best--working towards economic independence, attending school--were the ones that had come to the conclusion that if they were going to make it in this life they had to get their own acts together," she said. "It wasn't going to come from another relationship, because relationships produce another child and [the women] end up taking care of the man too."

Men's role

Still, even those who are dubious about marriage incentives by no means wish to freeze out men.

"I'm all for getting the fathers involved," said Strive's Sider. "We'll work with them on how to develop a relationship with your child, why it's important to pay child support. We're not trying to break up families, but if two people don't choose to get married, that's their choice."