

Match Maker

How a U.S. Official Promotes Marriage To Help Poor Kids

To Encourage Couples to Wed, Wade Horn Plans to Spend \$500 Million in Five Years*

Mr. Cobb Starts a Family

By LAURA MECKLER

The notion that government can help children escape poverty by promoting marriage for their parents was once considered a fringe idea from right field. It is now federal policy.

In very large part, that's due to Wade Horn, a child psychologist turned bureaucrat who has put marriage atop the Bush administration's limited antipoverty agenda.

As head of the federal Administration for Children and Families, Dr. Horn has employed the zeal of an ideologue and the discipline of an academic

POVERTY:

The New Search for Solutions

Seventh in a Series

to inject marriage promotion into a host of government programs under his purview, even before Congress authorized an official marriage program. Today, more than 200 programs are at work across the country, seeking to change public attitudes surrounding marriage, persuade teenagers to aspire to matrimony and teach relationship skills to young couples.

Along the way, Dr. Horn has co-opted critics, fine-tuned his rhetoric, and persuaded Congress to insert his marriage agenda into this year's welfare legislation, winning \$500 million over five years. A host of grants were doled out last month, to organizations ranging from large coalitions of social-services groups to anti-abortion pregnancy-counseling centers that plan relationship classes for teens.

"Wade Horn has shown the influence a bureaucrat can have," says Ronald Haskins, a welfare expert who has worked for Congress and the current President Bush's White House. "Anything that wasn't nailed down over there is now devoted to marriage."

Not everyone is persuaded. Women's groups say his emphasis on marriage unfairly demonizes unwed mothers, and pressures women to stay in sometimes unhealthy, violent relationships. Libertarians say government has no business using tax dollars to probe so deeply into people's personal lives. Some note that there's no proof yet that any of these efforts can work. Others say the money would be better spent elsewhere.



Wade Horn

The idea that poverty is, in significant measure, the result of broken families and unwed mothers has been contentious since Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial 1965 warning that the disintegrating black family was an obstacle to black advancement. In that year, 8% of children were born to unmarried parents. Today, more than one-third of all children—and nearly 70% of black children—are

Study after study show children are better off in two-parent homes. They are less likely to be poor, drop out of school, become teen parents or get arrested. The theory: Two parents bring stability and emotional support to chil-

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 dren and one another, not to mention providing two incomes. But can government do anything to actually promote marriage? And should it?

Dr. Horn offers an emphatic yes, and saw proof on a recent evening in Baltimore where he observed six couples participating in a federally funded effort called Building Strong Families. The program, being tried in seven cities, hosts weekly discussions for unmarried couples who have recently had or are about to have a baby. It doesn't specifically push couples to marry, but the curriculum sets out marriage as the ideal. Group leaders regularly mention marriage. Posters on the wall proclaim "Marriage Works."

On that evening, Myckel Cobbs, age 24, talked about how trust and openness come hard to him. But since meeting his girlfriend, Tashanna Harvey, 21, and joining the Baltimore program, things seemed different. "I came up on the streets, no family," he explained, glancing at Ms. Harvey, nearly nine months pregnant with their child. Now, "this is my family, with her."

On the drive back to Washington, Dr. Horn was still thinking about Mr. Cobbs's fatherless childhood. "Here they are, this young couple, trying to break that cycle. It takes a lot of courage," he said. "If this works, the real impact will be on their kids."

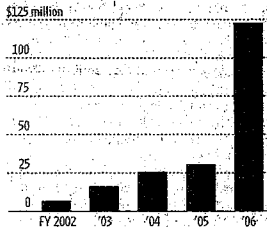
Six years into the Bush administration, Dr. Horn is one of the few remaining political appointees interested in "compassionate conservatism," the slogan from the President's first campaign. Mr. Haskins, now with the Brookings Institution, advised the White House on welfare for only a year. Political-science professor John Dilulio launched the White House's faith-based initiative to direct federal dollars to religious charities, but left after less than a year.

Dr. Horn endured in the Department of Health and Human Services, using his position to push the theory that families with married parents can pave the path out of poverty.

Even before Congress authorized the marriage program in the welfare bill, Dr. Horn began using discretionary funds from his Administration for Children and Families to inject marriage-promotion into the agency's programs—ranging from refugee assistance to aid for Indian tribes to child-support enforcement. The efforts included marriage-awareness campaigns and couples classes. Over its first four years, his patchwork of spending added up to a \$200-million program, which Dr. Horn dubbed the Healthy Marriage Initiative.

A Boost for Marriage

Congress approved significant spending for the Healthy Marriage Initiative for fiscal 2006. Total spending, by year:



Note: Fiscal years ended Sept. 30.
 Source: Administration for Children and Families

Dr. Horn didn't always succeed. He failed to get similar marriage-promotion efforts into Head Start, the preschool program, in the face of opposition. "We've never had parents request that," says Sarah Green, president of the National Head Start Association. "Most of them want help in how to get out of marriages that are not healthy." Dr. Horn says he dropped his marriage proposal in order to focus on other Head Start priorities.

Dr. Horn, 51, grew up in New Jersey, one of seven children of a liberal mother and conservative father. Over dinner, they would disagree about Vietnam, Watergate and abortion, he says, yet "no one remembers my parents leaving the table mad at each other."

He earned a doctorate in child psychology at Southern Illinois University and went into practice. He and his wife, Claudia, and their two daughters, moved to Washington in 1986 because Claudia, now a consultant, was promoted to be the associate rehabilitation director at the national headquarters of Goodwill Industries.

Impact of Marriage

Percentage of children from each type of family structure with the following problems:

Children with:	Living in families with incomes below the poverty level	In poor health	With high levels of behavior and emotional problems (ages 6-17)	Who were suspended or expelled from school in past 12 months (ages 12-17)
Single parents	35	25	15	23
Cohabiting parents	10	10	5	2
Married parents	8	5	3	10

Note: The differences between percentages for cohabitating and single parents weren't statistically significant, meaning that any apparent differences could be attributed to chance.

Source: Analysis of 2002 National Survey of America's Families by Child Trends, a private research group

was a man present. It was no surprise that few single moms married, he says, because the message was, "Don't do it."

Then in a 1997 paper published by the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank, Dr. Horn proposed reversing these incentives for programs such as public housing. "Only after all income-eligible, married, two-parent families are offered the benefit should it become available for income-eligible, single-parent families," he wrote.

After President Bush took office in 2001, he nominated Dr. Horn for an assistant secretary's post at HHS, but 90 groups opposed his confirmation, citing the 1997 paper and complaining his policies would keep women trapped in violent, unhealthy relationships out of fear of losing benefits.

In the hearings, Dr. Horn renounced his earlier comments, saying he was now convinced that preference for married people in social services could translate into discrimination against single moms. Sen. Rockefeller vouched for him and he was easily confirmed.

A key assignment for Dr. Horn was to help develop the Bush administration's proposal for renewing the 1996 welfare law. He pushed to include funding for marriage promotion, despite some reluctance from his boss, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson. "It wasn't my first priority," Mr. Thompson acknowledges, but says he came to see the political advantages. "The religious right certainly found this a plus and we could find more supporters" for the legislation.

As the job of hashing out welfare reauthorization shifted to Congress, Dr. Horn worked to mollify his critics. He directed that every program work with local domestic-violence experts. And he agreed to hire a domestic-violence expert as part of the national program team.

"One of the smartest things I did," Dr. Horn says, "was put the word 'healthy' in front of 'marriage.'" Every speech and handout on the initiative now uses that phrase.

He also was careful to steer clear of religious overtones. Dr. Horn is religious and active in his Presbyterian church. But he avoids using religious arguments to make the case for marriage.

Dr. Horn put Diann Dawson, a 27-year HHS veteran and an African-American, in charge of outreach to the black community. And, to woo welfare experts and academics eager to attack the program as ideological and unsupported by research, Dr. Horn incorporated evaluation requirements into many early programs and recruited prominent researchers in the field to study them. "He co-opted the whole damn academic world," Mr. Haskins, the onetime White House aide, says admiringly.

He still faced opponents. In Congress, the most vocal was Sen. Max Baucus, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, who reflected Montana's libertarian leanings. Marriage is a "personal and private choice, not something the government should interfere with," he told a Washington rally on the welfare bill in March 2002.

To help negotiate the welfare legislation, Sen. Baucus in 2004 hired Kate Kahan, now 32, a single mother and former welfare-rights organizer. Pregnant at 18, Ms. Kahan had married the father, then left him after a year and a half because she says he was violent. She and Sen. Baucus knew that the welfare bill inevitably was going to include a marriage program, but she fought for explicit protections: a promise that the domestic-violence experts hired would be experienced and qualified, and guarantees the programs would be voluntary. Dr. Horn, insulted that anyone would question his commitment to protecting women, pushed back.

The tension came to a head at a meeting during negotiations aimed at writing a bipartisan bill. Ms. Kahan was surprised to find Dr. Horn there. By her account, he began by asking what Sen.

families; the new studies will see if it works with poor, nonwhite couples.

In the Building Strong Families program in Baltimore, couples are randomly assigned either to join the program, or to receive no services but be contacted later for follow-up. Researchers will study the relationships—including how many pairs marry—and the couples' children.

On the night Dr. Horn visited Baltimore, he spoke to the young couples, without using the word marriage. "There's not a couple that doesn't have problems. It's work," he said. "But it's really worth it when you look at your kids."

Poverty: The New Search For Solutions

This article is the seventh in a series. Earlier installments were:

- 'Novel Police Tactic Puts Drug Markets Out of Business,' Sept. 27.
- 'Winning the Battle on Teen Pregnancy,' July 22.
- 'Poverty Program Gives Points to Do the Right Thing,' July 7.
- 'Cincinnati Applies a Corporate Model to Saving Infants,' June 20.
- 'In Poverty Tactics, an Old Debate: Who Is at Fault?' June 15.
- 'For Hungry Kids, 'Backpack Clubs' Try to Fill a Gap,' June 14.

Online Today: WSJ.com subscribers can read these articles, review excerpts from Wade Horn's writings and statements about marriage, and see additional data on the Healthy Marriage Initiative's spending and on how family structure affects children, at WSJ.com/Poverty.

headquarters of Goodwill Industries.

During his years as a therapist, he got interested in the importance of marriage. A divorcing couple asked if he would work with their child to "be sure the child was not impacted by divorce in any way," he recalls. "It was so cavalier. I won't go along with the idea that it is perfectly OK to assume divorce will have no impact on children."

He helped write policy papers for the first President Bush's 1988 presidential campaign and afterward landed the post of HHS commissioner for children, youth and families at age 34.

In 1989, the president appointed him to a commission on children, chaired by Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D., W. Va.). Dr. Horn successfully pushed to have the final report include rhetoric condemning divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing as bad for children. The White House, fearing Sen. Rockefeller might challenge Mr. Bush for president in 1992, leaned heavily on Dr. Horn to vote against the final report. But Dr. Horn thought Sen. Rockefeller had accommodated his concerns and voted yes. The report was approved unanimously.

After President Bush's 1992 loss left him without a job, Dr. Horn joined the burgeoning fatherhood movement, launching the private National Fatherhood Initiative, which promotes the no-

account, he began by asking what Sen. Baucus had against marriage. Ms. Kahan shot back that the senator is not against marriage but had more questions than answers about government promoting it. In any case, she said, poverty is complex and isn't going to be solved with marriage classes. Frustrated by her repeated insistence on that point, Dr. Horn threatened to walk out of the room, according to two people in the meeting.

After that, the two couldn't be in the same room, those involved in the talks say, and a Republican Senate staffer says she resorted to "shuttle diplomacy."

Dr. Horn says that characterization overstates the tension. But he allows that he sometimes aggravates his opponents. "There are times when I may push a little bit harder than other people may feel comfortable." Dr. Horn says, adding that he doesn't recall the specific debates with Ms. Kahan. A Republican staffer who participated in the talks confirmed Ms. Kahan's account.

When the welfare bill finally passed

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