

- SUBJECT:** Funding programs that support strong marriages and families
- COMMITTEE:** State Affairs — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 7 ayes — Swinford, Paxton, Christian, B. Cook, Flynn, Parker, Veasey  
0 nays  
2 absent — Van Arsdale, Farrar
- WITNESSES:** For — Brent Connett, Texas Conservative Coalition; Danielle Hanneken, Joe Hanneken, Retrouvaille International; Erin Kincaid, The Alliance for North Texas Healthy Effective Marriages; Roy Milam, Cornerstone Marriage and Family Ministries; Gloria Miranda-Cavazos, Hispanic Active Relationships Project of Cameron County; Robert Richardson, Family Life; Maggie Russell, Northside Family Ministries; Chris Shields, Texas Association for Marriage and Family Therapy; Michael Smalley, Smalley Marriage and Family Center; Paul D. Landrew; Arlene Wohlgemuth; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Julie Drenner, Texans for Family Values PAC; Merry Lynn Gerstenschlager, Texas Eagle Forum Education Liaison; Jonathan Saenz, Free Market Foundation; Alfred Allen, Sr.; Nathaniel Dugay; Malcolm Hester)
- Against — Katie Tastrom, National Association of Social Workers-Texas; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Patti Edelman)
- On — Jeff Johnson, Health and Human Services Commission
- BACKGROUND:** In 2003, the 78th Legislature enacted HB 2292 by Wohlgemuth, which reorganized the delivery of health and human services. Among its many provisions, it established the Healthy Marriage Development Program in Human Resources Code, sec. 31.015, to offer instructional courses on:
- premarital counseling, including anger resolution, family violence prevention, communication, honoring your spouse, and managing a budget;
  - physical fitness and active lifestyles, including sexual abstinence for unmarried and previously married people and nutrition on a budget; and

- parenting skills for character development, academic success, and stepchildren.

Recipients of assistance through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) — a federal block grant that funds cash assistance and other services for low-income families — who take the courses receive an additional \$20 per course in financial assistance, up to \$60.

**DIGEST:**

HB 2683 would add Human Resources Code, sec. 31.018 to require the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to spend each fiscal biennium, to the extent authorized by federal law, a minimum of 1 percent of TANF block grant funds on programs supporting the development of healthy marriages or strong families. Funds could be directed to the Healthy Marriage Development Program and the new Healthy Marriages and Strong Families Grant Program.

Under the Healthy Marriages and Strong Families Grant Program in Human Resources Code, sec. 31.017, HHSC could provide grants of up to \$50,000 each to programs supporting the development of healthy marriages or strong families. The programs could use the funds to enlarge program capacity or pay other related expenses.

If HHSC or another agency determined that a waiver or other federal authorization were necessary to implement any part of HB 2683, the agency would be required to request the waiver or authorization and could delay implementation of the bill.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2007.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

HB 2683 would benefit adults, children, and society as a whole by funding programs to promote healthy marriages and strong families. Happily married couples provide a stable and healthy environment for raising children. Research has shown that married couples are happier and healthier. Married people live up to eight years longer than their divorced or never-married counterparts, and marriage tends to provide increased financial security. Children of married parents also fare better. They are less likely to engage in criminal behavior, abuse drugs or alcohol, become pregnant out-of-wedlock, or experience emotional and psychological troubles. The initiatives funded by this bill would give low-income Texans the skills and knowledge to form and sustain healthy marriages and strong families.

By promoting strong marriages and families, the state would not withdraw support and services for single-parent families. There are many legitimate and federally approved uses for TANF block grant funds, including the strengthening of families and encouragement of two-parent households. Promoting marriage and supporting single-parent families are not mutually exclusive.

Healthy marriage initiatives do not encourage people to remain in abusive relationships. In fact, they are designed to do the opposite — strengthen families by giving couples the necessary skills to deal with conflict and anger within a relationship. Grant applicants seeking TANF funds for marriage promotion initiatives must demonstrate how the proposed programs and activities would address issues of domestic violence, and grant recipients are required to consult with domestic violence experts in the administration of their programs. Abusive marriages are good for no one, and programs funded with the grants authorized by HB 2683 would not provide comfort to spouse or child abusers.

The bill would not establish a government matchmaking service. Choosing to marry is a private decision, and the state of Texas has no intention of interfering with anyone's private life. Marriage is directly related to child well-being. The purpose of this bill is to fund programs that give couples and their families the tools they need to succeed in marriage and in life.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

By promoting marriage to low-income people, the state sends a message that the way out of poverty is dependence on a spouse rather than economic self-sufficiency. The purpose of TANF is to provide assistance to needy families to end dependence on government benefits. Rather than diverting these funds toward marriage promotion, Texas instead should invest TANF funds in strategies to support the transition from welfare to work or give working-poor families tools to escape poverty such as training in employment skills, child care, and adult literacy.

Marriage does not eliminate poverty. Studies show that most low-income unmarried women still would be poor or near-poor if they were married and working. Educational attainment and the job market have more influence on poverty than marital status. What low-income people really need is access to education and training opportunities leading to jobs that provide stable employment, living wages, and access to health benefits.

An unintended consequence of marriage promotion programs could be to encourage victims of domestic violence to marry or stay married to their abusers. Promoting marriage to women who were not in a safe or healthy relationship could harm those women and cost the state in increased medical expenses and loss of economic productivity.

While the promotion of marriage by the state might spring from noble motives, it intrudes into fundamentally private matters. The decision to marry is one of the most personal and important decisions that people make in their lifetimes. When reaching this decision, people turn to their family and friends, not the government.

NOTES:

According to the Legislative Budget Board (LBB), HB 2683 would cost \$9.7 million in federal TANF funds in fiscal 2008-09. Most of this money would go to grant awards, but the bill would result in other administrative costs and require HHSC to hire three additional staff members to manage the program. In the absence of sufficient federal funds, according to the LBB, the state would have to redirect funds from existing programs or the program could not be implemented.

A related bill, HB 2685 by Chisum, which would revise the premarital education course, use TANF funds to award scholarships to fund programs promoting healthy marriages and strong families, increase the marriage license fee from \$30 to \$60, and waive the fee and the 72-hour waiting period following receipt of a marriage license for those completing a premarital education course, also is on today's General State Calendar.