GAO Report Questions HHS Oversight of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees; Continued Funding for Initiative in Doubt

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, which reauthorized the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, allocated $150 million per year for five years to fund a Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiative (the Initiative). The intent of the Healthy Marriage program was to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent households to improve child wellbeing through healthy marriage promotion. The Responsible Fatherhood program was designed to strengthen the role of the father as a means of promoting child wellbeing, specifically within the context of marriage. Awards for Healthy Marriage demonstration grants ranged from $225,000 to $2.4 million. Responsible Fatherhood demonstration grants ranged from $188,000 to $1 million. Recent developments regarding funding for the initiative are described at the end of this summary.

The U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) recently examined HHS’ process for awarding grants and monitoring grantees of the Initiative. Findings include:

- More than 1,650 applications were submitted to HHS for review, and 216 organizations were selected to provide services. A very short period for reviewing grant applications meant that HHS was unable to fully examine the proposed programs and activities or to inform grantees if their proposed activities were permissible. This led to challenges for grantees when implementing their programs. Five of fourteen grantees visited during GAO site visits reported that, despite implementing the program as described in their proposal, they were subsequently informed by HHS that some of the activities were not permissible even though they were already providing the services to participants.

- The rush to complete the review process also led to a pool of 600 peer reviewers who did not fully comply with an HHS requirement that reviewers be experts in the field. The GAO found that reviewers included graduate students and practitioners who did not always have experience relevant to marriage and fatherhood.

- Both Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs reported that they seek to ensure that victims of domestic violence receive services by making referrals to domestic violence specialists in their area. Almost all grantees in both programs reported that they include domestic violence awareness as part of their programs and have protocols in place for detecting and responding to signs of domestic violence.

- A survey of grantees revealed that 58 percent of Healthy Marriage and 52 percent of Responsible Fatherhood programs target low-income individuals, and 39 percent of Healthy Marriage and 36 percent of Responsible Fatherhood grantees target minorities.

- Program monitoring by HHS staff was found to be inconsistent. According to the GAO report, monitors were given insufficient guidance to conduct uniform site visits, and were
not always consistent in providing grantees information on HHS policy and allowable activities. For example, HHS officials reported that abstinence education was not allowable, but several grantees were found to be operating programs that focused primarily on abstinence education. In addition, some grantees were allowed to adjust second-year performance measures if their program was not meeting current criteria, while others were not allowed to do so.

- Mechanisms for monitoring grantee compliance and performance were not in place. For example, the priority for making site visits and providing feedback and technical assistance was left to individual staff, leaving many programs without adequate assistance when they faced challenges. Several programs reported difficulty with recruiting and meeting participation goals, but they had not been prioritized for an on-site monitoring visit from HHS staff. According to the report, programs would have benefited from early intervention and assistance from HHS to correct performance issues in many cases, but did not receive it until the program was already providing noncompliant activities, or until it was clear that the program had not met performance standards.

GAO recommends that HHS “employ a risk-based approach to monitoring grantees and conducting grantee site visits, using its planned management information system and information from both progress reports and uniform performance indicators to help identify those grantees at risk of not meeting performance goals or not in compliance with grant requirements; and create clear, consistent guidance and policy for monitoring Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grantees.” HHS reports that it is in the process of implementing the recommendations.


**Funding Note:** A recent post from the Smart Marriages listserv reports that, according to leading Republican senators and Democratic staff, the current TANF marriage and fatherhood grants are at the top of the list for cuts in the new Congress, and current grants are not likely to be renewed in 2010.

**Child Support in the News**

- Dr. David Gray Ross has been named to serve on President-elect Barack Obama’s Health and Human Services transition team. Dr. Ross was Commissioner of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement under President Clinton, from January 1994 to January 2001. Ross will return to his current position as Executive in Residence at the University of Central Florida after serving in the temporary transition team role.

- Child support sweeps are conducted regularly on a local level to serve warrants and arrest noncustodial parents who have not paid their child support obligation. Sweeps took place in several jurisdictions in recent weeks. In New Jersey, 949 individuals were rounded up in all of the state’s counties as part of the state sheriff association’s biannual child support sweep, which targeted noncustodial parents who have failed either to pay child support or to appear in court to establish a child support order or an order for medical support. In a sweep in the Philadelphia county of Burlington, 32 noncustodial parents were charged with failure to pay child support. Of the 32 parents, 11 were charged and released after paying their child support debt, and 21 were being held in jail for failure to pay child support. In the third such operation in 2008, Tulare County in California conducted an arrest warrant operation targeted at people suspected of failing
to pay court-ordered child support. The sweep brought in 30 parents suspected of owing a combined amount of more than $1 million in child support. The suspects were either jailed or cited to appear in court.

• Parents who are low-income, chronically unemployed or otherwise financially insecure are the most likely to be unable to post the purge bond or pay the child support debt. These parents are therefore most likely to end up incarcerated or otherwise sanctioned in a sweep, and as a result, to face situations that are yet more unstable and precarious.

• Texas State Attorney General Greg Abbott is prioritizing support for passage of legislation to create a health care plan for the state’s children who are in the child support system, using child support funds. Abbott cited the 30 to 40 percent of parents who are responsible for providing medical support to their children, but who do not have access to health insurance benefits. His proposal would pool more than 200,000 children who fall into that category, creating a large enough pool to negotiate affordable private insurance coverage. The plan would require legislation to replace current child support guidelines that result in orders for cash medical support to the custodial parent if the noncustodial parent does not have employer health benefits. Current guidelines do not guarantee that the assistance will be used to provide medical insurance for the child.

• The Sedgewick County district court website, www.dc18.org, has initiated an online listing by name of all individuals for whom a warrant has been issued due to the nonpayment of child support. Individuals are listed by name and case number.

Canada Province Plans Comprehensive Poverty Reduction Program

Despite an economic downturn, the Canadian province of Ontario has announced its plan, Breaking the Cycle, to combat poverty by providing multiple services and supports. The program has a goal of reducing the number of children in poverty by 90,000, or 25 percent, over five years. The plan would:

• Increase the benefit for low-income children by $1,310 per year. At program maturity, the total income for a single parent with two children under age 13 working full-time at minimum wage would be 54 percent higher than in 2003.

• Enhance public education by adding school and recreational programs for at-risk youth, full-day school for four- and five-year-olds, and supports for parents to get involved in the schools.

• Initiate a series of community initiatives including summer jobs programs, temporary financial assistance to tenants facing eviction, and the introduction of legislation to regulate temporary jobs agencies.

• The establishment of a Social Policy Institute to focus on evidence-based social policy, and legislation to provide for the measurement of progress in implementing the new programs.

The program plan is available at http://www.growingstronger.ca

This monthly policy briefing is made possible by the generous support of the Open Society Institute (OSI) Campaign for Black Male Achievement. Any opinions, errors or conclusions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or positions of OSI.