



# COFO

Consortium of  
Family Organizations

# Family Policy Report

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Issued quarterly to assist policymakers in evaluating legislation and social programs from a family perspective.

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## Introduction

This is the first issue of COFO's new quarterly *Family Policy Report* which is designed to help policymakers enact and administer policies that support and strengthen family life. It will provide public officials with analytic tools to use as they develop and assess new proposals or evaluate current programs.

Many people now agree that our nation's most important social institution—the family—is undergoing serious stress. Public officials are being urged from all sides to enact-specific pro-family policies on issues such as child care, parental leave, welfare reform, and health care. But it is difficult for them to know what effects the proposals will have on family life or by what criteria to judge whether the effects are helpful or not. When a new proposal is put forward, among the most important questions to ask are: *What effects will this proposed action have on family life? Will it help to strengthen and support families? Or will it, inadvertently, weaken them?*

How often do policy analyses and reports address these questions? Very rarely. Current methods of policy analysis do not focus on families; they focus on individuals. There are important differences between these two perspectives.

### Future Issues

Future issues of this *Report* will examine a specific legislative proposal or executive action from a *family perspective*. In each issue, COFO will briefly review the relevant family research related to the issues and identify the family impact questions that need to be raised. Regrettably, extensive research is often unavailable to provide definitive answers, but we will draw on what is known to suggest the most plausible answers to these questions.

### This Issue

In this issue COFO provides a broad framework for understanding what we mean by a *family perspective* and how we will use it in future *Reports* to evaluate legislation. We address the following questions:

- Why is a family perspective needed?
- What is family policy?
- What criteria should be used to guide policymaking and determine what is good for families?
- What are some key family impact questions?

These family criteria and impact questions are summarized and included here as an *insert*, which the reader can remove and use to study bills, amendments, regulations, or existing programs that directly affect family functioning.

Finally, we tell you something about who we are—the Consortium of Family Organizations (see the back page of the insert). We wish to make it clear that we do not represent a particular political point of view. We are five national organizations who serve families and advocate for improved understanding of the nature and complexity of families' lives across the life cycle and for a family perspective in policymaking and in social programs.

### Why Is a Family Perspective Needed?

*Jim is a blue-collar worker whose wife died from cancer. After her long illness, which drained the family's financial and emotional resources, he sought assistance to keep his family together. He discovered that his salary, modest by today's standards, was too high for government support and too low to pay for private housekeeping and child care. The pressures of keeping his family together intensified, and he turned to alcohol. Jim lost his job, the authorities responded to his problems by placing his three children in foster homes.*

Family-oriented policies and programs could have provided the kind of assistance Jim and his family needed to stay together. Such programs would also have saved the government the thousands of dollars a year paid for foster care and Jim's alcohol treatment and financial support. COFO believes that situations like this develop because policies and programs designed to help needy individuals do not sufficiently take families into account. Family-centered policies are often much more cost-effective.

The following examples point out the importance of a family perspective in policymaking activities: following questions:

- Medicare, Medicaid, and many other health programs fund institutional care and treatment for chronically ill and disabled children, adults, and the elderly, but rarely fund most of the services needed to enable families to care for them at home, which most people would prefer.

- Only a small fraction of public and private employers are "family-friendly." Yet evidence indicates that flexible work schedules, parental and family leaves, child and elder care benefits, and employee assistance programs pay off in increased employee productivity, morale, recruitment, and retention.
- Policies and programs do not encourage family members to be involved in the care of their hospitalized ill child, substance-abusing teenager, mentally ill adult relative, or frail elderly parent, even though research has shown that family involvement and support speeds and sustains recovery or improves the management of chronic illness.
- In recent years, the government has devoted many program resources to finding families who will adopt special-needs children (handicapped, abused, and older children). Yet once the adoption becomes final, there are virtually no resources designated to help provide the supportive services to parents often needed in order to help make these challenging adoptions successful.

## What Is a Family Perspective?

Currently, most public policymaking focuses solely on individuals with specific needs or problems. But the individual's family is often a part of the problem, is always much affected by it, and usually needs to be part of the solution. Policymaking needs to broaden its focus to include individuals' family context. COFO believes that a family perspective in policymaking will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of most social programs. This family perspective involves:

- *Awareness of the impact of changes in family life on the major institutions of society.* The decline in family size, the rapid rise of maternal employment, the escalation in rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing, and other family trends have had profound effects on society. For example, these demographic changes are driving the intense concern about child care, child support, welfare reform, and long-term care. Policymakers now acknowledge that the fundamental changes occurring in family life create critical new challenges for social policy, yet the public policy response to these trends has been too little and too late.
- *Sensitivity to the fact that policies and programs can have varied effects on different types of families and may affect different aspects of family life.* Families come in many configurations. Some have children at home, others do not. There are two-parent and one-parent families, families with employed mothers and stay-at-home mothers, young and old families, families of varied income levels, families from different racial and cultural backgrounds, isolated families and families with a great deal of social support. Too often, policies target only one type of family and ignore the diverse patterns and interrelated functions of families.

- *Acknowledgment of the power of family ties and the variety of ways that individuals' needs, problems, and options are influenced and constrained by their family context and responsibilities.* Regrettably, most social programs ignore the family. The program staff seldom interview, inform, advise, consult or support family members and relatives. Moreover, work with family members is not usually paid or reimbursed. Paradoxically, when family relationships are strained or conflictual, professionals are even less likely to work with families. However, in such situations, family involvement is most imperative.
- *Recognition of the family as the essential partner in the provision of health care, education, and social services to individuals.* Parents, spouses, and other family members play a vital role in the promotion of individuals' good health, the treatment of illness, children's school achievement and their development into responsible, law-abiding citizens. Hence, the efforts of educators, health care professionals, social workers, and court officers are much more successful when reinforced by family members. But parents and relatives are seldom given the information, power, or respect they need to ensure that they can work in partnership with human service professionals.
- *Integration of the family as an important unit of concern in policy analysis and program evaluation.* Social policies and programs typically focus only on outcomes for individuals as the sole basis for judging success and cost effectiveness, to the exclusion of family outcomes. We now know more about how important the family context is to program success.

## What Is "Family Policy"?

There is much confusion about the scope of the term, "family policy": Some individuals and organizations use the term "family policy" to mean any policy that gives financial help to families with dependent children. Others mean policies that ease the lives of working parents, such as provision of day care or parental leave policies. But COFO believes family policy is broader than this. *Family policy is fundamentally concerned about families as the basic social institution.*

Society depends on families to perform certain essential tasks *throughout the life cycle* that no other institution is able to carry out as well. The business of families can be grouped into four broad categories:

- Families provide individuals with their *basic personal and social identity*.
- Families provide *economic support* to meet their dependents' basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing.
- Families *rear and nurture* the next generation to be productive members of society.

- Families provide *protective care* for disabled, frail, and vulnerable members of all ages who cannot care for themselves.

Families are helped to fulfill these social responsibilities by a number of other private and public social institutions—schools, the health care system, social agencies, and others. All society benefits when families perform these functions well. It is only when they falter or fail that additional government action to supplement or supplant the family's role becomes an issue.

Family policy is often interpreted too broadly as meaning any policies that affect people who are family members. COFO believes that the term "family policy" should be confined to the following four basic areas of family functioning, namely, policies that directly and explicitly concern:

1. *Family composition*: policies that affect childbirth, marriage, divorce, adoption, and foster care.
2. *Economic support*: policies that affect families' ability to provide for their dependents' basic needs.
3. *Childrearing*: policies that concern parents' ability to nurture and rear their children.
4. *Family care*: policies that concern families' ability to care for their chronically ill, frail, or disabled members and relatives.

Of course, families are also important to individuals because they provide love, intimacy, affection, and recreation as well as transmit cultural, religious, and social values. Families provide support and refuge in times of crisis. In addition to these positives, however, can be the source of our most negative feelings and painful experiences. Social policy is *indirectly* concerned with these intimate aspects of family life when they either reinforce or interfere with the four major family functions.

To make this use of the term clear, consider the Tax Reform Act of 1986. The entire Act does not fall within the domain of simply because it lowers the tax rates for most individuals who happen to live in families. But current proposals to make the child care tax credit refundable would be an example of family policy. Issues that are included in family policy are those that arise from the four basic areas of family functioning, such as welfare dependency, teen pregnancy, family planning, prenatal care, child care, child support, divorce and mediation, community-based long-term care, juvenile justice, family-oriented personnel policies, child welfare/foster care, and family violence.

While not *primarily* family issues, many other current social problems—such as poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, hunger, and AIDS—have important, distinct family dimensions. Basic areas of social policy such as education, housing, health and mental health care, would also benefit from a family perspective. Upcoming issues of the *COFO Family Policy Report*, will examine proposals in many of these areas.

## What Criteria Should Be Used to Implement a Family Perspective?

COFO recommends that the following six principles be used as family criteria to guide policymaking (see the insert, the COFO Family Impact Questions, for a fuller text):

1. **Family Support and Responsibilities:** Policies and programs should aim to support and supplement family functioning and provide substitute services only as a last resort'
2. **Family Membership and Stability:** Whenever possible, policies and programs should encourage and reinforce family, parental, and marital commitment and stability, especially when children are involved.
3. **Family involvement and Interdependence:** Policies and programs must recognize the strength and persistence of family ties, even when they are problematic.
4. **Family Partnership and Empowerment:** Policies and programs must consider families as partners when providing services to individuals.
5. **Family Diversity:** Families come in many forms and they provide love, intimacy, affection, and recreation as well as configurations, and policies and programs must take into mount their different effects on different types of families. Policies and programs must recognize the diversity of family life, neither discriminating against nor penalizing families solely for reasons of structure, roles, cultural values, or life stage.
6. **Targeting Vulnerable Families:** Families in greatest economic and social need and those judged to be most vulnerable to breakdown should have the first priority in government policies and programs.

In the family analysis of legislation, COFO will be using a framework of 40 family impact questions to help assess the extent to which these general principles are met by a specific proposed or existing social policy or program.

### **Family Policy Report**

The next two issues of the Report, to be published in the summer and fall of 1990, will examine specific proposals in health policy to see how they measure up against a family perspective. If you have suggestions of legislation for such analyses, please write or call members of the editorial board.

# COFO'S FAMILY IMPACT QUESTIONS - Insert

Increasingly, policymakers and their staff at all levels of government ask: What effects does (or will) this program (or proposed policy) have on families? Will it help or hurt, strengthen or weaken family life? These questions sound disarmingly simple. In fact they are very complex. A policy may have different effects on different types of families and on various dimensions of family life. Research may determine what these impacts are. But evaluative criteria are needed as yardsticks to decide what is meant by the terms "strengthen" and "weaken."

COFO has developed a tool to serve as a basic framework for such investigations: a set of six guiding principles to serve as the criteria and a checklist of basic family impact questions. These tools, when used together, guide the research.\* COFO believes that these principles, or family criteria, represent a general consensus on goals for family policy. The relevant family impact questions listed under each principle should be adapted and fleshed out to incorporate specific program content. This tool can be used to:

- Help prepare questions for legislative hearings.
- Review a policy proposal, draft regulation, or draft bill.
- Study the implementation and assess the outcomes of an existing program.

Often the answers to these questions are not readily available because the research has not yet been conducted. But the first essential step is to ask the right questions. Only then will the necessary research follow.

## CHECKLIST: A TOOL FOR ANALYSIS

Check those principles and questions that apply to the particular program or policy.

- 1. **FAMILY SUPPORT AND RESPONSIBILITIES: Policies and programs should aim to support and supplement family functioning and provide substitute services only as a last resort.**
  - How does the proposal (or existing program) support and supplement parents' and other family members' ability to carry out their responsibilities?
  - Does it provide incentives for other persons to take over family functioning when doing so may not be necessary?
  - What effects does it have on marital commitment or parental obligations?
  - What effects does it have on adult children's ties to their elderly parents?
- 2. **FAMILY MEMBERS AND STABILITY: Whenever possible, policies and programs should encourage and reinforce marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, especially when children are involved. Intervention in family membership and living arrangements is usually justified only to protect family members from serious harm or at the request of the family itself.**
  - What incentives or disincentives does the policy or program provide to marry, separate, or divorce?
  - What incentives or disincentives are provided to give birth to, foster, or adopt children?
  - What criteria are used to justify removal of a child or adult from the family?
  - What resources are allocated to help keep the family together when this is the appropriate goal?
  - What services are provided to help family members living apart remain connected and, if appropriate, come together again?
- 3. **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND INTERDEPENDENCE: Policies and programs must recognize the interdependence of family relationships, the strength and persistence of family ties and obligations, and the wealth of resource that families can mobilize to help their members.**
  - To what extent does the policy or program design recognize the influence of the family context upon the individual's needs or problem?
  - To what extent does it involve immediate and extend family members in working toward a solution?
  - To what extent does it acknowledge the power and persistence of family ties, especially when they are problematic or destructive?
  - How does it assess and balance the competing needs, rights, and interests of various members of a family?

\*Adapted from *A Strategy for Strengthening Families: Using Family Criteria in Policymaking and Program Evaluation*. T. Ooms & S. Preister, Eds. A consensus report of the Family Criteria Task Force. Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar, 1988.

- 4. **FAMILY PARTNERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT: Policies and programs must encourage individuals and their close family members to collaborate as partners with program professionals in the delivery of services to an individual. In addition, parent and family representatives are an essential resource in policy development, program planning, and evaluation.**
  - In what specific ways does the proposed or existing programs provide full information and a range of choices to individuals and their close family members?
  - In what ways do program professionals work in collaboration with the families of their clients, patients, or students?
  - In what ways does the program or policy involve parents and family representatives in policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation?
- 5. **FAMILY DIVERSITY: Families come in many forms and configurations, and policies and programs must take into account their different effects on different types of families. Policies and programs must acknowledge and value the diversity of family life and not discriminate against or penalize families solely for reasons of structure, roles, cultural values, or life stage.**
  - How does the proposal or program affect various types of families?
  - If the proposed or existing program targets only certain families, for example, only employed parents or single parents, what is the justification? Does it discriminate against or penalize other types of families for insufficient reasons?
  - How does it identify and respect the different values, attitudes, and behavior of families from various racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds that are relevant to program effectiveness?
- 6. **TARGETING VULNERABLE FAMILIES: Families in greatest economic and social need, as well as those determined to be most vulnerable to breakdown, should have first priority in government policies and programs.**
  - Does the proposed or existing program identify and target publicly supported services for families in the most extreme economic or social need?
  - Does it give priority and preventive services to families who are most vulnerable to breakdown?

## THE CONSORTIUM OF FAMILY ORGANIZATIONS

Founded in 1977, the **Consortium of Family Organizations (COFO)** is composed of five national organizations working together to promote a family focus in public policy and social programs. In addition to other activities, COFO sponsors monthly family policy seminars held in Washington, DC, by AAMFT's Family Impact Seminar.

Members organizations of COFO are:

**The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT)** is the professional association for nearly 17,000 credentialed marriage and family therapists in the United States, Canada and abroad. The AAMFT Research and Education Foundation conducts research, education, and other activities that promote the well-being of marriage and family life. The Family Impact Seminar is the policy unit of the Foundation. Mark R. Ginsberg, Ph.D., Executive Director, AAMFT, 1717 K Street, NW, Suite 407, Washington, DC 20006, (202) 429-1825. COFO Representative: Steven Preister, D.S.W., AAMFT Deputy Executive Director.

**The American Home Economics Association (AHEA)** is an educational and scientific association of more than 26,000 professionals from various disciplines that comprise the field of home economics. Karl Weddle, Ph.D., Interim Executive Director, AHEA, 1555 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, (703) 706-4600. COFO Representative: Kathleen Sheehan, Director of Public Policy.

**Family Resource Coalition (FRC)** is a national organization representing thousands of community-based

family resource and support programs across the country. Bernice Weissbourd, President, 230 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1625, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 726-4750. COFO Representatives: Frank Farrow, (202) 371-1565.

**Family Service America (FSA)** is a network of more than 290 private, nonprofit, voluntary agencies in the United States and Canada dedicated to providing a wide range of services to families in crisis or with specific problems and needs. Geneva Johnson, President, FSA, 11700 West Lake Park Drive, Milwaukee, WI 53224, (414) 359-1040. COFO Representative: Patricia Langley, Director, FSA Office on Governmental Affairs, 1319 F Street, NW, Suite 606, Washington, DC 20024, (202) 347-1124.

**The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR)** is the professional association of scholars and practitioners engaged in research, dissemination, and practical application of the multidisciplinary study of marriage and family life, family life education and counseling, and public services for families. Mary Jo Czaplowski, Ph.D., Executive Director, NCFR, 3989 Central Avenue, NE, Suite 550, Minneapolis, MN 55421, (612) 781-9331. COFO Representative: Margaret Feldman, Ph.D., 1311 Delaware Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20024, (202) 554-0242.

**For further information:** COFO members rotate coordinators each year. For 1990, contact: Patricia Langley, COFO Coordinator, c/o FSA Office on Governmental Affairs, 1319 F Street, NW, Suite 606, Washington, DC 20024, (202) 347-1124. Insert, COFO Family Impact Questions Checklist, March 1990

# COFO Family Policy Report

The COFO Family Policy Report is a publication of the Consortium of Family Organizations (COFO), consisting of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), the Family Resource Coalition (FRC), Family Service America (FSA), and the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR). Formed in 1977, the nonpartisan Consortium is committed to the promotion of a family perspective in public policy and human services. Collectively, COFO comprises nearly 50,000 family professionals working with families in every state of the union, faculty members in every major university in the nation, nearly 300 family agencies and more than 2,000 family resource programs providing services to millions of families annually, and more than 10,000 volunteer board members.

The Report is published quarterly in the spring, summer, fall, and winter and addresses current legislation and programs that affect families. Correspondence and requests for subscriptions and back issues may be addressed to the COFO Coordinator, c/o FSA Office on Governmental Affairs, 1319 F Street, NW, Suite 606, Washington, DC 20004, (202) 347-1124. Subscriptions are \$12.00 annually.

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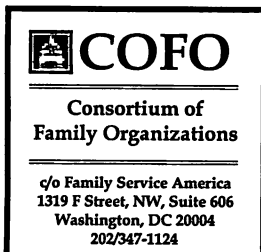
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The Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars assumed the mission of the Family Impact Seminar in 1999. Hard copies of reports can be ordered from the Institute. To order, contact Meg Wall-Wild, PINFIS, 1300 Linden Drive, Room 130, Madison, WI 53706-1524, by phone at (608) 263-2353, or by email at [wallwild@wisc.edu](mailto:wallwild@wisc.edu). For further information, contact Executive Director, Karen Bogenschneider or Associate Director, Bettina Friese by mail at the preceding address, by phone at (608) 262-4070 or (608) 262-6766, or email at [kpbogens@wisc.edu](mailto:kpbogens@wisc.edu) or [bfriese@ssc.wisc.edu](mailto:bfriese@ssc.wisc.edu)