

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT FAMILY-CENTERED POLICYMAKING

A Supplement to
COFO's Open Letter
to Presidential Candidates
and Public Officials

THE COALITION OF FAMILY ORGANIZATIONS:

- The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy**
- The American Home Economics Association**
- Family Service America**
- The National Council on Family Relations**

Formed in 1977, the nonpartisan Coalition of Family Organizations (COFO) is a consortium of four national professional and family service organizations committed to promoting a family focus in public policy and social programs. COFO's four organizations collectively comprise 60,000 family professionals working with families in every state of the Union.

PRO-FAMILY TALK IS NOT ENOUGH:

Family well-being must become a central concern of the machinery of government.

COFO's Open Letter challenges the Presidential Candidates and other public officials to institute governmental reforms that would make family well-being a central concern of policymaking. This supplement provides more detail on why such reforms are needed and what they would involve in a question and answer format.

Questions addressed are:

- What do people mean by saying a proposal is "pro-family"?
- What is "family policy"?
- What do we mean by a "family perspective" in policymaking?
- If government were to adopt a family perspective, would this result in too great an intrusion into family privacy?
- Can there be a consensus on the major goals of family policy?
- What criteria should be used to implement a family perspective?
- Once in office, to whom do policymakers turn for reliable information on families?
- What reforms are needed?
- Wouldn't these reforms simply create more bureaucracy and lead to costly new programs?

What do people mean by saying a proposal is "pro-family"?

For the last decade, the pro-family theme has been used as a political football. First the left, and then the right, claimed that they were the sole champions of family life. Now we are at a watershed. Across the political spectrum, many say that they are "pro-family" and use it as an attractive label to repackage old political agendas. "Pro-family" is being so watered down that it is simply coming to mean "pro-people". But while everyone is a member of some kind of family constellation, not every policy that affects individuals is family policy.

Furthermore, 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. There are isolated families and those with a great deal of social support. When a proposal is said to be pro-family, which of these kinds of families is it supposed to benefit? And what aspect of family life is it supposed to help? These are complicated questions that need careful study and debate.

What is "family policy"?

Some individuals and organizations use the term "family policy" to mean any policy that gives financial help to families with dependent children, such as increasing the tax exemption for child dependents. Others mean policies that ease the lives of working parents, such as provision of day care or parental leave policies.

But family policy is broader than this. *Family policy is fundamentally concerned about the family as the basic social institution.* Society depends on families to perform certain essential tasks throughout the life cycle which no other institution is able to carry out as well. The business of families can be grouped into four broad categories:

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

4. 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.

Of course, families are also important to individuals because they provide love, intimacy, affection and recreation, and they transmit cultural, religious and social values. And families provide support and refuge in times of crisis. But social policy is not usually directly concerned with these more intimate aspects of family life.

COFO recommends that the term "family policy" be confined to these four broad areas of social 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. **Child rearing:** 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.

To make this distinction clear, consider the Tax Reform Act of 1985. The Act does not fall within the domain of family policy simply because it lowers the tax rates for most individuals who happen to live in families. But a proposal to change the child care tax credit would be an example of family policy. Other issues that are included in family policy are welfare dependency, teen pregnancy, family planning, prenatal care, child support, divorce and mediation, long-term care, juvenile justice, family-oriented personnel policies, child welfare/foster care and family violence.

Many other current social problems, while not *primarily* family issues—such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, hunger and AIDS—have important, distinct family dimensions. These and many other basic areas of social policy—such as education, housing, health and mental health care—would benefit from a family perspective.

What do we mean by a "family perspective" in policymaking?

Currently, most public policymaking focuses solely on individuals who have a specific need or problem. But the individual's close family is often a part of the problem, is much affected by it and needs to be part of the solution. Policymakers should broaden their focus and take individuals' family context into account. In general, the most effective and efficient way to help a person in need is to involve members of the family so that they reinforce rather than undermine the goals of the program.

A family perspective in policymaking should 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 in maternal employment, the escalation in rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing and other family trends have had profound effects on society. 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.** 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 and never deal with family members and relatives. Program staff are not expected or trained to work with families, and such work is not usually paid for or reimbursed.
- **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 good health, treatment of illness, in children's school achievement and the creation of responsible, law-abiding citizens. When family members are involved in reinforcing, supplementing and sustaining the efforts of educators, health care professionals, social workers and court officers, these efforts are much more successful. But parents and relatives are seldom given the information, power or respect they need to ensure that they can work in partnership with 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 their success and cost effectiveness and not on family outcomes. There is a growing interest in assessing policy and program effects on family structure and functioning, but the methodology for doing so still needs, for the most part, to be developed (see Family Criteria Task Force Report).

If government were to adopt a family perspective, wouldn't this result in too great an intrusion into family privacy?

Most people don't realize the extent to which government decisions already affect almost every aspect of families' lives. As discussed, hundreds of federal and state programs, laws and regulations directly and explicitly affect family behavior and responsibilities. Others have indirect effects. Sometimes these policies provide useful support. But, often inadvertently, these policies can be destructive of family autonomy and integrity. Family members' wishes are not respected, their responsibilities are undermined and their rights are brushed aside.

If policymaking were to be more family focused, in some cases it would mean less government intervention, and in some cases more. Family-centered policy should support and supplement family functioning, not supplant the family. Prevention and support services that are made available at earlier stages in the development of a need or problem may help avoid the kind of massive intervention that results when the problem has become a crisis or chronic situation.

There are indeed many difficult and complex questions about the limits and manner of government intervention in family life. We believe these need to be carefully studied and widely discussed. A family perspective will stimulate such an informed debate, not stifle it.

Can there be a consensus on the major goals of family policy?

Family issues touch upon deeply felt values and beliefs. Some claim that the controversies engendered by family policy debates are too bitter to ever realize a consensus on broad policy goals and priorities. In our view, the politicization of family issues is a result of policy debates being dominated by special interest groups that greatly exaggerate the degree of disagreement within the public at large.

We believe there is now a broad agreement in our nation about the definition of the *problem* and the *general ends* that need to be achieved on many family issues. Understandably, disagreements arise most often over the *means* to obtain them. For example, conservatives and middle of the road Republicans, liberals and moderate Democrats, feminists and child advocates, all now agree that in order to be free to work, low income parents need some government assistance with child care. However, there is real disagreement on how large a role government should play in determining the type of child care for which the subsidies are used, and how large the subsidies should be.

A broad consensus is emerging on many other family issues as well. For example, most Americans believe that absent parents should be required to provide economic support for their children; welfare mothers should be expected to become self-supporting; young teenagers should delay sexual activity; and employers should modify work schedules and fringe benefits to mesh better with family responsibilities.

What criteria should be used to implement a family perspective?

A Family Criteria Task Force, made up of representatives of COFO and other individuals, worked for a year to draw up goals and principles to serve as criteria for family-centered policymaking. Although its members' political orientation differed, the Task Force agreed on six broad family principles that should guide policymaking (see the Family Criteria Task Force Report). The Task Force's accomplishment suggests that Americans are ready to agree on a broad set of goals for family-centered policy. The six principles developed by the Task Force are:

1. The *first* presumption of policies and programs should be to support and supplement family functioning, rather than to create substitutes for the family.
2. Policies and programs should encourage and reinforce family, parental and marital commitment and stability, especially when children are involved.
3. Policies and programs must recognize the strength and persistence of family ties, even when they are problematic.
4. Policies and programs must treat families as partners when providing services to individuals.
5. Policies and programs must recognize the diversity of family life.
6. Families in greatest economic and social need, and those determined to be most vulnerable to breakdown, should have first priority in government policies and programs.

In addition, the Task Force developed 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. For example:

- What incentives or disincentives does the policy or program provide to marry, separate or divorce; have or adopt children?
- What criteria are used in the policy or program to remove a child or dependent adult from a family? What resources are allocated to help keep the family together?
- Does the policy set inappropriate or unrealistic expectations for family members to assume financial and/or caregiving responsibilities for seriously ill or disabled infants, children or adults?

- Is the program equally accessible to families of various structures, life cycle stages or ethnic or cultural heritages?
- What efforts does the policy or program make to identify and target those families who are the most vulnerable and least likely to have other sources of support?

How would policymakers who agree that government needs a stronger family focus inject a family perspective in policymaking, and who could help them provide the information and expertise needed to do so?

Once in office, to whom do policymakers turn for reliable information on families?

Unfortunately, there are no authorized bodies or governmental units at the federal or state levels mandated to monitor, digest and synthesize family trends and developments and to assess their significance for policymaking. There are no individuals whose job is to advise the Department Secretaries, the White House or Governors about how a proposed policy is likely to affect families. Even though since 1981 there has been a Select Committee in the House of Representatives concerned with Children, Youth and Families, and a number of states have special councils and task groups to study families, none of these bodies has the broad mandate that is needed.

Nor is much help available in the private sector. Unlike other areas of national priority, such as the economy and the environment, there are no think tanks or policy institutes whose major activity is the study of families and family policy. The growing body of information about families and family-centered approaches is seldom tapped by policymakers.

On some family-related issues advocacy organizations have done a tremendous service in compiling statistics and recommending policy options. While these sources are always useful, public officials should not rely *solely* on them for several reasons.

First, these organizations usually represent only one part of the family, for example: the disadvantaged child, the parent, the abused spouse or the divorced father. Representing only part of the family does not enable them to balance competing rights and needs of different members within a family, or to consider the well-being of the family as a whole.

Second, many of these organizations have a distinct political point of view; they can be easily labeled liberal or conservative. They present family data and arguments in a form that buttresses their point of view.

What reforms are needed?

To make wise policy decisions that affect family life, policymakers need regular, objective information and dispassionate analysis. This should be provided by nonpartisan sources that undertake the following tasks:

1. To monitor, continuously and systematically, changing family trends and their implications for public policy.
2. To assess the impact of actual and proposed policies on family life.
3. To help develop and implement policies that are family-centered.

In other important areas of public policy such as the economy or the environment, a host of institutions both in the government and in the private sector are dedicated to providing this kind of information. We need new, similar family institutions in both the executive and legislative branches as proposed below.

Two analogous examples have helped shape our proposal: government's response to the environmental crisis and its efforts to ensure the health of the economy.

The idea of requiring family impact statements has attracted considerable interest. It was modeled on the environmental impact legislation enacted in 1974. Its goal—to encourage awareness of the impact of public decisions upon family life—has received widespread support across the political spectrum. For example, the majority of delegates to the 1980 White House Conference on Families voted to support the idea; President Reagan, in 1986, issued an Executive Order to require all federal agencies to review existing and proposed policies for potential impact on families; and Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) has proposed that family fairness statements be used in the U. S. Senate. However, none of these proposals has been implemented.

Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY) has suggested a second model that is more promising. He believes the appropriate analogy is the Full Employment Act of 1946, which set forth broad national goals for economic policy and established several new institutions to help policymakers achieve these goals, including the Council of Economic Advisors and the Joint Economic Committee.

Similar legislation should be proposed which sets forth broad goals for family policy and creates new institutions to provide the objective information and analysis needed to help achieve these goals and encourage a family perspective.

These institutions would gather together and analyze family information presently scattered throughout government agencies and in the private sector. They would coordinate with and supplement, not duplicate, the work of existing agencies. The institutions needed are as follows:

IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

● *National Family Commission*

Establish a National Family Commission as a permanent, independent agency.

Functions: To collect, synthesize and assess family information; conduct hearings and commission special studies; issue reports directly to the public; provide assistance to similar state bodies.

Authorized initially for a trial period of five years. Commissioners to be jointly appointed by the President and U.S. Congress; professional staff.

● *Council of Family Advisors*

Establish a Council of Family Advisors in the White House to report directly to the President.

Functions: To issue an annual report to the public on the state of families; provide timely advice on policy development and budgetary issues as they affect family life; coordinate closely with the Council of Economic Advisors, Office of Management and Budget and executive agencies.

Modeled on the Council of Economic Advisors. Three to five family experts appointed as advisors by the President; professional staff.

● *Executive Agencies*

Establish special family units within existing research and evaluation offices.

Functions: To serve as central coordinating point for reviewing the family impact of proposed and existing policies and programs; monitor the impact of changing family trends on department programs.

IN THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

● *Senate and House Select Committees on Families*

Establish a Special Committee on Families in the Senate comparable to the present House of Representatives' Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families but

the scope of both Committees should include family issues of adults and the elderly.

Functions: To conduct hearings and issue reports related to family policy; provide essential background for the work of the authorizing committees.

● *Congressional Family Research Office*

Establish a Family Research Office in the U. S. Congress.

Modeled on the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

Functions: To serve as a central congressional clearinghouse of family-related information; conduct studies and special analyses of family issues for the Select Committees and legislators generally; coordinate closely with CBO, and other congressional research offices.

Wouldn't these reforms simply create more bureaucracy and lead to costly new programs?

The short answer is no. The cost of these reforms is very modest and they do *not* create any new national programs. We already spend billions of dollars on programs that directly concern family life. But we spend virtually no money on asking whether these programs are working well for *families*, or how they can be improved.

Besides, evidence accumulates that family-centered programs do lead to reduced costs when, for example, expensive institutional care is avoided by providing more support for less expensive family-based care, when a marriage receives the help needed to avoid divorce, and when comprehensive services to young, very poor families result in healthier, better educated and more productive young adults.

The public decided to allocate resources to offices devoted to safeguarding the health of the economy and the environment. Surely, the health and well-being of the family are important enough to do the same?

In conclusion, reforms such as these need to be proposed, studied, debated and enacted. The Coalition of Family Organizations is ready to help. Contemporary family life poses challenges for public policy that can no longer be ignored. At present, families are everyone's concern but nobody's responsibility. Government must deliberately shoulder some of this responsibility. Pro-family talk is no longer enough.

For more information on COFO, its activities, quarterly newsletter and publications, contact: 1989 COFO Coordinator, c/o FSA Office on Governmental Affairs, 1319 F Street, NW, Suite 606, Washington, DC 20004, 202/347-1124.

Our *Open Letter* and this *Question and Answer Supplement* draw considerably upon two publications which develop some of these ideas in more detail. In addition, each has extensive bibliographies. These sources are:

** Family Criteria Task Force. *A Strategy for Strengthening Families: Using Family Criteria in Policymaking and Program Evaluation*. Ooms, T., & Preister, S., eds. Washington, DC: The Family Impact Seminar, AAMFT Research and Education Foundation, 1988.

Ooms, T., & Johnson, A. S. *Taking Families Seriously: A Challenge for Social Policy*. Monograph commissioned by the Project on the Federal Social Role. Forthcoming.