



Strengthening Marriage



Encouraging Fatherhood



Protecting Children



Honoring Elders

PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST

Twenty-One Policy Recommendations
to Strengthen Michigan Families

for the 94th Michigan Legislature

Thank you for your interest in the work of Michigan Family Forum and our “Putting Families First” agenda.

As the Legislature begins its 94th legislative session, there are many issues competing for your time, attention and state funding. Addressing key social issues such as education, crime, substance abuse and the economy will continue to be a high priority.

However, there is one issue - the breakdown of the family - that must be considered if we are serious about securing Michigan’s future. In fact, the decline of the family has played a significant role in virtually every major social problem facing our state.

That’s why we have prepared this agenda - to help you focus on practical ways to strengthen Michigan’s families. We have tried to design proposals that can win bi-partisan support in each area of focus - strengthening marriage, promoting fatherhood, protecting children and honoring elders. As we strengthen the family, we will positively impact a host of pressing social problems and reduce our need for government services.

We hope you will give careful consideration to each of these proposals. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or need further information.

We look forward to working with you in the months ahead!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brad Snavelly". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brad Snavelly
Executive Director



PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST

The 94th Michigan Legislature faces many critical challenges. High on this list should be concern over the state of marriage and the family. It is the condition of these important institutions that will determine the health of our communities and the well-being of our children.

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan remarked that the most significant change in America during his forty-year political career had been that “the family structure has come apart all over the North Atlantic world” and that it had happened “in an historic instant.” In just forty years, single parent households tripled, cohabitation increased eleven times, and unwed child-bearing jumped six times. Tragically, these trends have in turn led to unprecedented numbers of absent fathers. Today, over 50 percent of children can expect to spend part of their childhood in a home without their biological father.

Michigan has also been impacted by the decline in family stability. According to the Michigan Department of Community Health, 37 percent of all children are now born to unmarried parents. Twenty-six counties reported out-of-wedlock birth rates of 40 percent or higher, with one exceeding 54 percent. We do not highlight these facts to disparage single parents, but rather to point out the inevitable societal consequences of these trends. For example, research has proven that children who grow up without both parents tend to have poorer education outcomes, engage in more criminal activity, and have poorer mental and physical health.

But we do have hope for our future. There is an emerging public consensus about the critical role that marriage and family structure play in our society. According to a recent poll, 87 percent of Michigan voters are concerned about the current state of marriage and 62 percent think we should be actively seeking solutions. In addition, local marriage and fatherhood initiatives are engaging more people in community-based efforts to foster healthy marriages and reconnect fathers to their children.

At Michigan Family Forum, we believe that the family is the best place to raise our children as well as care for our aging parents. Throughout this legislative session, we will spearhead efforts to enact strong, family-friendly policies designed to strengthen marriage, protect children, promote responsible fatherhood, and honor our elders. We encourage lawmakers to take action on the recommendations that follow.

Strengthening Marriage

Encouraging Fatherhood

Protecting Children

Honoring Elders



Strengthening Families & Marriage

For decades now, the social sciences have provided clear and convincing evidence that not all family structures are equal. A marriage which is healthy and enduring enriches the couple, their children, and the community around them. Alternative living arrangements, broken families, and never-formed families are not as beneficial as healthy marriages, and they are frequently the cause of many of our social ills.

Marriage changes two people's lives, and society clearly benefits. Looking at the marriage vow, one sees that couples promise to remain faithful to one another and to support each other financially and emotionally. This mutual agreement removes a burden from society when spouses look after one another, particularly in times of sickness and old age.

Marriage yields significant dividends. Children of intact marriages tend to engage in risky behavior less frequently, do better in school, and have better mental and physical health than children from broken or never-formed marriages. Adults who are married tend to enjoy better mental and physical health, accumulate more wealth, and engage in risky or illegal behavior less often than unmarried adults. Finally, our senior citizens enjoy better support from spouses and children in their later years if they remain married. Clearly, society does benefit by marriage and rightly rewards married couples for the stability they bring to society.

Our state's public policy must actively work to help couples choose and succeed in building strong marriages. We recommend the following:

PROMOTE MARRIAGE EDUCATION

Incentives to encourage pre-marital education, marriage enrichment, and marriage counseling should be established. These incentives can be in the form of tax credits or, in the case of pre-marital education, reduced waiting periods or marriage license fees.

ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO RELIGIOUS COUNSELING

Michigan must eliminate outdated language which places restrictions on counseling by clergy and religious bodies. Current law prohibits clergy who are not employed by a church from engaging in marriage and family counseling. Many clergy who are retired or between jobs have provided these services for years and they can still legally marry couples. It is unreasonable to prohibit those who can officiate at weddings and have experience in marriage and family counseling from providing that counseling.

STRENGTHEN MARRIAGES BY MAGISTRATES

Public officials who are authorized to marry couples should be required to provide premarital education or to provide referral information to couples prior to marriage.

DEFINE OBJECTS OF MATRIMONY

Couples should be required to submit written objects of matrimony to the official solemnizing their marriage and to the county clerk. Michigan should allow couples to include legally binding steps to restore objects of matrimony, such as marriage counseling, in marriages where one partner alleges that the objects of matrimony have been destroyed.

PROVIDE MARRIAGE HEALTH BENEFITS FOR VETERANS

While virtually all marriages experience stress at some point, the marriages of military personnel undergo a unique stress that results in an unusually high number of divorces. Michigan should provide marriage education and preservation benefits upon the request of a veteran or veteran's spouse if they are experiencing marital stress.

EXTEND WAITING PERIOD FOR DIVORCES INVOLVING MINOR CHILDREN

Michigan should extend the waiting period to one year for couples seeking divorce if minor children are involved. If a party alleges that domestic violence has occurred, the current six month waiting period would apply. Longer waiting periods will work to give couples more opportunities while separated to seek reconciliation or to give the minor children an opportunity to adjust to the divorce.

TRACK PRE-MARITAL EDUCATION STATISTICS

Michigan should provide a “check off” area on the marriage application, the marriage license and a petition for divorce to indicate whether or not the couple has participated in a premarital education program. This “check off” will help the state determine whether or not premarital education is effective and it will serve as a reminder to the couple and the person officiating the wedding that the state considers premarital education important.



Strong families are important to the well-being of our children, and a healthy view of human sexuality is a key component of strong families. State and community leaders must work to ensure that the laws and policies of Michigan work to protect and promote public health by shielding children from the harms of divorce and unhealthy sexual influences. By shoring up laws governing sex education, restricting exposure to obscenity, and minimizing the negative effects of divorce, policymakers can give our most vulnerable citizens a better chance to build their own strong families.

We also need to look for ways to care for the most vulnerable children: those who are in the foster care system, born out-of-wedlock, or being placed for adoption. These children already have some circumstances in their life that will put them at a disadvantage. Michigan must work to place them in a home that will do the most to minimize or eliminate these obstacles. The debate is over - married parents provide the best environment to raise children. We must work aggressively to promote adoption and place more of these children in a loving, stable home with two married parents.

REQUIRE DIVORCE EFFECTS EDUCATION

Many states and counties require divorcing couples to attend a divorce effects program if they have minor children. This requirement recognizes that divorce can have a serious long-term impact on a child's life. While no program can eliminate the devastation a child experiences as his family disintegrates, it can help parents work to minimize disruption and to recognize and address behaviors and fears the child may exhibit as a result of the divorce.

PROMOTE PARENTING PLANS

Lawmakers should require a parenting plan to be in place before a divorce is granted to couples with minor children. Parenting plans would be developed in conjunction with a divorce effects program and would detail custody and decision-making arrangements regarding the children. The plans would be approved by the court but could be completed without the assistance of an attorney, greatly reducing the "my client must win" approach to divorce settlements.

ALLOW PRE-NATAL DEPENDENTS FOR TAX DEDUCTIONS

Michigan can reduce the tax burden on young families by extending tax deductions to unborn children if the mother is under the care of a physician. A pre-natal tax deduction will help offset many of the costs that are incurred prior to a baby's birth and it will serve as an incentive to seek pre-natal care.

ENCOURAGE MARRIED COUPLE ADOPTION

The legislature should direct state agencies to give priority to married couples as adoptive parents and should protect private adoption agencies from penalties if they choose to adopt a similar policy.

INTENSIFY ADOPTION EFFORTS

The mission of the Children's Trust Fund should be expanded to include adoption promotion efforts and to offset adoption expenses for babies of unmarried mothers. Additionally, the Department of Human Services and all agencies that receive family planning funding should be required to educate pregnant minors—particularly mothers that receive public assistance—about the process and the benefits of adoption for the baby and for the expectant mother.

PROMOTE ABSTINENCE

Promoting abstinence as the only method of family planning that is 100 percent effective in preventing pregnancy or STD's among unmarried individuals should be the primary objective of publicly-funded family planning programs. Every agency that receives public funding for family planning should be required to have all personnel who distribute family planning devices or information trained to promote abstinence.

PRESUME CHILD ABUSE/NEGLECT WHEN MINORS ARE PREGNANT

Law enforcement and child protection agencies should be required to presume child abuse or neglect when children under 16 are pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted disease. Current law requires a presumption for children aged 12 and under. Since a child who is under the age of 16 cannot legally consent to sexual intercourse, it is logical to investigate the circumstances.

REGULATE BILLBOARDS FOR ADULT BUSINESSES

Michigan should enact legislation to regulate outdoor advertising for sexually oriented businesses. In order to minimize the impact of these businesses on minors, signage should be limited to the business name, address, phone number and hours of operation. Adult businesses should not be allowed to display pictures and graphics, or list goods and services provided.



Encouraging Fatherhood

All children deserve a loving father who is actively engaged in their lives. Sadly, many children do not have such fathers. Some of these children do not have involved fathers because the fathers simply don't care. However, in many cases, it is because their fathers lack sound parenting skills or because obstacles prevent meaningful interaction. Some states and communities are working to remedy these dilemmas in order to reconnect fathers with their children. While Michigan has taken some positive steps in this area, there is much more that can be done.

CREATE FATHERHOOD TASK FORCE

Michigan should develop a Governor's Task Force similar to Fatherhood Commissions established by nearly a dozen other states. The Task Force would be charged with identifying and studying critical problems for fathers, ways to eliminate barriers to responsible fatherhood, and ways to stimulate a climate that encourages responsible fatherhood.

MAINTAIN LOCAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVES

Michigan needs to sustain funding for Fatherhood Initiatives under the administration of the Department of Human Services.

PROMOTE INCARCERATED FATHERS PROGRAM

The Department of Corrections should actively help parents, particularly fathers, remain involved in their children's lives whenever it is appropriate. Efforts should include programs designed to reconnect incarcerated fathers with their children, including parenting classes as a condition for parole. Additionally, amnesty for child support arrears should be conditional upon parolees maintaining support and involvement in their child's life after release. By appropriately screening fathers, reconnecting them with their children, and equipping them to become responsible fathers, Michigan could break the cycle of generational crime that often accompanies children of absent fathers.

ESTABLISH PUTATIVE FATHER REGISTRY

Michigan should establish a putative father registry in order to encourage child support and to protect the rights of fathers to be actively involved in the lives of their children. Failure to enroll in the registry is a presumption that the father has surrendered his parental rights. Such a presumption would speed the adoption process but could be reversed if the court were convinced that the father wants his parental rights restored and shows a desire to actively support his child.



Honoring Elders

The first children of the post-war “Baby Boom” generation are just entering retirement age. Providing for the needs of our rapidly aging society is one of the great challenges of our time. If we hope to meet this challenge without significant tax increases, we must start by encouraging and expecting families to play a greater role.

Our elders have great value as human beings regardless of physical and mental limitations. They deserve our care and protection. They are also our connection to the past. Sadly, too many suffer from loneliness and depression, feeling society has forgotten them. We can do better. We believe the family is the best place to care for these vulnerable members of our society. When families meet the needs of an aging parent or grandparent, we also benefit by learning lessons from the past that enrich our lives and those of future generations. Michigan should encourage families to plan and prepare for future needs, promote family care-giving, and foster inter-generational relationships.

ESTABLISH TAX CREDIT FOR IN-HOME ELDERCARE

Many adult children need help in order to provide in-home care to elderly parents. These families believe that multiple generation homes are healthier for everyone involved and they simply need financial assistance to make it work. New tax credits for families who provide in-home care should be available. These credits may actually save taxpayers money by reducing, or at least delaying, the higher costs associated with care in nursing homes.

DEVELOP TAX INCENTIVES FOR LONG-TERM CARE INSURANCE AND LONG-TERM CARE SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

Michigan residents should receive tax relief for taking responsible steps to provide long-term care for themselves and their family members. Michigan law already encourages such behavior when it comes to retirement, home ownership, and education. Long-term care should be treated in much the same way.

PROMOTE DIGNITY FOR OUR ELDERS

The legislature must work to create a system that promotes the dignity of the individual in their final years of life. Too often, families are unable to care for loved ones in a dignified or home-like setting. Even in long-term care facilities, regulatory mandates create barriers to dignity and place undue burdens on families and caregivers. The legislature must find unique ways to encourage inter-generational support that will reduce government dependency and foster a sense of community and purpose for individuals of all ages.



Strengthening Marriage



Encouraging Fatherhood



Protecting Children



Honoring Elders

OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE

MICHIGAN GUIDE TO ABSTINENCE RESOURCES

PROMOTING FATHERHOOD IN MICHIGAN:
A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR CIVIC, BUSINESS, AND NON-PROFIT LEADERS

SEX EDUCATION: RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN MICHIGAN LAW

MICHIGAN ADOPTION RESOURCE GUIDE

WHAT EVERY CHILD NEEDS: THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS

FAMILY POLICY BRIEFS

INFANT ADOPTION IN MICHIGAN: REVIVING A VANISHING PHENOMENON

ABOUT MICHIGAN FAMILY FORUM

OUR CORE VALUES

The family is the fundamental institution in a civil society.

Healthy, lifelong marriages are beneficial to adults and offer the best environment
in which to raise children and care for elders.

The involvement of responsible fathers is essential to the economic, emotional, and social health of children.

Children need the protection of stable families and a healthy understanding of human sexuality.

Elders deserve to have security and care provided by loving family members in a comfortable home environment.

© 2007 Michigan Family Forum

PO Box 15216, Lansing, MI 48901-5216 • Phone (517) 374-1171 • Fax (517) 374-6112

Executive Director, Brad Snavelly • Public Policy Director, Dan Jarvis

Communications Director, Jon Stanton • Graphic Design, Stefan Hull



Sound Public Policy for Stronger Michigan Families

MICHIGAN FAMILY FORUM
PO Box 15216
Lansing, MI 48901-5216

phone (517) 374-1171
fax (517) 374-6112
www.michiganfamily.org