



Strengthening Marriage



Encouraging Fatherhood



Protecting Children



Honoring Elders

Putting Families First

Seventeen Policy Recommendations
to Strengthen Michigan Families for
the 96th Michigan Legislature

Dear Friend:

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

As the State Legislature opens its 96th legislative session, there are many issues worthy of our time and attention. Balancing the state budget while addressing key social issues such as poverty, crime, education, substance abuse and economic development will once again present a great challenge for state leaders.

However, there is one issue - the fragmentation of the family - that must be addressed if we are serious about securing a healthy future for the next generation of Michigan citizens. In fact, the decline of the family has played a significant role in virtually every major social problem facing our state.

That’s the goal of this agenda - to help identify policies that will strengthen Michigan’s families. We’ve tried to design proposals that transcend partisan politics, focusing on four key areas of family policy - strengthening marriage, protecting children, promoting fatherhood and honoring elders. Working together, we can strengthen the family and positively impact our most urgent social problems while reducing the need for government services.

We hope you will give some time and thoughtful consideration to 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 Snavely". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brad Snavely
Executive Director



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. This mutual agreement removes a burden from society when spouses look after one another, particularly in times of sickness and old age. Marriage also changes our behavior in ways that make both parties happier, healthier and better off financially.

Marriage dividends are significant. 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 and 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. Our public policy must actively work to help couples choose and succeed in building strong marriages.

Marriage Education

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

Eliminate Barriers for Family and Marriage Counselors

Michigan law currently prohibits or hinders individuals who want to become marriage and family life counselors from participating in the profession. These barriers must be removed in order to allow service providers, specifically clergy and mental health professionals, the opportunity to assist individuals and families in need of professional family life education.

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. It will also signal to the couple and the person officiating the wedding that the state considers premarital education important.

Amend No-Fault Divorce Law

Legislation making the divorce process a more equitable one should be enacted. A more flexible system that recognizes different family situations would allow for divorce in cases of mutual consent, in the best interests of the child or when one party acts in an egregious manner and destroys the “objects of matrimony.” In cases where only one party believes the “objects of matrimony” are destroyed, the state should take steps to protect the spouse that wants to preserve the marriage.

Allow Prenatal Dependents as 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 prenatal 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 prenatal care.



Honoring Elders

National trends show that the fastest growing segment of our population (85 years or older) will continue to increase as 77 million people enter their “golden years.” 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 caregiving, and foster intergenerational relationships.

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 intergenerational homes are healthier for everyone involved. They simply need financial assistance to make it work. A \$1,000 tax credit for families who provide in-home care should be available. With more than 70% of residents in nursing homes receiving taxpayer support for their care, such a credit is sure to save taxpayers money by reducing or delaying the higher costs associated with care in nursing homes.

Tax Incentives for Long-Term Care

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 group homes, regulatory mandates create barriers to dignity and place undue burdens on families and caregivers. The legislature must find unique ways to encourage intergenerational support that will reduce governmental dependency and foster a sense of community and purpose for individuals of all ages.



Protecting Children

Strong families are important to the well-being of our children and a married couple is a key component of a strong family. State and community leaders must work to ensure that the laws and policies of Michigan protect our children from the harms of divorce and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. By shoring up laws governing sex education, minimizing the negative effects of divorce and encouraging adoption by married couples, policymakers can give our most vulnerable citizens a better chance to build their own strong families.

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 parenting time 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.

Divorce Effects Programs

Many states and municipalities 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, they can help parents minimize disruption by recognizing and addressing behaviors and fears the child may exhibit as a result of the divorce.

Adoption Promotion

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 about the process and the benefits of adoption for the baby and for the expectant mother. This is particularly true for mothers that receive public assistance.

Child Support Security Act

A judge should be allowed to establish a “child support trust fund” when parenting time and support issues are settled. Under such legislation, a judge would have the option of taking one year’s support out of the marital assets and placing it with the Friend of the Court. If a support payment were late, the custodial parent could get the money from the trust fund and the court could then order the fund to be replenished by the payer. The trust fund protects the child and custodial parent from the burden of late payments.

Amend Sex Education Law

Because sex education is a value-laden subject, Michigan law permits parents to opt their child out of sex education programs without penalty. Lawmakers should encourage parents to take a more active role in educating their children in human sexuality by extending the opt-out provision to include release-time for students, allowing parents to enroll their child in a sex education program of their choice in an off-site location. The sex education reporting requirement also needs to be amended to include the cost of a sex education program and the number of hours a student participates.



Encouraging Fatherhood

All children deserve a loving father who is actively engaged in their life. Sadly, many children do not have such fathers. Some of these children do not have involved fathers because the fathers are absent or neglectful. 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. Michigan should follow the lead of these other states and help men become responsible fathers for their children.

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.

Local Fatherhood Initiatives

Michigan must sustain funding for Fatherhood Initiatives under the administration of the Department of Human Services. The legislature should require these initiatives to report outcomes to legislative leaders and committees.

Promote Incarcerated Fathers Program

The Department of Corrections should actively work to help incarcerated fathers remain involved in their children's lives whenever it is appropriate. Efforts should include programs designed to reconnect incarcerated fathers with their children and require parenting classes as a condition for parole for fathers. Finally, parolees should receive amnesty for child support arrears if they maintain support and remain involved 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 so 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 by the putative father that he wants his parental rights restored and he shows a desire to actively support the child.



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OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE

SEX EDUCATION AND MICHIGAN LAW: EVALUATING OUR SCHOOLS

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.

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