

Kansas Family Policy Council
Informational Hearing on Marriage
House Federal and State Affairs Committee
February 12, 2015
Presenter: Mary Wilkinson

Good morning and thank you for having me. I am here on behalf of Kansas Family Policy Council. KFPC is an educational, public policy organization working to strengthen families in Kansas. I serve as Vice-Chairperson on the Board of Directors. I am not here as an academic or a research expert. I am here as a wife, mother, and grandmother who cares deeply about our great state of Kansas and the families who live here.

I appreciate this opportunity to discuss this very important topic of marriage. Why does marriage matter? It matters because of children. Marriage fundamentally is about creating a link between mothers and fathers and their children. That link—living in a home with their married mother and father—gives children the best opportunity to flourish. As we have already heard, on average, children from married family households fare better than children from other family structures.

Kansas Family Policy Council convened a Marriage Task Force over a period of months in 2012 to study marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock childbearing. Today I will use the report from that Task Force as the main focus of my presentation.

While serving on the Marriage Task Force, I spent many hours, days, and weeks studying every article and study that I could find about marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and unwed childbearing. The Task Force wanted to find out what public policy initiatives were being discussed or implemented across the United States in addition to utilizing the research and statistics. The report titled “Marriages Fortify Families” showcases our findings and recommendations.

On your outline, you will find a summary of some of the problems related to the breakdown of marriage. I will be referencing the correlating page numbers in the report for you to note and read.

Problems and Task Force Findings:

- 1) Two few marriages, too many divorces—see page 4-5, numbers 1, 2, and 3 (divorce, cohabitation, unwed childbirth); page 6, number 11. Right here in Kansas, 8,243 minor children were affected by divorce in 2013. In 2012, the number was 9,108. In 2011, the number was 9,885. These numbers represent living, breathing babies, toddlers, children, and adolescents, whose world falls to pieces when their parents divorce (KDHE statistics on divorce and marriage).
- 2) Taxpayer costs too high and rising—see page 5, number 4 (A 2012 special report from the Heritage Foundation by Robert Rector, “Marriage: America’s Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty” shows that the numbers are even higher now. In the fiscal year 2011, three quarters of welfare assistance, or \$330 billion, went to single parent families.)
- 3) Children unprotected and at risk—see page 6, number 5
- 4) Divorce laws and judicial policy on divorce function more to facilitate divorce with little help toward reconciliation—see page 6, numbers 8, 9; page 8, Counseling Resources; (page 31, the Minnesota model legislation for a reconciliation program)
- 5) Lack of knowledge and understanding by parents and society at large about the effects of divorce, especially on children—page 6, numbers 5, 6, 7, 12
- 6) Spouses who oppose the divorce have little recourse and a lot to lose—page 6, number 14 (the reluctant respondent can lose their income, home, children, and their lifestyle)

Task Force Recommendations:

- 1) Community Based Initiatives
- 2) Public Policy
- 3) Legislative Proposals, pp. 10-15
 - a. Waiting Period
 - b. Pre-filing Notification
 - c. Pre-filing/Post-filing Education
 - d. Pre-marital Education
 - e. Marriage Education Handbook
 - f. Bifurcation/Mutual Consent

- 4) Creation of a Marriage Policy Institute
- 5) Ideas from the Institute for American Values “State of Our Unions”
- 6) Appendix—Model Legislation

“The Marriage Index” from the Institute for American Values and The National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting:

- 1) Ideas to improve Marriage Indicators, pp. 13-21 (note especially pp. 17-20)

It is clear that broken families as a result of divorce, cohabitation, and unwed childbearing may well be the greatest challenge that our state faces. The effects of broken families spill over into every part of public and private life including government agencies, schools, childcare, healthcare, the criminal justice system and civil courts, and in our own personal lives and families. Our state, our communities, our schools, and our businesses are only as strong as our families. We owe it to the thousands of children affected by divorce each year to find ways to encourage and protect marriage. To each one of them, it means the world.

Mary Wilkinson is currently the Vice-Chairperson of Kansas Family Policy Council, and serves as a friend and mentor to an unwed mother of two at the Lady Bugg House in Wichita, KS. Her background includes a decade of work experience in emergency nursing and quality assurance, and over two decades of experience working with various non-profit organizations. More recently, she served on the Governor’s Task Force on Childhood Poverty in 2012-2013. Her favorite chosen occupation is to care for her own family and home.