

Mr. Chairman, Senator Santorum and members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today. My name is Julie Baumgardner. I am the President and Executive Director of First Things First, a community based nonprofit initiative dedicated to strengthening marriages and families based in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I have been asked to talk today about our community initiative and the work we are doing to build strong marriages and families.

I will share with you why and how we launched this initiative, our progress and lessons learned.

Why was First Things First Started?

While Chattanooga has prospered economically the health and well being of our families has not kept pace. Divorce and out-of-wedlock births are compromising the future prosperity of Chattanooga's children. Clearly, a city and its families do not thrive on economic factors alone.

Chattanooga was a city looking for leadership to help anchor its most basic beliefs. Our situation is a bit of a mystery. Not only do we have economic growth we have great values. Illustrative of this point is that while 95 percent of Hamilton county residents agree that the family is the main building block of a healthy society, 33 percent of the population have been divorced. The national average is 22 percent. Divorce affects 21,000 households in Hamilton County. According to a survey conducted by the Barna Research Group in March 1997, 84 percent of the Hamilton County residents surveyed agree that sex outside marriage is not a good idea. However, 50.4 percent of all births in 1994 in Chattanooga were to unwed mothers – the 5th highest unwed birth rate of 128 cities in the nation. Moreover, 44 percent of the community surveyed did not find out of wedlock births troubling. (21.4 percent is the Anglo-American rate and 74.6 percent is the African-American unwed birth rate.)

The basic non-economic problems in the Chattanooga area orbit around one concern: the family.

Chattanooga was looking for leadership and a way to help its citizens live according to what they believe is important.

Currently, there are 124,444 households in Hamilton County. 40,305 households (32 percent) have children under 18; 11,012 households (27.3 percent) are female-headed; 2,386 (5.9 percent) are male-headed; and 26,494 (65.7 percent) are two-parent households.

Social scientists have demonstrated conclusively that divorce, out of wedlock births, and lack of fathering contribute to poverty, poor achievement in school and throughout life, greater crime, greater drug abuse, lower mortality, poorer health, and a litany of social ills. According to research:

- four out of five children will not grow up with an intact family by the year 2010.
- typically, the household income of a divorced family declines 37 percent.
- divorce and unwed childbearing create higher costs for taxpayers due to higher rates of crime, drug abuse, education failure, chronic illness, child abuse, domestic violence and poverty¹
- the likelihood that a young male will engage in criminal activity doubles if he is raised without a father and triples if he lives in a neighborhood with a high concentration of single parent families²
- children whose parents remain married experience better health, fewer developmental problems and are less likely to be depressed.³
- overall, 77 percent of all children suffering from long-term poverty come from broken or never-married families. Only 22 percent of children experiencing long-term poverty come from intact married families.⁴
- approximately 65 percent of second marriages end in divorce⁵

¹ The Marriage Movement, Institute for American Values, 2000

² Underclass Behaviors in the United States 1993

³ “The Positive Effects of Marriage” Patrick F. Fagan, Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, and America Peterson

⁴ National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979-2000

⁵ National Association of Stepfamilies

What is First Things First ?

A group of concerned community leaders realized in April of 1997, that in order to change the culture it would take more than just economic development but an effort to strengthen the true infrastructure of our community, the family. First Things First was created in recognition of family breakup and its impact on our community. It was designed as an experiment to see if it was possible to change attitudes and behaviors, to reverse the spiraling divorce and out-of-wedlock pregnancy rates, and to re-engage fathers in the lives of their children. The new initiative was unveiled at a news conference in August 1997.

First Things First is a community based, grassroots initiative dedicated to strengthening marriages and families through education, collaboration and mobilization.

FTF uses credible research to identify and understand significant issues facing Chattanooga's families; identifies values-based solutions and evaluates the impact of these solutions in our community; and builds broad public support for these solutions through strategic use of media, educating community leaders and concerned citizens, training and effective partnerships.

In an effort to reverse the trends of destructive relationships and strengthen the infrastructure of our community, First Things First advocates for strong, healthy, lifelong marriage; promotes the activity of both a father and mother in the lives of their children and works to prevent out of wedlock pregnancies. FTF and its supporters strive to positively change attitudes and behaviors about marriage and divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and fathering. We are a secular organization based on Judeo-Christian values that works with sacred and secular, public and private entities. We utilize a prevention approach.

FTF has three goals: to reduce divorce and out of wedlock pregnancies by 30 percent and to increase father involvement in the lives of their children by 30 percent.

What Can be Done at the Community Level to Strengthen Marriage?

Research commissioned by First Things First indicated that:

- people wanted to have strong marriages and be engaged parents, but felt ill equipped to do so.
- 69 percent of Hamilton Countians agree that, in most cases, children who are raised in a home with their married, natural parents will grow up to be more stable emotionally than will children raised by one parent.
- Nine out of 10 Hamilton County residents disagree with the statement: “Marriage is an old-fashioned, outmoded institution.”
- The message from the vast majority of Hamilton Countians is that marriage is worth preserving, even when it takes some work. More than four out of every five people say that a couple unhappy in their marriage should “remain together and work to re-establish the love they once felt,” while only 15 percent said that the same unhappy couple should “get a divorce.”
- When asked which of these points of view came closest to their own point of view, more than two-thirds of Hamilton County adults said marriage should be considered a promise “til death do us part,” while nearly one-fourth said marriage should be considered a promise “as long as love shall last.”
- Those who participated in premarital counseling are more likely to see divorce as bringing its own set of problems, while those who did not participate in counseling are more likely to see divorce as a positive step to a better life.⁶

National research shows that 85 percent of Americans say they plan to marry at some point and time. The bottomline is that people in our community were telling us that marriage mattered to them and they wanted to know how to make it work. This being the case, First Things First strategically set out to change the culture in our community through a multifaceted approach. We have worked diligently to provide couples, individuals, families, professionals, and community agencies with quality educational resources to build stable, healthy, long lasting marriages and families.

- Professional training helped us build capacity among professionals in our community including clergy, mental health workers, educators, caseworkers, etc.

⁶ Wirthlin Worldwide, 2002

- Community wide trainings provided opportunities for individuals to be equipped with the skills necessary to forge a long lasting, healthy marriage.
- Public service announcements with thought provoking messages were aired to keep the message in front of people that marriage does matter, fathers are important, and waiting to have sex until you are married is best.
- Staff began educating the masses about the affects of divorce, out of wedlock births and fatherlessness on our community through speaking engagements, classes at places of faith, civic organizations, PTA meetings, neighborhood association meetings, high schools, colleges, etc.

Since 1997, literally thousands have benefited from trainings we have held. Here is a listing of some of the trainings in which community professionals and citizens have participated:

- Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program – training for professionals and couples.
- Marriage for a Lifetime – Gary Smalley – Training for couples and churches.
- Keeping Love Alive – Michele Weiner Davis – training for professionals and couples.
- Strengthening Stepfamilies – Elizabeth Einstein – training for professionals and families.
- Pre-marital education classes, secular and faith-based, for couples preparing for marriage or re-marriage.
- Community mobilization training – education for the masses about how divorce, out of wedlock births and fatherlessness impact our community and what they can do in their own sphere of influence to affect change.
- Smart Stepfamilies – Ron Deal – training for stepcouples.
- Taking Back Your Kids – training for educators and parents.
- Conducted trainings for approximately 200 communities across the country interested in creating healthy marriage initiatives.
- Presented keynotes and workshops at the international Smart Marriages conference for the past four years about community healthy marriage initiatives.

- Stepfamily Support Group Facilitator Training – Dick Dunn – training for churches interested in starting stepfamily support groups.
- Marriage Savers mentor training – Mike McManus – training for churches and mentor couples.
- Hamilton County Divorce Education and Mediation Program – our program ended up going statewide – training for parents who have filed for divorce.
- Instrumental in the development of the national *Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles*.
- Exhibited at Bridal Fairs to reach 1,000 brides to be with information they should consider before they marry.
- Sponsored marriage teleconference with Gary Smalley, Kevin Leman, Dennis Swanberg, Les and Leslie Parrott and Chuck Swindoll – marriage enrichment for couples.
- Facilitated the organization of the African American Marriage Initiative to assist African American churches with marriage education opportunities. There are currently 23 churches participating in this initiative.
- Sponsored the African American Marriage Initiative Couples Conference – training for married and single African Americans.
- Sponsored Adult Children of Divorced Parents seminar.
- Provided numerous marriage enrichment opportunities for area churches.

Impact on the Community

Many people believed that First Things First would fail because people were not interested in hearing about efforts to strengthen their marriage. The response was totally opposite. Since our launch in 1997, the phones have not stopped ringing and people continue to come to our trainings.

The latest local research shows that since 1997 we have seen a 27.2 percent decrease in divorce filings and a 22.6 percent decrease in teen out of wedlock pregnancies. We have experienced a slight decrease in out of wedlock pregnancies in women age

20-44. We have seen a significant increase in father involvement in the lives of their children.⁷

I have seen first hand the impact that First Things First has had on this community. Last year we presented a seminar on Adult Children of Divorced Parents. It was almost overwhelming to see the response from attendees. This is what one couple shared with us on their evaluation:

“We planned to file for divorce last week, but decided to wait until after the seminar. After attending, we really feel like we gained insight into why things are off track in our marriage. We have decided not to file for divorce and are going to focus on making our marriage work.”

We teach a fathering/relationship class in the Hamilton County Jail. Initially, we planned to focus on fathering with these men. However, we were surprised to find that many of them were married and openly talked about struggling with this relationship. Instead of giving them a lot of theoretical information we teach them skills. This eight-week class currently has a waiting list. Men say that it is the best class they have ever had. No one had ever taught them this information. They have told us that this class has given them a second chance with new tools to strengthen their relationship with their wives and children.

More couples preparing for marriage are attending our premarital education classes. One couple wrote this on their evaluation:

“We came to get a discount on our marriage license, but came away with excellent information. I plan on using the info on a daily basis.”

Nearly 500 people turned out for the African American Marriage Initiative couples conference. Here is one of numerous testimonials we received after one of the conferences:

⁷ US Census 2000, Hamilton County Clerks Office, Hamilton County Health Department and Tennessee Department of Health.

“My husband John and I have attended lots of Marriage Retreats over our 34 years but, this was absolutely the largest. We invited our son and his wife from Atlanta.. They have had some trials this year and the retreat was quite helpful. My husband thinks it was the best marriage retreat ever because the speaker was down to earth and didn't use a lot of psychological jargon in his presentation. I think it was the best ever because it allowed the couples time together by ending at 9:00 p.m. and not starting before 9:00 a.m. Also, the conflict resolution stood out with me because that is very much a part of my job as counselor. I am going to ask my pastor to become a church affiliate.”

These are just a few examples of the feedback we get from people all the time.

What is the community response?

Based on the response we have seen since 1997, people are hungry for information about how to have a healthy, strong, long-lasting marriage. Knowing where to go to find this information is critical. If we are going to make a lasting impact in our community, then citizens, businesses, places of worship, schools, agencies, government, media, and others have to make it their business to help people find the resources to achieve their goal of building a strong marriage and family.

Lessons Learned

I think the most important lessons we have learned are:

- Changing culture takes time and commitment.
- Strategic partnerships are critical. First Things First partners with more than 100 groups both locally and nationally. Government agencies in Hamilton County partner with us on a regular basis.
- When a couple divorces, their children are at significantly higher risk for divorce. This one divorce has the potential to negatively impact generations. If we can help one couple keep their marriage on track, we are potentially affecting generations to come in a positive manner.

How Can Government Help Strengthen Marriage?

I think the real question is how can government not be involved in helping to strengthen marriage when research shows that high rates of family fragmentation generate substantial taxpayer costs. *The Marriage Movement: a Statement of Principles* report released in 2000, states that divorce and unwed childbearing create substantial public costs paid by taxpayers. Higher rates of crime, drug abuse, education failure, chronic illness, child abuse, domestic violence and poverty among both adults and children bring with them higher taxpayer costs in diverse forms: more welfare expenditure, increased remedial and special education expenses, higher day care subsidies, additional child-support collection costs, a range of increased direct court administration costs incurred in regulating post-divorce or unwed families, higher foster care and child protection service costs, increased Medicaid and Medicare costs, increasingly expensive and harsh crime-control measures to compensate for formerly private regulation of adolescent and young-adult behaviors and many similar costs.

Learning how to navigate the road of marriage is every bit as important as learning how to drive. I can think of four things government could do right away to help strengthen marriage.

- Encourage couples who want to be married to take premarital education classes. Many caseworkers have long-term relationships with their clients. They should be an excellent resource for community classes and activities that will help their clients be better parents and marriage partners.
- Be willing to invest significant funding to emphasize the importance of healthy marriage and provide marriage education and enrichment opportunities through agencies such as Head Start, TANF, Children's Bureau, Community Services, Refugee resettlement, etc.
- Do away with the marriage penalty and other disincentives to marry.
- Sponsor major media campaigns to promote marriage.

I continue to be amazed at the number of people who tell us we are making a difference in the community. I believe that a huge part of this is because we are dealing with the

root of the problem instead of consistently putting band-aids on the symptoms. While we still need to address intervention issues with those who find themselves in the midst of distress, First Things First is committed to educating and equipping our community in an effort to change the culture for the benefit of future generations.