

The price of fractured families

By **Jeff Kemp**

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Marriage in America is in trouble. For many adults and young people, the marriage ideal of "happily ever after" sits in stark contrast to the fear of divorce. We call it the relationship recession — a cultural crisis with huge human and economic costs.

Does this mean a continued decline in marriage is inevitable? Or, is our culture poised for a marriage renewal and message of hope?



It is time to look at strengthening marriage as a community priority. Helping to reduce child poverty and the pain of fractured families in our communities is one of the most compassionate ways we can effectually build a strong future.

There are now 40 years of research that links fractured families to many of our most difficult social problems. The good news is that these same social trends have revealed to us what works and led to a growing consensus that marriage continues to be our most pro-child institution, and one of the best anti-poverty strategies we have.

For the first time, a national study has quantified the taxpayer costs of divorce and unwed childbearing. The numbers are staggering.

Top researchers and economists estimate that divorce and unwed childbearing cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$112 billion each year, making the cost more than \$1 trillion in the last decade. For Washington state taxpayers, the price tag is \$7.1 billion in the past decade. That translates to more than \$711 million each year, which is enough to hire more than 15,000 new public-school teachers in Washington state.

Ben Scafidi, economics professor at Georgia College & State University, and principal investigator of the report, "Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing," developed a methodology to look at taxpayer expenditures for anti-poverty, criminal-justice and education programs, and to assess lower levels of taxes paid by individuals who, as adults, earn less because of reduced opportunities as a result of having been more likely to grow up in poverty.

The methods and conclusions were peer-reviewed by 20 independent groups of academics and economists that included The Brookings Institution and Morehouse College. Overall, the \$112

billion figure represents a "lower bound" or minimum number. Sponsors of the report included the New York-based Institute for American Values, the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, the Georgia Family Council, and Families Northwest.

Recent studies, including "For Richer or for Poorer: Marriage as an Anti-poverty Strategy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, show that marriage can reduce poverty levels for single mothers anywhere between 65 and 80 percent. Saying "I do," for the right reasons, can also be the best way to avoid the burdens of poverty.

Behind all of these numbers are real people and their children. Every day, single parents are doing heroic jobs raising their kids, but we all know someone who has experienced the trauma of divorce. Too many children are growing up without the benefits of having both a mother and a father in the home.

With a trillion-dollar cost nationally, everyone is paying the price for fractured families. So, how do we turn the tide and offer hope to as many people as possible?

In Clackamas County, Oregon — the state's third-largest county — divorce rates have dropped by 15 percent over the past five years with the help of community-based partnerships and a Community Marriage Policy organized by Every Marriage Matters (EMM). Other nonprofit organizations are partnering with groups like EMM to support couples and provide tools for healthier relationships through marriage preparation, workshops, and marriage mentoring and training.

In Chattanooga, Tenn., similar marriage preparation and mentoring programs have helped to reduce divorce and teen pregnancy by 29 percent.

Throughout the Northwest, thousands of couples each year are entering marriage more prepared and better equipped to create a healthy, lifelong marriage through a successful and evidence-based marriage-preparation program known as Prepare/Enrich.

Solutions and community action are happening throughout the Northwest.

Anyone can write a new script and start over. Individuals, civic groups, businesses and the faith community have a role to play if we are going to have a marriage renewal in this country.

The goal to reduce divorce and unwed childbearing rates is not insurmountable. Marriage continues to be the most pro-child institution we have, and knowing now that divorce is hazardous to your wealth, a healthy marriage is truly priceless.

Jeff Kemp is president of Redmond-based Families Northwest (www.familiesnorthwest.org), the leading training organization for Prepare/Enrich and a key sponsor of "Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing."

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