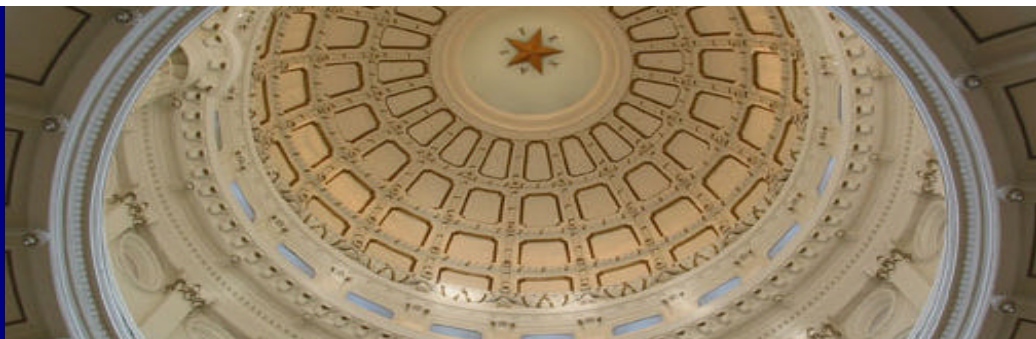


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Conservative Watch

The Newsletter of the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute

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TCCRI Begins New Task Forces

January 2004

Last interim, TCCRI conducted two very successful task forces focusing on major legislative issues: health care and the budget. Both task forces culminated in well researched and well respected reports. (To view a copy of the reports, please visit www.txccri.org/publications.) Both succeeded in educating legislators on these issues and most of the recommendations in the reports were signed into law in the 78th Regular session. Most notably, the findings of the health care task force resulted in HB 2292

The TCCRI has begun work on two of its interim task forces addressing the education finance debate and the recent trends toward the breakdown of the family. Both task forces meet monthly in Austin and feature notable authorities on these subjects from all

over the nation.

The TCCRI School Finance Task Force began in July under the leadership of Senator Florence Shapiro, and Representatives Linda Harper-Brown, Larry Taylor, and Bill Keffer. In an attempt to address the calls for additional money to be given to public schools, the task force began the process of shifting the focus to education reforms and improved efficiency. Just as the TCCRI State Finance Task Force did in its study of the state budget and opportunities for savings in preparation for the 78th Session, the School Finance Task Force aims to dispel the myth that there is nothing left to do but raise taxes or create new taxes in order to fund education.

The task force's work, to this point, has centered on education reforms by learning about the best practices of successful schools, workforce issues,

and accountability and assessment measures. Aided by education and policy experts, as well as the input of principals and teachers and other school district officials, the task force continues to explore areas of education reform that can improve student performance and better prepare student for higher education or entering the workforce. Ultimately, the task force plans to release recommendations that will help shape the kind of schools that will make Texas students among the best in the country in terms of performance and preparation for other pursuits after high-school graduation.

Additionally, the focus brought to school finance as a result of frustration with increasing property taxes will drive the task force to evaluate the finance structure of public educa-

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Texas Families First

From the time that Daniel Patrick Moynihan first raised the alarm about the consequences of family breakdown and the role government plays in fostering that breakdown, conservatives and liberals alike have acknowledged the problem without much success in preventing it. The result of so many broken homes has been a tragic increase in the number of broken lives. From the increase in drug addiction, to dependency on government, to rising numbers of

abandoned, abused and unwanted children, to the cycle of domestic violence and sexual assault against women, to the sometimes horrific conditions confronted by foster children, there is no question that the collapse of the American family is running a tragic course. It is a situation that must change.

But neither the piling of statistics nor documentation of horror stories has moved policymakers and concerned citizens to actually arrest the problem. It simply grows. We are treating the

symptoms but we are not getting to the root of the problem. Consequently, the number of government agencies -- and programs within agencies -- that deal with the symptoms of social breakdown proliferate. The Office of the Attorney, for one, while being the state's lawyer, is really more a social service agency. The Attorney General administers the Title IV-D Social Security program, most commonly known as child support collection, which accounts for two-thirds of

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Texas Families First

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the agency budget and nearly all its personnel. But the Attorney General is just one of many agencies similarly constituted. The Health and Human Services Commission, the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Workforce Commission, the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, and the Department of Corrections all in various forms touch the lives of people hurt by social breakdown.

While it is evident that a myriad of state and federal agencies -- and state and federal programs -- deal with these problems, no one has yet captured the full fiscal implications of social breakdown. The costs, where they are manifest, and just how many people access such programs is not known nor are the consequences understood. How many women, for instance, must apply for TANF because of uncollected child support payments? Furthermore, no one knows just how many needy people don't access these services and what would happen to the state budget if they did.

An entire social service delivery system has grown up around these problems and which subsist in large part from government funds transferred from the treasury to these valued non-governmental organizations. The problems confronted by foster children would be far worse without the existence of a group like CASA -- Court Appointed Special Advocates -- as would the lives of victims of sexual assault without the presence of the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault. These organizations, like so many others, play an invaluable role in helping the abused, abandoned and neglected; and they largely, to one degree or another, depend on government grants to meet the urgent needs of the victimized.

But the fact remains that policy makers have not fully grasped the fiscal consequences of social breakdown, and largely because of the limited worldview of many on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Conservatives have properly diagnosed the problem: the collapse of the family due to changing social mores and neglect of religious values has reshaped the structure of American society for the worse. Children living in single-parent households or with co-habiting adults have risen dramatically, contributing to a host of problems, like teen pregnancy and sexual abuse. Liberals, on the other hand, have done a superior job of working with, counseling and encouraging victims. Their exercise of compassion and good will must be admired, commended, and emulated.

Unfortunately, the Left tends to largely ignore, or worse, actually promote, the social currents and underlying philosophy that leads to the breakdown. One cannot simultaneously argue that divorce must remain socially acceptable and easily accessible while also insisting on responsible fatherhood, as many liberals do. The Right, while preaching about family values, rarely engages in helping repair the shattered lives that have come symbolize the norm faced by most Americans today. One cannot insist on the sanctity of

life while not extending the underlying value of that sanctity -- love -- to those demeaned and marred by family discord and dissolution, as so many conservatives readily do. The Right ignores the victims, while the Left ignores why they are victims.

Since there is such a conflict of vision between the Right and Left and their approaches so different to these problems, the logical way to begin a dialogue on this rather far-reaching and controversial subject is to begin in a place that all of us can agree: that the fiscal consequences of social breakdown are a chief budget driver and it is imperative that we understand the magnitude of the problem and discuss policies that can alter the trend. The growth of government, in many respects, tracks the rise in the number of broken homes. Elder care, for instance, was once a firm obligation of the family. Today, the elderly are wards of the state. Additionally, the more broken homes the more government must intervene in the lives of victims, particularly that of children, but that intervention has tremendous long-term risks.

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Conversely, if we can fix the home, we can certainly fix government to allow it to do what it must: maintain a system of justice, deliver public education and build roads. But it will take a real determination on the part of conservatives, principally, to actively engage in the lives of victims, to understand their plight and recommend changes to social and fiscal policy that can reverse the current and highly disturbing trends. This change must happen, as the brilliant and eminent social scientist James Q. Wilson has noted: "The right and best way for a culture to restore itself is for it to be rebuilt, not from the top down by government policies, but from the bottom up by personal decisions." But government policy does have a role, and that's why we are here. As Patrick Fagan of the Heritage Foundation put it, "It is time ... to implement policies and programs

that would help couples make a permanent commitment to each other and their children, and begin reaping the emotional, health, educational, social, and economic benefits of marriage."

Some of the people who have been on the front lines are actively engaged in this debate: Ben Bentzin and Sandra Martin who are active with the Children Advocacy Centers; Diane Rath who heads the Workforce Commission; Christine DeLay, who's dedication to foster children is an inspiration; Rep. Dan Gattis, who as a prosecutor, saw the perpetrators and victims in his office on a daily basis; Greg Phillips, who has the unenviable task of consolidating HHSC. Also, we can't forget Geanie Morrison, who is the rare conservative who did something for abandoned babies, and Arlene Wohlgemuth, who has done more than just about anyone to think clearly and act decisively in the area of fiscal and social policy.

(Taken From John Colyandro's opening remarks to TCCRI's Texas Families First Task Force)

TCCRI Task Forces (continued)

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tion in Texas. Beginning from the premise that there is money spent on education that could be redirected and spent more efficiently on education, the task force will set priorities for education funding just as budgeters did during the 78th Legislative Session. Additionally, the task force will set guidelines to be used in evaluating the many options floated to provide property tax relief, but which essentially shift the burden to other areas and methods of taxation.

The task force will continue its work until the issue is debated in a legislative session, regardless of when that session may occur. As a task force of the TCCRI, the conservative approach to public policy is central to the development of the recommendations that will come from this discussion. Bringing a conservative voice to the school finance debate is essential to the formation of sound public policy.

Texas Families First, TCCRI's task force on the fiscal costs of social breakdown, began meeting in October. Under the leadership of Representative Dan Gattis, the task force will examine the fiscal implications to the state of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, refusals to pay child support payments, child physical and sexual abuse cases, domestic violence and sexual assault. Taken separately, each of these problems is serious and demands resolution. Taken together, they represent a broad collapse of the family which also has a direct fiscal impact to the state.

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problems being addressed by the government. For this reason, the TCCRI intends to hold a comprehensive dialogue on the fiscal costs of social breakdown, recommend possible areas of legislative action to meet the challenges in the social and fiscal areas.

A significant amount of state appropriations originates from the need to combat and remedy the effects of social breakdown. For instance, the Attorney General's office has four programs solely related to ameliorating the effect of social problems: child support collection, crime victims' compensation fund, crime victims' assistance grants to groups such as TAASA and the Internet Bureau, which investigates child pornography.

The expenditure of state funds in these areas is indicative of disturbing cultural trends that fail to maintain respect for families, women and children.

Individuals from the private sector, representatives from government agencies, social service organizations and other interested parties will educate us as to the challenges faced by Texas families, women and children, and suggest ways the state can better address the root causes of those challenges. In short, Texas Families First is about gaining insight into social policy decisions that can produce a positive effect on Texas families, and alleviate pressure on the state budget.

Input and comments from friends of the TCCRI are always welcomed. If you would like to participate in these discussions, please contact the TCCRI.

Creating a Culture of Compliance: the Need for Child Support Collection

Speech By Casey Hoffman, CEO of Supportkids. Edited with permission by Lisa Hendee

The experts tell us that children who live in poverty are much more likely to experience poor physical health, poor emotional health, substance abuse, less success in school and finally, a greater likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system. Growing up poor causes unimaginable pain for our children. The formula for escaping poverty can be simple: a job plus a child support check plus day care will take a significant number of families above the poverty line and children of those families away from the liabilities associated with an impoverished lifestyle. If the child support check is one of the three elements that take children out of poverty, then we must have a government child support program that focuses on these children and their families. It is inconceivable that the

government's Title IV-D child support program as it is presently designed will ever be adequately funded to serve all the children.

An inadequately funded, technologically challenged, Title IV-D child support program with an overwhelming number of cases fails to sufficiently serve more than half the families in need of assistance. If the state cannot work effectively for half the families in need of enforcement assistance, then it must transform its strategy and actions so that the neediest families get help first and foremost. A change in the mission and a new way to measure success offer the best hope to the children living in poverty who could greatly benefit from effective child support enforcement.

We must implement a two-fold strategy to lever-

age government child support services to affect positive outcomes for children living in poverty. The strategy must first utilize a case valuation system that requires the government to first work the cases of children and families living in poverty or who are most vulnerable to falling below the poverty line. The case valuation system should address cases in the following order: families on welfare and/or Medicaid, families who have recently stopped receiving these benefits, families who have lived below the poverty line but have never been on welfare, and finally paternity cases with a named father. Obviously, the above families are most likely to be negatively impacted by a parent's failure to pay child support and the state should give their cases the attention they deserve.

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Working to Promote Healthy Families

By Diane Rath, Chair of Texas Workforce Commission

Recently, there have been concerns about the manner in which the Texas Workforce Commission (Commission) has implemented the provisions of HB 2292 regarding the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The Commission commends the Texas Legislature for enacting this landmark legislation that reinforces Texas' commitment to helping TANF recipients move from welfare to work.

Historically, Texas has been a pioneer in the development of progressive welfare policy. Prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, Texas enacted welfare reform legislation, HB 1863, in 1995 that recognized the responsibility for parents to adequately care for their families. As a result, Texas requires each participant to sign a Personal Responsibility Agreement (PRA) as a condition of eligibility for the TANF program. This agreement ensures that parents are caring for their families by maintaining their children's health and immunizations, keeping their children in school, abstaining from abusing alcohol or controlled substances, cooperating with child support enforcement, and preparing for and going to work.

Personal responsibility is a central element of the success of both state and federal welfare reform. In order to emphasize the notion of personal responsibility, the 78th Texas Legislature enacted HB 2292 that established a pay for performance model for the TANF program. As a result, the Commission adopted rules that add to the Choices work requirement activities that are essential to the health, safety, and well being of families under the Personal Responsibility Agreement (PRA). The revisions to the Choices rules require parents to take time to care for their families.

Parents can focus on work when their children are healthy. Any parent can attest to the fact that a sick child takes priority over work obligations. Research shows that sick children can cause parents to lose time from work. The result can be lost wages for the parent and lost productivity for the employer. When parents have the time to take their children to health and dental appointments and get immunizations, the child is more likely to remain healthy.

Parents can focus on work when they know their children are attending and succeeding in school. Parents who are worried about whether their children are in school or how they are doing in school are less likely to have success in the work-

place. Increasingly, employers recognize that when children do well in school, working parents seem to be able to better focus on their work responsibilities. Additionally, children who are better educated are more likely to lead healthier, more productive lives.

Parents who are able to abstain from substance abuse are more likely to realize success for their families. Substance abusers who seek treatment have a better chance to achieve economic success. Although many parents who abuse substances are able to function in a work environment, studies show that those who seek treatment are 50 -100% more likely to become employed after treatment. Further, the jobs they obtain tend to have more fringe benefits, lower risk of injury, and higher wages than the jobs of parents who don't seek treatment.

Innovative and effective policy has led Texas to achieve recognition from the federal government. Texas has received over \$72 million in High Performance Bonuses over the past four years for helping TANF recipients obtain employment and for family formation. Implementation of creative policies will continue to contribute to Texas' success in moving TANF recipients from welfare to self-sufficiency.

Child Support (continued)

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Along with a well thought out case valuation system, the state must implement a prevention strategy that will result in fewer families needing the help of government child support enforcement agencies. A successful and cost effective strategy that results in fewer families having to apply for government child support services will result in more child support enforcement resources for families living in poverty or on its brink. To realize this goal, the state must create a culture of compliance with respect to court ordered child support. About 80% of the people who pay personal income taxes in this country comply voluntarily because of fear of prosecution, costly economic penalties and/or public embarrassment. More parents would comply if they feared the same consequences associated with failing to pay court ordered child support. The state should also seek to remove some of the negative reinforcement that occurs because we do not always collect interest on overdue payments and consistently compromise the total amount due for arrears.

However, the state must go beyond actions that

support a culture of compliance through effective enforcement. Valuing the family and promoting stable family life are vital to the health and well-being of Texas children. We should not shy away from encouraging marriage and we need to offer resources to those families experiencing stress in their marriage. Valuing marriage also calls for a deliberative divorce process aimed at protecting children. Parents should fully appreciate the impact of separation and divorce on their children before it occurs. If parents still decide to proceed with the dissolution process, they should be counseled on how best to minimize the negative impact on their children post separation or divorce.

There is no question that tough enforcement supports the possibility of family. If you are dodging your court ordered obligation for child support, there is very little possibility of family. The same is true if there is non-compliance with visitation and access orders. Advocating that all court orders be honored and that the rule of law be followed supports valuing family. It is time for Texas to support its poorest families through effective enforcement and promoting stable family relationships.

TCCRI Names New Board Members

At the TCCRI September Board meeting, the board unanimously adopted a resolution electing new members to the Board of Directors. Joining the board are Senator Craig Estes, Representative Arlene Wohlgenuth, Representative Linda Harper-Brown, Representative Mark Homer, Eric Glenn of Humana and Christine Davis O'Brien of Astra-Zeneca Pharmaceuticals. Each of the new Directors have expressed interest in, and been active in the success of the TCCRI. The TCCRI welcomes these new Directors. For a complete list of TCCRI's Board of Directors, please visit www.txccri.org.

