

Professional Responses to Government-Endorsed Premarital Counseling

By: [Christine E. Murray](#)

Murray, C. E. (2006). Professional responses to government-endorsed premarital counseling. *Marriage and Family Review*, 40(1), 53-67.

Made available courtesy of Taylor and Francis: <http://www.taylorandfrancis.com/>

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Taylor and Francis. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.*****

Abstract:

This paper presents preliminary findings about the manner in which public policies that promote premarital counseling impact professionals who conduct premarital counseling. The purpose of this paper is to describe findings from a survey of premarital counseling providers in a state in which the government endorses premarital counseling. A total of 194 premarital counseling providers described their responses to their state government's endorsement of premarital counseling. Results indicated that a majority of providers held a favorable opinion of this policy, although a number of providers held either unfavorable opinions of the policy or were uncertain about the policy's effectiveness. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Family policy, premarital counseling

Article:

Approximately one-fourth of all marriages end within the first seven years (Pinsof, 2002). Recently, government officials have attempted to respond to increasing divorce rates and other family structure changes through the creation of policies designed to promote marriage and family life (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). Many of these policies encourage or require couples who marry to attend premarital counseling programs (Gardiner, Fishman, Nikolov, Laud, & Glosser, 2002). Although existing research supports the effectiveness of premarital counseling programs, there has been no conclusive, long-term evidence that proves that family promotion activities (e.g., premarital counseling) are effective with all populations (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Moreover, there is a great need for research examining the effectiveness and impact of marriage-promoting policies and activities (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004).

This paper presents preliminary research that examines the impact of premarital counseling-related public policies upon the practitioners who provide the services. Specifically, this article presents the findings from a statewide survey of premarital counseling providers who practice in a state (Florida) in which the state government implemented policies that endorse premarital counseling. The following two research questions guided the research described in this article: (1) What are the personal and professional characteristics of providers of government-endorsed premarital counseling? and (2) How effective do these providers believe that government-endorsed premarital counseling is in promoting healthy marriages? The respondents were all drawn from one state, thus the findings of this study will provide preliminary information about the impact of premarital counseling-related public policies upon service providers in Florida, which has these policies. The remainder of this study presents a review of research examining providers of premarital counseling, an overview of the public policy context surrounding this study, the methodology and findings of a state-wide survey of premarital counseling providers, and implications of the findings of this study for practice and future research.

PREMARITAL COUNSELING PROVIDERS

A limited amount of literature was located that examines the characteristics of providers of premarital counseling. Providers of premarital counseling may come from a number of professional backgrounds,

including clergy and mental health professionals (Stahmann, 2000; Wright, 1994). While the most common providers of premarital counseling are clergy (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1980), members of the clergy often refer couples to other professionals for premarital counseling services (Williams, 1992). The existing literature suggests that providers may differ according to their professional background. For example, members of the clergy may have minimal training in counseling skills (Williams, 1992). However, mental health professionals may be relatively untrained in preventive approaches to family intervention (Murray, 2005).

Jones and Stahmann (1994) conducted a nationwide survey of 231 clergy to examine their beliefs and practices related to premarital counseling. Respondents had an average of 17 years of experience providing premarital counseling, and they had seen an average of 8.1 couples for premarital counseling within the previous year. In general, the respondents felt that premarital counseling was very valuable, and most (94%) believed that premarital counseling should be required of all couples before they marry. Approximately, 50% of the survey respondents had not received any specialized academic training in premarital counseling. While these findings provide information about the characteristics of the providers of premarital counseling, no existing research was located examining providers' beliefs about premarital counseling-related public policies.

THE PUBLIC POLICY CONTEXT

Premarital counseling providers, like other professionals who work with families, are impacted by public policies that influenced affect family life. In recent years, federal and state government agencies have taken a proactive stance toward promoting healthy marriages and families (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). Marriage and family promotion policies may include marriage-related media campaigns, covenant marriages, special task forces designed to address family issues, incentives to attend premarital counseling, marriage license waiting periods, marriage handbooks, and marriage tax credits. For a review of specific state policies, see Gardiner et al. (2002). Marriage promotion policies implemented in Florida, where the survey described in this paper was conducted, are discussed below. Similar policies that exist in other states and the rationale behind public policies that provide incentives for couples to participate in premarital counseling are also examined.

In 1998, the state government in Florida passed the Florida Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act, intended to promote marital and familial health (Florida Statutes, 1998, Section 741.0305). This legislation provides incentives, including a reduction of the marriage license fee and a waiver of the 3-day waiting period to obtain a marriage license, for couples who attend a premarital preparation program. Premarital counseling programs should include communication skills, conflict management, financial responsibilities, and children and parenting issues. An approved premarital counseling program must also meet for a minimum of four hours and must be conducted by an approved professional. However, the Florida statutes do not mandate a singular curriculum content or format for premarital counseling programs, nor does the state provide training for premarital counseling providers as part of this legislation.

Providers of premarital counseling in Florida may register with the clerk of the court in their county. The Florida Statutes (1998, Section 741.0305) state that the following groups of people are eligible to become registered premarital counseling providers: licensed psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed marriage and family therapists, licensed mental health counselors, representatives from religious institutions, and any other providers who gain approval from the judicial system. In order to become a registered provider, an individual must provide the court system in his or her county with an affidavit that affirms the provider's credentials and that the provider's program meets the criteria outlined in the law. Upon completion of a premarital counseling program with a registered provider, participants receive a certificate or letter verifying their completion, which they present to the county clerk of court in order to be eligible to receive the incentives described earlier.

Beyond the incentives to promote premarital counseling, all couples who marry in Florida receive a marriage handbook at the time they apply for their license. This marriage handbook addresses several aspects of married life and outlines relevant laws related to marriage, families, and divorce. In addition to endorsing premarital

counseling and the marriage handbook, the Florida legislation established divorce education classes and high school education requirements related to marriage and family life.

In the area of marriage preparation, several other states have developed legislation that either encourages or requires couples to attend pre-marital counseling before they marry. Although the incentives and requirements vary across states, Florida's incentives for premarital counseling are similar to incentives offered in other states such as Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. In Minnesota, for example, couples can take a 12-hour course in order to earn a \$50.00 reduction in the marriage license fee (Gardiner et al., 2002; Parke & Ooms, 2002). By 2002, 13 state legislatures had considered incentives for couples to attend premarital counseling (Gardiner et al., 2002). In addition to national and state initiatives to promote premarital education and counseling, some actions have been taken at the local level. For example, in some communities, church representatives sign an agreement to offer rigorous premarital counseling to any couple they marry (Parke & Ooms, 2002).

Incentives such as those offered in the Florida statutes (1998) are designed to increase the likelihood that couples will attend premarital counseling. However, only about 30-35 percent of couples attend pre-marital counseling (Fraenkel, Markman, & Stanley, 1997; Olson, 1983). There are a number of reasons couples do not seek out professional intervention or education prior to marriage, including limited time availability, a lack of knowledge of the benefits of premarital education, and high costs associated with some programs (Fraenkel, Markman, & Stanley, 1997). Many couples also view marriage as private and do not feel comfortable in seeking out help (Fincham & Bradbury, 1990). In addition, Williams (1992) found that most couples feel prepared for marriage when they are engaged, which may render them less likely to feel a need for premarital assistance.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to learn more about the attitudes and practices of premarital counseling providers whose work is affected by public policy, a cross-sectional survey was conducted with a representative sample of premarital counseling providers in the state of Florida. All providers of premarital counseling who were registered with their counties as of September 9, 2003 were eligible to participate in this study.

Sampling Procedures

Systematic sampling was used to select a representative sample of potential participants for this study. Lists of registered providers in 51 of the 67 counties in Florida were obtained from the county clerk of court offices. Sixteen counties did not provide lists to the investigator upon request. A total of 1000 premarital counseling providers were selected into the sample. The investigator attempted to contact each of these individuals through electronic or regular mail and invited them to participate in the survey. Each potential respondent was contacted a total of three times. Of the 1000 providers selected into the sample, 210 respondents completed the survey. Two hundred and one respondents could not be contacted because their mailings were returned as non-deliverable. Therefore, the response rate for this survey, not including the mailings that were not deliverable, was 26.3%.

Instrumentation

Participants were asked to complete a 78-item instrument, the Pre-marital Counseling Survey (PCS), which was developed for this investigation. There are three sections included on the PCS. The first two sections address (1) providers' beliefs about which client characteristics impact the degree to which couples benefit from premarital counseling and (2) the topics providers believe are important to address in premarital counseling. The findings based on these two sections of the PCS have been presented elsewhere (author citations). The final section on the PCS includes 15 questions that ask respondents to provide information related to their demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnic background, religious affiliation, and educational attainment), premarital counseling practices (e.g., years of experience providing premarital counseling, type of training received, and practice setting), and professional back-grounds. In addition, this section includes an open-ended question that states, "How effective do you believe the Florida government's endorsement of premarital counseling is in promoting healthy marriage and reducing the divorce rate?"

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved calculating the frequencies and percentages of each of the provider characteristics. In addition, Chi-square tests were conducted to determine if providers of different professional orientations differed based on any of the other characteristics measured. To analyze the qualitative data gathered through the open-ended question, content analysis procedures were used.

RESULTS

Providers' ages ranged from 26 to 83, with an average age of 55.28 years (SD = 10.83). A percentage of 86.76 respondents were men, and 13.24% of the respondents were women. Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of participants' ethnic backgrounds, professional affiliations, highest levels of educational attainment, and religious affiliations. As demonstrated in Table 1, the majority of the sample (80.1%) was Caucasian, and most identified their primary professional affiliation as clergy (81.46%).

TABLE 1. Participant Demographics (Ethnic Background, Professional Affiliation, Highest Educational Attainment, and Religious Affiliation)

	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Ethnic background</i>		
African American	29	14.43
Asian American	2	1.00
Caucasian	161	80.10
Hispanic	7	3.48
Native American	6	2.99
Other	3	1.40
<i>Professional affiliation</i>		
Clergy	167	81.46
Family life educator	1	0.49
Clinical social worker	2	0.98
Marriage and family therapist	7	3.41
Mental health counselor	10	4.88
Psychologist	3	1.46
Other church representative	6	2.93
Teacher	4	1.95
Other	5	2.44
<i>Highest educational attainment</i>		
High school diploma	4	1.99
Some college	12	5.97
Associate's degree	4	1.99
Bachelor's degree	27	13.43
Some graduate school	11	5.47
Master's degree	79	39.30
Specialist degree	9	4.48
Doctoral degree	55	27.36
<i>Religious affiliation</i>		
None	2	0.99
Baptist	54	26.73
Jewish	3	1.49
Lutheran	12	5.94
Methodist	24	11.88
Non-denominational Christian	21	10.40
Pentecostal	10	4.95
Presbyterian	12	5.94
Roman Catholic	23	11.39
Other	26	20.30

Notes: Number of respondents for which data were missing in each category: 9, ethnic background; 5, professional affiliation; 9, highest educational attainment; 8, religious affiliation. For ethnic background, respondents could select more than one ethnic background, so the sum of the percentage is greater than 100%.

Providers had an average of 19.44 years (SD = 12.08) of experience conducting premarital counseling. Eighty-one percent indicated that they had received training as a counselor or therapist. Sixty-eight percent indicated that they had received specialized training in premarital counseling and/or education, leaving 32 percent of the sample with no training in premarital counseling and/or education. Eighty-eight percent of the sample had provided premarital counseling within the past year. The respondents were most likely to provide premarital

counseling in a religious institution (84.88%). Other practice settings included private practice (8.29%), community agencies (0.98%), and schools (0.49%). The number of couples with whom each provider had worked in pre-marital counseling in the past year ranged from zero to 750. The average number of couples seen within the past year was 14.84 (SD = 61.35), the median was four couples, and the mode was three couples. The typical length of the providers' premarital counseling programs ranged from 1 hour to 80 hours. The mean length of time in the program was 8.71 hours (SD = 8.56), and the median and the mode were 6 hours.

When there were an adequate number of respondents per category for the demographic variables, Chi-square tests were conducted to determine if providers of different professional affiliations differed in any other background characteristics. For this analysis, providers were separated into two groups based on their professional affiliations: (1) clergy and (2) others. The only significant difference between clergy and representatives of other professional affiliations was related to gender ($n = 206$, $df = 1$, $\chi^2 = 32.93$, $p < 0.0001$). For gender, males represented 93.41 % of clergy, although they represented only 58.97% of the representatives of other professional affiliations.

Providers' Opinions of Florida's Endorsement of Premarital Counseling

Of particular interest to a discussion of professional implications of premarital counseling policies are the participants' responses to the open-ended question included on the PCS, which asked providers to describe their attitudes toward the effectiveness of the Florida government's endorsement of premarital counseling. Of the total sample, 194 participants provided responses to the open-ended question. Responses were coded into consistent categories, and several themes emerged. First, 112 (57.7%) of the responses indicated a favorable opinion of the effectiveness of the government's endorsement. Examples of comments that indicated a positive opinion toward the endorsement include the following:

It is a very good effort to try to urge couples to become more educated, prepared, and committed to marriage and preserving the family, thereby reducing the divorce rate. I applaud such efforts.

It is very effective and very much needed in keeping the family together. We Americans have a very high divorce rate.

I believe the Florida government's endorsement of premarital counseling is highly effective in today's society because of the many social, cultural, and economic pressures that affect couples.

I think it can be very helpful. Having couples take a longer, harder look at themselves individually and their relationship before marriage is good.

I feel as though it is very effective; so many folks don't have a clue about getting ready for spending their life together.

Only 20 (10.3%) respondents felt that the initiative was either not effective or of very little effectiveness. Comments typical of these respondents included the following:

Not effective. The small number who elect to take the course can outweigh the benefits of it.

Not very because it is not required.

Not at all. Those who seek counseling for its own sake are those who will benefit most from it.

Non-effective. I believe divorce is too easy to obtain and therefore allows the married couple an easy escape instead of working out their problems and situations. Marriage takes daily and total commitment to one another and the willingness to maintain a relationship on a sacred level.

Not very effective, too little!

Thirty-nine respondents (20.1 %) indicated that they were uncertain about the effects of the initiative or had insufficient knowledge to form an opinion on the matter. Comments from providers in this category included the following:

I've never seen or heard statistics to support or not support the endorsement-compared, for example to states that do not encourage counseling. Ergo, no opinion–skeptical.

I have not seen enough data to give an opinion on this subject. Too early to tell about the overall effect.

It hasn't touched our lives, really.

It is a worthwhile effort by the State to see that couples prepare themselves for marriage. But I have no way to evaluate its effectiveness. It is my personal practice to only marry couples after 6-8 hours of premarital counseling, even before the State instituted their endorsement.

Another theme that was mentioned by a number of respondents was the notion that the endorsement is “a step in the right direction.” In all, 19 (9.8%) respondents used this exact phrase or a similar statement to express the notion that the government's endorsement of premarital counseling is an initiative that can have a positive impact, but it alone is not sufficient to promote large-scale change.

Other themes that emerged included the effectiveness of the endorsement at encouraging couples to attend premarital counseling who would not otherwise do so, the need for the couple to apply the information they learn in the counseling sessions, and suggestions for future policy changes. In addition, several respondents commented on the motivation of the couples to attend premarital counseling as an important influence on the effectiveness of the government's endorsement. These open-ended responses are readdressed in the next section to illustrate the implications of this investigation.

DISCUSSION

Family policies, such as the Florida Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act (Florida Statutes, 1998), affect premarital counseling providers and other professionals who work with families, such as counselors, researchers, and family-life educators. Following a discussion of the limitations of this study, I discuss the potential impact of premarital counseling-related policies for service providers. Finally, I present recommendations for future research.

Limitations

The limitations of this study must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this study involved a survey of providers of premarital counseling in a single state in which the government endorses pre-marital counseling. The policies that affect these providers are unique to that state, and providers in other states may face different variations on the policies enacted in Florida. Therefore, further research should be done to examine the beliefs and practices of providers in other states in which premarital counseling-related policies exist.

Second, this survey included one open-ended question that asked directly about providers' responses to the state policies surrounding pre-marital counseling. Additional research that includes a more thorough exploration of providers' responses to these policies should be conducted using alternate methodologies, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and empirical assessment instruments. Additional limitations of this investigation included a relatively low response rate and the high number of potential participants who were unable to be contacted. In light of these limitations, the findings presented in this article should be considered preliminary information about the impact of premarital counseling-related public policies upon service providers.

Potential Impact of Family Promotion Legislation for Service Providers

On a practical level, public policies can influence the work of family professionals in several ways. First, increased government attention and funding for family programs provides professionals with the opportunity to reach a wider population. Family-focused public policies may provide incentives that make it more likely for families to receive the services that professionals offer. The responses of some participants in this study reflected this benefit of premarital counseling promotion policies through the following statements:

This will help some couples be influenced to believe that premarital counseling is important.

It brings couples in that may not otherwise have sought counseling on their own.

The reduced cost of a marriage license has proven to be incentive for many couples to receive premarital counseling.

I think it gets couples to consider premarital counseling that other-wise would pass on it.

Anything that encourages couples to seek counseling, even financial consideration helps marriage. Some couples don't realize the need they have of counseling until they come to my office.

The government 'coupon' does provide an opportunity for couples to consider the benefits of premarital counseling thus creating the opportunity for premarital counselors to expose couples to the long term benefits.

I think some couples would not seek counseling if the state did not endorse it. After they come, they usually have a positive experience.

Currently, there is no evidence that proves that incentives are enough extra motivation to increase widespread participation in premarital counseling programs. Several survey respondents commented on the motivational aspects of the government's incentives to attend premarital counseling, and these sentiments are illustrated by the following comments:

Couples who are not actively engaged in the program generally just 'do the time,' and receive little benefit other than a discounted license fee.

To the degree that participants actively engage in the process, healthy marriages can be promoted and divorce rates reduced.

Couples may choose to go through the counseling, and go through the motions without engaging in real exploration of the issues just to save some money on the license. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink!

In the final analysis it is, of course, up to each couple as to what they will do with the help given.

I believe any couple who receives pre-marital counseling and education potentially benefits greatly. The primary factor is the couple's motivation. If they are merely trying to get a financial discount, the benefit will be minimal, though there is always the possibility that they will be impacted with good basic principles in spite of themselves.

Another possible benefit of government promotion of family-related interventions is that couples and family members who participate in prevention and enhancement programs may be more likely to seek professional services at a later point in time (Stanley, 2001). For example, one respondent commented, "The state's endorsement of premarital counseling is good because after they are married and find themselves in conflict, on

average, I believe they seek counseling to resolve issues.” Another respondent added, “It is an incentive for newlyweds to come in before marriage, which develops a relationship for future needs.” A third respondent asserted that policies that promote premarital counseling “[are] beneficial in developing credibility and desire for the counseling.” A related potential drawback is that only those populations who are targeted by government-endorsed family promotion activities may become more likely to seek out available professional services at a later time. According to the findings of this investigation, 84.88% of providers conduct premarital counseling in religious institutions. Therefore, couples who have no affiliation with a religious institution may be less likely to receive premarital counseling services, as well as other professional counseling and/or family educational services at a later time.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following research questions arise in relation to the findings of this study: (1) How do premarital counseling providers in other states differ from providers in Florida? (2) What impact do providers’ beliefs about premarital counseling-related policies have upon the services they provide to couples? (3) What influence do providers’ political beliefs have upon their response to premarital counseling-related policies? (4) In what ways do providers change their practice patterns in response to premarital counseling-related public policies? (5) Are couples more likely to attend premarital counseling in states in which the government has endorsed premarital counseling?; and (6) What effect does a couple’s motivation for entering premarital counseling (e.g., for intrinsic learning or in order to receive a discount on a marriage license) have upon the benefits they receive from the experience? Future research should continue to examine the impact of premarital counseling-related policies upon the providers and recipients of these services.

REFERENCES

- Brotherson, S. E., & Duncan, W. C. (2004). Rebinding the ties that bind: Government efforts to preserve and promote marriage. *Family Relations*, 53, 459-468.
- Carroll, J. S., & Doherty, W. J. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118.
- Fincham, F. D., & Bradbury, T. N. (1990). Preventing marital dysfunction: Review and analysis. In F.D. Fincham and T. N. Bradbury (Eds.), *The psychology of marriage: Basic issues and applications* (pp. 375-401). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Florida Statutes, Sections 741.0305 and 741.04 (1998). *The Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act of 1998*. Retrieved December 3, 2002 from http://www.flsenate.gov/Statutes/index.cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=CH0741/SEC04.HTM
- Fraenkel, P., Markman, H., & Stanley, S. (1997). The prevention approach to relationship problems. *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 12, 249-258.
- Gardiner, K., Fishman, M., Nikolov, P., Laud, S., & Glosser, A. (2002). *State policies to promote marriage*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved May 12, 2003, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/hspparent.htm>
- Jones, E. F., & Stahmann, R. F. (1994). Clergy beliefs, preparation, and practice in pre-marital counseling. *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 48, 181-186.
- Murray, C. E. (2005). Prevention work: A professional responsibility for marriage and family counselors. *The Family Journal*, 13, 27-34.
- Olson, D. H. (1983). How effective is marriage preparation? In D. R. Mace (Ed.), *Prevention in family services: Approaches to family wellness* (pp. 65-75). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Parke, M. & Ooms, T. (2002). More than a dating service? State activities designed to strengthen and promote marriage. *Center for Law and Social Policy*. Retrieved May 10, 2003, from <http://www.clasp.org>
- Pinsof, W. M. (2002). The death of ‘Till death do us part’: The transformation of pair-bonding in the 20th century. *Family Process*, 41, 135-157.
- Stahmann, R. F. (2000). Premarital counseling: A focus for family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 22, 104-117.
- Stahmann, R. F. & Hiebert, W. J. (1980). *Premarital counseling*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

- Stanley, S. M. (2001). Making a case for premarital education. *Family Relations*, 50, 272-280.
- Williams, L. M. (1992). Premarital counseling: A needs assessment among engaged couples. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 14, 505-518.
- Wright, H. N. (1994). Marital counseling. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 13, 174-181.