



Strengthening Marriage



Encouraging Fatherhood



Protecting Children



Honoring Elders

Putting Families First

Fourteen Policy Recommendations
to Strengthen Michigan Families for
the 95th Michigan Legislature

Thank you for your interest in the work of Michigan Family Forum and our “Putting Families First” agenda.

As the Legislature begins its 95th legislative session, there are many issues competing for your time, attention and state funding. Addressing key social issues such as education, crime, substance abuse and the economy will continue to be a high priority.

However, there is one issue - the breakdown of the family - that must be considered if we are serious about securing Michigan’s future. In fact, the decline of the family has played a significant role in virtually every major social problem facing our state.

That’s why we have prepared this agenda - to help you focus on practical ways to strengthen Michigan’s families. We have tried to design proposals that can win bi-partisan support in each area of focus - strengthening marriage, promoting fatherhood, protecting children and honoring elders. As we strengthen the family, we will positively impact a host of pressing social problems and reduce our need for government services.

We hope you will give careful consideration to each of these proposals. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or need further information.

We look forward to working with you in the months ahead!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brad Snavelly". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brad Snavelly
Executive Director



Strengthening Families & Marriage

For decades now, the social sciences have provided clear and convincing evidence that not all family structures are equal. A marriage which is healthy and enduring enriches the couple, their children and the community around them. This mutual agreement removes a burden from society when spouses look after one another, particularly in times of sickness and old age. Marriage also changes our behavior in ways that make both parties happier, healthier and better off financially.

Marriage dividends are significant. Children of intact marriages tend to engage in risky behavior less frequently, do better in school and have better mental and physical health than children from broken or never formed marriages. Adults who are married tend to enjoy better mental and physical health and accumulate more wealth and engage in risky or illegal behavior less often than unmarried adults. Finally, our senior citizens enjoy better support from spouses and children in their later years if they remain married. Clearly, society does benefit by marriage and rightly rewards married couples for that in providing for the needs of children.

Our public policy must actively work to help couples choose and succeed in building strong marriages.

Marriage Education

Incentives to encourage premarital education, marriage enrichment and marriage counseling should be established. These incentives can be in the form of tax credits or, in the case of pre-marital education, reduced waiting periods or marriage license fees.

Marriage by Magistrates

Public officials who are authorized to marry couples should be required to provide premarital education or to provide premarital education information to couples prior to marriage. Public officials should officiate responsibly.

Track Pre-Marital Education Statistics

Michigan should provide a “check off” area on the marriage application, the marriage license and a petition for divorce to indicate whether or not the couple has participated in a premarital education program. This “check off” will help the state determine whether or not premarital education is effective and it will serve as a reminder to the couple and the person officiating the wedding that the state considers premarital education important.



Encouraging Fatherhood

All children deserve a loving father who is actively engaged in their life. Sadly, many children do not have such fathers. Some of these children do not have involved fathers because the fathers simply don't care. However, in many cases it is because their fathers lack sound parenting skills or because obstacles prevent meaningful interaction. Some states and communities are working to remedy these dilemmas in order to reconnect fathers with their children. Michigan should follow the lead of these other states and help men become responsible fathers for their children.

Fatherhood Task Force

Michigan should develop a Governor's Task Force similar to Fatherhood Commissions established by nearly a dozen other states. The Task Force would be charged with identifying and studying critical problems for fathers, ways to eliminate barriers to responsible fatherhood, and ways to stimulate a climate that encourages responsible fatherhood.

Local Fatherhood Initiatives

Michigan must sustain funding for Fatherhood Initiatives under the administration of the Department of Human Services. The legislature should require these initiatives to report outcomes to legislative leaders and committees.

Promote Incarcerated Fathers Program

The Department of Corrections should actively work to help incarcerated fathers remain involved in their children's lives whenever it is appropriate. Efforts should include programs designed to reconnect incarcerated fathers with their children, requiring parenting classes as a condition for parole for fathers and amnesty for child support arrears if parolees maintain support and involvement in their child's life after release. By appropriately screening fathers, reconnecting them with their children and equipping them to become responsible fathers, Michigan could break the cycle of generational crime that so often accompanies children of absent fathers.

Establish Putative Father Registry

Michigan should establish a putative father registry in order to encourage child support and to protect the rights of fathers to be actively involved in the lives of their children. Failure to enroll in the registry is a presumption that the father has surrendered his parental rights. Such a presumption would speed the adoption procedure but it could be reversed if the court were convinced by the putative father that he wants his parental rights restored and he shows a desire to actively supportive of the child.



Protecting Children

Strong families are important to the well-being of our children and a married couple is a key component of strong families. State and community leaders must work to ensure that the laws and policies of Michigan protect and promote the well-being of our children from the harms of divorce and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. By shoring up laws governing sex education, minimizing the negative effects of divorce and encouraging adoption by married couples, policymakers can give our most vulnerable citizens a better chance to build their own strong families.

Divorce Effects Programs

Many states and municipalities require divorcing couples to attend a divorce effects program if they have minor children. This requirement recognizes that divorce can have a serious long-term impact on a child's life. While no program can eliminate the devastation a child experiences as his family disintegrates, they can help parents minimize disruption by recognizing and addressing behaviors and fears the child may exhibit as a result of the divorce.

Promote Parenting Plans

Lawmakers should require a parenting plan to be in place before a divorce is granted to couples with minor children. Parenting plans would be developed in conjunction with a divorce effects program and would detail custody and decision-making arrangements regarding the children. The plans would be approved by the court but could be completed without the assistance of an attorney, greatly reducing the "my client must win" approach to divorce settlements.

Adoption Promotion

The mission of the Children's Trust Fund should be expanded to include adoption promotion efforts and to offset adoption expenses for babies of unmarried mothers. Additionally, the Family Independence Agency and all agencies that receive family planning funding should be required to educate pregnant minors about the process and the benefits of adoption for the baby and for the expectant mother. This is particularly true for mothers that receive public assistance.

Allow Pre-Natal Dependents for Tax Deductions

Michigan can reduce the tax burden on young families by extending tax deductions to unborn children if the mother is under the care of a physician. A pre-natal tax deduction will help offset many of the costs that are incurred prior to a baby's birth and it will serve as an incentive to seek pre-natal care.



Honoring Elders

National trends show that the fastest growing segment of our population (85 years or older) will continue to increase as 77 million people enter their “golden years.” Providing for the needs of our rapidly aging society is one of the great challenges of our time. If we hope to meet this challenge without significant tax increases, we must start by encouraging and expecting families to play a greater role.

Our elders have great value as human beings regardless of physical and mental limitations. They deserve our care and protection. They are also our connection to the past. Sadly, too many suffer from loneliness and depression, feeling society has forgotten them. We can do better. We believe the family is the best place to care for these vulnerable members of our society. When families meet the needs of an aging parent or grandparent, we also benefit by learning lessons from the past that enrich our lives and those of future generations. Michigan should encourage families to plan and prepare for future needs, promote family caregiving, and foster intergenerational relationships.

Tax Credit for In-Home Eldercare

Many adult children need help in order to provide in-home care to elderly parents. These families believe that multiple generation homes are healthier for everyone involved. They simply need financial assistance to make it work. A \$1,000 tax credit for families who provide in-home care should be available. Such a credit may actually save taxpayers money by reducing or at least delaying the higher costs associated with care in nursing homes.

Tax Incentives for Long-Term Care

Michigan residents should receive tax relief for taking responsible steps to provide long-term care for themselves and their family members. Michigan law already encourages such behavior when it comes to retirement, home ownership and education. Long-term care should be treated in much the same way.

Promote Dignity for Our Elders

The legislature must work to create a system that promotes the dignity of the individual in their final years of life. Too often, families are unable to care for loved ones in a dignified or home-like setting. Even in group homes, regulatory mandates create barriers to dignity and place undue burdens on families and caregivers. The legislature must find unique ways to encourage inter-generational support that will reduce governmental dependency and foster a sense of community and purpose for individuals of all ages.



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OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE

MICHIGAN GUIDE TO ABSTINENCE RESOURCES

PROMOTING FATHERHOOD IN MICHIGAN:

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR CIVIC, BUSINESS, AND NON-PROFIT LEADERS

SEX EDUCATION: RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN MICHIGAN LAW

MICHIGAN ADOPTION RESOURCE GUIDE

WHAT EVERY CHILD NEEDS: THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS

FAMILY POLICY BRIEFS

INFANT ADOPTION IN MICHIGAN: REVIVING A VANISHING PHENOMENON

ABOUT MICHIGAN FAMILY FORUM

OUR CORE VALUES

The family is the fundamental institution in a civil society.

Healthy, lifelong marriages are beneficial to adults and offer the best environment in which to raise children and care for elders.

The involvement of responsible fathers is essential to the economic, emotional, and social health of children.

Children need the protection of stable families and a healthy understanding of human sexuality.

Elders deserve to have security and care provided by loving family members in a comfortable home environment.

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