

Healthy marriages save taxpayer dollars; churches tapped to help educate couples

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DALLAS—The state has a vested interest in promoting healthy marriages, and churches can help by providing premarital education, several marriage education advocates told a group of North Texas ministers.

Divorce and unmarried childbearing costs taxpayers \$112 billion a year, said Cosette Bowles, who leads ANTHEM—the Alliance for North Texas Healthy Effective Marriages. But looking at it positively, if family fragmentation were reduced by 1 percent, taxpayers would save \$1.12 billion.

Recognizing the cost of unhealthy marriages, Texas has joined a growing number of states that offer a financial incentive for couples who complete premarital education courses, Bowles told North Texas church leaders who met at the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board staff offices in Dallas.

Effective Sept. 1, couples who complete at least eight hours of premarital education are exempt from the state marriage license fee and the 72-hour waiting period between the time a license is issued and a wedding can occur legally.

The waiver of the marriage license fee and waiting period offers some incentive to couples to complete premarital education, but the greater incentive should be the benefits families experience by learning how to communicate and resolve conflicts, Bowles said.

“Successful couples have the same number of disagreements as those divorcing. And all couples disagree about the same issues—money, kids, sex, housework, in-laws and time,” she said. “It’s not a matter of being better matched.”

Rather, she said, the key is learning to handle stress and resolve conflict in healthy ways. And when children are factored into the equation, the importance of making marriage successful grows exponentially. Research shows children who grow up in homes with both a mother and father who enjoy a healthy marriage face fewer risks and have the best opportunity to thrive, Bowles said.

“Children growing up in a stable, two-parent family are less likely to remain or end up in poverty, more likely to succeed academically, physically and emotionally healthier,” Bowles said. “They are less likely to suffer physical or sexual abuse, abuse alcohol or other drugs, or become a teenage parent.”

Couples who believe they will have a happier marriage if they live together first are fooling themselves and costing society, she added.

“Cohabiting before marriage increases the incidence of marital conflict, marital unhappiness and chance of divorce,” she said.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission has named 12 regional intermediaries for its healthy marriage initiative to make sure services are available statewide.

Regional intermediaries—such as ANTHEM in Dallas and surrounding counties—enlist premarital education providers, including churches and other faith-based organizations.

Churches may fit into either of two categories:

- State-paid providers must use approved curriculum selected by the

regional intermediary and offer classes free of charge to participants.

- Providers not paid by the state can use faith-based curriculum and may charge a fee to participants. Curriculum must be registered with the regional intermediary.

All curriculum—whether in a state-funded program or not—must be skill-based and grounded in research.

While the principles presented in approved curriculum—communication skills, conflict resolution and components of a healthy marriage—do not conflict with biblical teachings, the instruction cannot be explicitly religious in nature if the provider receives state funding, said Erin Kincaid, who works with ANTHEM in public policy and communications.

“Separation of time and place are key,” Kincaid explained. The eight hours of state-mandated instruction must not include explicitly religious curriculum. However, at the end of the eight hours, a provider may announce the required course is completed, but anyone who wishes to continue to meet to study what the Bible says about marriage and family is invited to return the next week.

For a complete list of regional intermediaries or to receive more information, visit www.bgct.org/family or e-mail keith.lowry@bgct.org .