SUMMARY REPORT

AAHMI

African American Healthy Marriage Initiative

Roundtable

"Why Marriage Matters"

August 1, 2003 • Washington, D.C.

The work that you do here today will make a great deal of difference…in trying to promote healthy marriages as an underpinning for and within the African-American community.

C. Everette Wallace, CNBL

I. Purpose of the Roundtable

The Centre for New Black Leadership, the Executive Directors Association of OIC of America, and the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternal organization, in a joint partnership with the Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services, convened a historical Roundtable discussion of the African-American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI). The Roundtable, held on Friday, August 1, 2003, brought together twenty-five influential individuals to discuss the current culture/state of marriage in the Black community and why marriage matters. A select group of professionals, from a variety of disciplines and institutions serving the Black community, the Roundtable participants were leaders from the faith community, research, academia, civic and community based organizations, business, media, entertainment and government.

The Roundtable conversation was based on research which demonstrates the strong correlation between family structure and child well-being. All things being equal, children who grow up in healthy, married two-parent families do better on a host of outcomes than those who do not. Further, many social problems affecting children, families, and communities could be prevented if more children grew up in healthy, married families.

The Roundtable strategies included a discussion aimed at improving child well-being and strengthening families by promoting healthy marriage. The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative provides a culturally competent strategy for addressing the unique experiences of the African American population. Cultural orientation, traditions and practices form a diversity of beliefs, attitudes, interpersonal styles and behaviors. Differences in age, race, ethnicity, gender, education, political persuasion, religious background and socio-economic status influence how people and organizations view and respond to the healthy marriage agenda. The AAHMI seeks to educate and communicate, enhance partnerships and identify resources to support the formation and stability of healthy marriages and improve child well-being in the African American community.

Four questions were posed to Roundtable participants, which they answered in brief written papers in advance of the event:

- What needs to be done to educate the Black community on the numerous benefits of marriage?
- What needs to be done to help the Black community reconnect marriage and childbearing by reducing divorce and out of wedlock birth rates as well as increasing the marriage rate?

- How should the Federal government address the high divorce and out of wedlock birth rates and low marriage rates in the Black community?
- How can we build effective coalitions in communities to foster healthy marriages?

> *This is not about subtraction...it is about adding into the range of services that we provide to families in this country an additional service. Not at the expense of other services…not about pitting one type of family structure against another. We have been…reluctant to say that one of the things that some families need…is help achieving a goal that many families have for themselves, which is to form and establish a long-lasting and healthy marriage.*
>
> *Wade Horn, ACF*

The conveners and senior government officials charged participants to break new ground by formulating ideas to assist African-Americans who choose marriage for themselves to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.

Dr. Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families detailed ACF's efforts to promote healthy marriage across America and the valuable lessons to be learned through this particular effort in the African-American community. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Deputy Secretary, Claude Allen delivered a passionate essay on the linkages between healthy marriage and healthy communities, describing the commitments he believes must be made to halt the spread of HIV/AIDs in the African-American community and throughout the world.

> *Marriage…is an institution that preserves our culture. We need to make sure that African-American youth understand the facts about healthy marriage. We need to be setting before our youth today marriage as a goal…since the [negative] consequences of out-of-wedlock birth are magnified for Black children.*
>
> *Claude Allen, HHS*

II. Overview of Roundtable Discussion

The discussion confirmed the reasons for convening such a meeting. There was general agreement that when marriages are weak, communities are weakened. The statistics for marriage, out-of wedlock births, and single parenting are uniquely challenging for America's African-American communities.

- 41% of African American adults are married, compared to 62% of whites, and 60% of Hispanics
- There are 23 divorces per 1000 African American couples per year compared to 19 for whites
- 69% of African American births are to unmarried women, compared to 25% for whites and 42% for Hispanics.
- 55% of African American children live with single parents compared to 23% of whites and 31% of Hispanics.

I remember when it was not the norm for African-American children to be locked up or flunking out of school, or communities to be headed by so many single parents, so this world looks like an anomaly to me.
Roundtable Participant

The Roundtable discussion leaders, Ambassador Andrew Young of Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc. and Representative Jennifer "JC" Carroll of the Florida House of Representatives, opened the Roundtable with remarks followed by introductions by each participant. The conversation was structured around the following topical areas and desired outcomes:

- **Topic:** Identify and explore the current culture/state of marriage in the African American community.

  Outcome: Shared understanding of common issues that confront the African American community that must be addressed to promote healthy marriage.

- **Topic:** Visioning—What would a new more desirable culture of marriage in the African American community look like?

  Outcome: Create a vision/mission statement as to why marriage matters to African American children, families and the community.

- **Topic**: How do we market the message and benefits of marriage effectively in the African American community?

  Outcome: Develop a communication/marketing strategy to reach different segments of the population.

Current Culture and State of Marriage:

1. Historical Legacy

Any discussion about the state of marriage among African Americans must be considered within the context of their historical legacy in this country. Deputy Secretary Allen's opening remarks to the Roundtable members portrays this issue perfectly:

> "…[We] were brought over here on ships against our will. Our families were torn apart. Our families were separated. We were working not just for freedom in terms of getting back to the Motherland, but we were working to be reconnected as families. That is what has been the preserving factor in our community and since the '60's we have seen that destroyed... [We] need to rekindle our efforts to fight for healthy marriages across this country, but particularly for African American families. "

2. Public Policy Impact

There was general agreement among the participants that some of the most destructive forces against the institution of marriage in the African American community have been governmental public policies. Government policies ranging from denial of welfare benefits if the man was in the home, housing and property ownership, incarceration/sentencing, restrictions of social security benefits in support of marriage, and income tax policies were all cited as negatively impacting marriage. Analysis of public policies is critical to our mission of promoting healthy marriages and strengthening families.

3. Ambivalence About Marriage

The Roundtable participants acknowledged that the public conversation about marriage in the African-American community shows us to be of two minds about the topic. It is time to reach consensus and publicly disclose that we value the institution of marriage. We must unequivocally proclaim that healthy marriage is in the best interest of our children, of our couples, and of our communities.

Black single mothers would like for life not to be so hard. Most would readily say, if given a choice, that they would rather have raised their children in a happy, successful marriage. The cultural institution that is in the best interest of our children and the community at large is a healthy marriage.

4. The Benefits of Marriage

According to the description by one participant, marriage is a public commitment—a public love commitment—that places one in a larger village so that if the marriage breaks up, family and friends provide the supports for the formerly married couple and children. It is quite different from the single never married family which tends to be an isolating event. One of the key benefits of marriage is that it places the children in a publicly recognized communal space where folks will come together to support family functioning (e.g. childrearing, economic and emotional security, mutual aid) if the marriage fails.

The participants acknowledged that the psychology of marriage as a healthy goal must begin early in the lives of children and youth. One of the first questions is *what is your relationship with yourself?* A professional therapist among the participants stated that Black people have the worst health conditions in the country. We don't take care of our emotional selves, our spiritual selves, or our physical selves, and all of these issues must be adequately addressed to prepare for appropriate relationships and healthy marriage.

A New More Desirable Culture of Marriage

The Roundtable participants reached consensus in crafting a mission statement which reflects the spirit and goal of our collective efforts:

> "To promote and strengthen the institution of healthy marriage in the African American community."

The group proceeded to define the goals and objectives which were later refined as follows:

- Improve the well-being of African American children by increasing the number of children living in healthy, two-parent married households.
- Improve the number of healthy marriages in the African American community.
- Improve the overall well-being of the African American community
- Develop and improve the capacity within the African American community to provide healthy marriage programs and services.

1. The Case for A Research Agenda

Several of the researchers among the Roundtable members proffered that most of the research on the benefits of marriage have been conducted on white marriages rather than black marriages. While there was an acknowledgement of mutual areas common to both Black and white marriages, there must be a particular research focus pertaining to the Black population. Those areas must be empirically defined and their relevance shown for different socioeconomic and age levels.

2. Issue of Marriageability

The participants thought it important to address the issues of marriageability. Their view was that the concept of marriageability has been defined too narrowly, as purely an economic construct. The discussion seems to be reduced to "if you have a job you are marriageable, and if you don't you are not." The conclusion was that the concept of marriageability should include other important factors such as values of commitment, honesty, respect, communication and fidelity in addressing the practical aspects of marriage.

3. Strategies for A Culture Change

Several participants suggested broadly that in order to effectuate change and restore a culture that values the institution of marriage, it is essential to engage the faith community, business community and government in the marriage movement. Others suggested that while the church can be the base of a movement, the church cannot be the movement. We need a larger movement that can mobilize individuals and groups around a shared goal, even where there may different agendas and priorities.

It was further agreed that the AAHMI will focus its efforts within the context of the Congressionally-defined understanding of marriage as being between one man and one woman.

4. Marketing the Message Effectively in the African American Community

> *We need to make sure that what's being preached from our pulpits is being heralded in our magazines and our media, is on the front of every one of our lips. When we speak to our children and our grandchildren we need to put the word "marriage" before them.*
>
> *Claude Allen, HHS*

The Roundtable discussion generated a number of concrete actions in support of marketing the message about the benefits of healthy marriage to the African American community. The following list, while not exhaustive, gives a flavor of those suggestions on what needs to be marketed, how it might be marketed and where it can be most effectively marketed.

<u>What to Market:</u>

- Sources of information on marriage relevant to the African-American community;
- Find and promote healthy marriage role models;
- Celebrate healthy marriages of longevity, enhance their visibility;
- Advance parenting skills, encourage parenting effectively together in marriage;
- Marriage friendly public policies and removal of barriers;
- Program, services, counseling and curriculum development;
- Need for empirical Afro-centric research studies.

<u>How to Market:</u>

- Utilize the public and private educational system to inform students on topic of marriage;
- Develop a marriage resource clearinghouse;
- Outreach to small inner city churches with fewer than four hundred congregants;
- Engage media industries as partners in promotion of African American marriage
- Use the performing arts as a vehicle to show positive role models in action and convey other marriage-related messages;
- Organize an educational forum for the Black press on issues/realities of marriage;
- Plan to work with the community by educating, forming support groups, disseminating information;
- Commission research to rally around;
- Use the "Back To Sleep" campaign to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome as a communication model. It was research based; the communication took place effectively; and it had access/funding/whatever it took to succeed;
- Showcase promising service models for promotion of healthy marriage.

Where to Market

- Implement Black marriage education courses at institutions of higher learning, especially targeting historically Black colleges and universities;
- Disseminate information through churches and other faith-based institutions;
- Public awareness campaigns, including outreach at places such as beauty salons/barber shops, movie theaters, and others where the community gathers.

III. Personal Commitments and Next Steps

The final period of the discussion was devoted to identifying personal commitments for future involvement in the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative by the participants. The following suggestions for future actions were outlined:

- Need to build a coalition that partners with ACF but does not limit itself to the ACF agenda;
- Ask ACF to consider ways to formalize the relationship established with the Roundtable participants;
- Broaden the federal agencies that need to be brought to the table in future discussions.

Subsequent to the Roundtable, the ACF AAHMI Executive Leadership team met to consider the results from the roundtable and to formulate further next steps. Among the actions taken and decisions made were:

Future Roundtable Participant Involvement

- Roundtable members will be included in local AAHMI forums.
- Consider roundtable members' concept papers and proposed activities in support of the AAHMI.
- Development of a communication strategy to keep Roundtable members connected and engaged.

Forum Planning

Using the data obtained from the Roundtable discussion, the Executive Leadership team determined the Forum goals, dates, locations, areas and themes.

Forums Goals

- Provide education on the AAHMI
- Emphasize the impact of AA Healthy Marriage
- Receive community feedback on the topic of marriage in the AA community
- Provide information to the broader community
- Take advantage of geographical expertise/resources
- To promote partnerships and support for the AAHMI at the local, regional and national level.

Forum Dates	Locations	Themes
1. November 7-8, 2003	Atlanta	Youth
2. January 23-24, 2004	Dallas	Media & AA Business Community
3. May 14-15, 2004	Chicago	Faith Based/Community
4. Summer 2004	Oakland	Consolidated Forum/All Topics

There was agreement that while each forum had a distinct theme, all will cover research and have breakouts for each topical area.

A Special Word of Thanks

The AAHMI Roundtable could not have occurred without the support of many, many people. A sincere thank you is extended to the Roundtable conveners: C. Everette Wallace and Phyllis Berry-Myers of the Centre for New Black Leadership; Carl Gee and Reuben Blackwell, III of the Executive Directors Association of OIC of America; and Andrew Young, Harry E. Johnson, Sr., and Ronnie S. Jenkins of Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc. In addition, gratitude is extended to the leadership at the US Department of Health and Human Services.

The success of the Roundtable hinged upon the willing and enthusiastic participants who are listed on the rear cover of this report. Through their generous contributions of time and expertise they have established a blueprint for future activities. They deserve many thanks and are warned that they will be called upon in the future!

Finally, a heartfelt thank you is extended to Gloria Lawlah-Walker and her staff from MarLaw Systems Technology, Inc. for their support of the entire AAHMI project.

> *Communication is going to be key; many times in our communities we have not taught our youngsters how to communicate with each other, with their family members, and the like. We need to educate our community, have them understand the need for relationship building and communicating.*
>
> *Roundtable Participant*

Roundtable Conveners

Centre for New Black Leadership
Executive Directors Association of OIC of America
Alpha Phi Alpha

Discussion Leaders/Facilitator

The Honorable Andrew Young, Alpha Phi Alpha and Goodworks International
The Honorable Jennifer Carroll, Florida State Legislature
Ms. Doris McMillon, McMillon Communications, Inc.

Roundtable Participants

Dr. Charles A. and Frances Ballard, National Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization
Mrs. Vivian Berryhill, National Coalition of Pastor's Spouses
Dr. Lorraine Blackman, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
Ms. Audrey Chapman, WHUR Radio
Ms. Dianna Durham-McLoud, Illiana Coalition for Family and Community Restoration
Ms. Mildred Freeman, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education
Miss Lakita Garth, Dominion Enterprises
Mr. Carl Gee, Opportunities Industrialization Center of Greater Milwaukee
Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Colby College
Dr. Robert Hill, Westat Incorporated
Mr. Michael Hughes, Youth Representative
Dr. Linda Malone-Colon, Hampton University
Mr. Thomas Meloncon, Texas Southern University
Dr. Ron Mincy, Columbia University
Ms. Nisa Islam Muhammad, Wedded Bliss Foundation
Rev. Clarence Shuler, Building Lasting Relations, Inc.
Dr. Rozario Slack, First Things First
Dr. DeForest Soaries, First Baptist Church of Somerset, NJ
Mr. Bill Stephney, StepSun Music
Mr. C. Everett Wallace, Centre for New Black Leadership
Mr. Roland Warren, National Fatherhood Initiative
Ms. Diane Weathers, Essence Magazine
Rev. Carl Jeffrey Wright, Urban Ministries, Incorporated

AAHMI Executive Leadership Team

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