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The White House Conference on Families

Recommendations and Conclusions

by **Bonnie Shane**

The country is looking to you for constructive suggestions about how our society can help — not just government — but our entire society . . . President Jimmy Carter used these words to launch the first White House Conference on Families (WHCF) in Baltimore on June 5, 1980. How the “constructive suggestions” will be realized, with a look at the formation of the White House Conferences on the Family and its recommendations, is timely for those concerned with the directions of the family in the 1980's.

The National Advisory Committee (NAC), a diverse group of presidential appointees including professors, attorneys, religious leaders, corporation leaders, labor leaders and directors of various community agencies and organizations, met in July, 1979 to organize the Conference. The first step was to establish seven national hearings across the country to focus the concerns of the Conferences. These open hearings were buttressed by a parallel Gallop Poll entitled “American Families—1980.” Then, more than 2,000 Americans, chosen by their states and their peers, participated in the three conferences held in Baltimore, Minneapolis and Los Angeles. The delegates to those conferences agreed on over 170 recommendations which were compiled and reported by a National Task Force. The Task Force is currently in an implementation process which will run until March, 1981, in an effort to realize the recommendations. The top recommendations ranked in order of overall concern were:

- Family Oriented Personnel Policy Implementation
- Substance Abuse Prevention
- Tax Revision to Support Families
- Tax Policies for Care of Aging and Handicapped
- Family Impact Analysis
- Public Awareness of Handicapping Conditions
- Government Programs to Assist Handicapped
- Home Care for Elderly
- Tax Credits for Aging

RECOMMENDATIONS

FAMILIES AND MAJOR INSTITUTIONS

Government

The conferences all showed deep concern about government sensitivity for families. The number one recommendation in Minneapolis was “that laws and regulations be analyzed in terms of their impact on families”.

All supported ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Media

All three conferences expressed concern about media influence on the family. They called for greater regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), with more community consultation, and less emphasis on violence, pornography, crime, stereotyping, drugs and alcohol. Specific recommendations requested the FCC to establish regional grievance mechanisms, community advisory boards and to promote an understanding and awareness of disabled persons.

Community Institutions

Each conference sought greater involvement of community and religious organizations in planning and providing services to assist families, and encouragement of self-help groups. Attacks on racism and discrimination were recommended.

Law and Judicial System

Baltimore and Los Angeles delegates urged greater use of conciliation services in family disputes and a system of special family courts, as well as arbitration and mediation, as alternatives to traditional adversary courtroom settlement of marital disputes.

The Minneapolis group made no recommendations concerning family law and the judicial system, but instead, formed proposals to support a Human Life Amendment and to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment. (Both were defeated by the Conference.)

FAMILIES AND HUMAN NEEDS

Education

In Los Angeles, the number one recommendation called for a school and parent partnership to insure quality education. All Conferences showed interest in development of educational policies and suggested establishment of community advisory councils, Family Education Programs, Community Education Programs and equal education opportunities, with state and federal government assistance.

Health

Here again Minneapolis did not pass a recommendation. (Three recommendations opposing abortion were defeated.) Baltimore and Los Angeles expressed concern about improving health care through education, early intervention, counseling and screening.

Child Care

There was consistent agreement on the need for alternative forms of quality child care and full parental choices. Several recommendations dealt with enactment of incentives for businesses who sponsor child care.

The Handicapped

Many recommendations from all three conferences concerned families with members who suffer from handicaps. The use of the media, education, training, counseling, and self-help groups was suggested to promote positive attitudes. Delegates also proposed the use of tax credits to encourage home care of disabled family members.

Housing

Affordable housing, programs to end housing discrimination, and strict enforcement of current laws to eliminate discrimination were proposals adopted by each WHCF.

FAMILY CHALLENGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Drug Substance Abuse

The top Baltimore recommendation concerned drug substance abuse and steps that schools, the media, parents and health professionals could take to alleviate and control this serious problem. The other two conferences showed deep concern and expressed the need for training qualified personnel, government assistance, and accessibility of treatment. A specific Minneapolis recommendation proposed an increase in alcohol taxes to fund local treatment programs.

Aging

With belief that the individuality of elderly persons should be recognized through a broad choice of living arrangements, all conferences suggested provision for home as well as institutional settings. Tax incentives to households with elderly members were strongly recommended. Suggested reforms in the social security system included assurance of an adequate income level, reduction of limitation on earned income and no reduction in social security payments because of marriage.

Parents and Children

Recommendations concerning adolescent pregnancies ranged from comprehensive health, education and social services to positive peer group values as a means of prevention. All agreed that in the area of foster care and adoption each child has a right to a stable, permanent home.

Preparation for Marriage and Family Life

There was unanimous support for "comprehensive family life education for children, youth and adults," with courses and programs in human development, marriage and the family, parenting and human sexuality suggested.

Family Violence

The need for government leadership in understanding the cause of family violence and in enacting and funding

protective legislation was emphasized. [See Mikulski in this issue.] A need to increase public awareness through media and community education was stressed. Rehabilitation services for the victim and the perpetrator of family violence were recommended.

FAMILIES AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Status of Homemakers

Recommendations supported changes in the tax code, including elimination of state and federal inheritance taxes for spouses, as well as tax credits for homemakers providing primary care for handicapped and elderly persons, and were approved by overwhelming majorities at all three conferences. Increased recognition of and equity for full time homemakers through tax and social security changes were called for.

Income Security

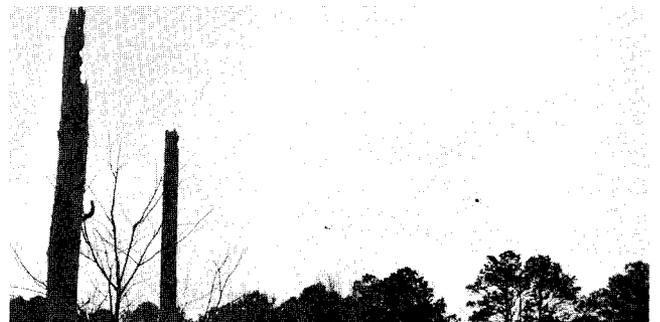
Specific proposals for changes in the social security system included survivor benefits regardless of age and children, credit for time taken off from work for child rearing, widows benefits at age 55, and social security benefits in one's own name rather than as dependent. While the conferences noted that income maintenance programs have a detrimental effect on families, they agreed that laws should encourage a father in indigent circumstances to remain in the household. Other proposals included "guaranteed annual income", elimination of mandatory retirement and an increase in employment opportunities for the elderly.

Economic Pressures

There was strong consensus on proposals for full employment (implementation of the Humphrey-Hawkins Act), special emphasis on lower cost of health care, food and housing, vigorous enforcement of existing laws concerning affirmative action programs, equal pay for equal work and efforts to combat sexual harassment and discrimination.

Families and Work

Creative work arrangements such as flextime, job-sharing, flexible leave policies for both sexes and dependent care options including child care centers received the highest recommendation from all the conferences.



Tax Policies

Nearly all the delegates called for elimination of the marriage tax penalty by permitting married couples with both spouses gainfully employed the option of filing separate or joint tax returns and tax incentives for home care for the elderly and disabled.

IMPLEMENTATION

WHCF staff plans for implementation include meetings with officials of the executive and legislative branches of state and federal government at all levels, corporation leaders and community groups.

Although the implementation period has begun recently, some positive responses have occurred. President Carter proposed a reduction of marriage tax. The Senate Finance Committee called for elimination of the marriage tax by allowing use of either joint or individual tax returns, in H.R. 3601, proposed by Millicent Fenwick, with 230 co-signers.

Formation of a drug abuse program for government employees and their families is expected.

A corporate task force composed of 100 representatives of the largest employers is involved in planning to make the workplace more responsive and meeting with representatives from the Departments of Labor and Commerce to consider personnel policies involving flex-time, shared jobs, leave policies, etc.

A report to the Association of Family Conciliation Courts¹ is being prepared, outlining proposed implementation of recommendations concerning the family within the court system.

Creation of a privately funded organization to carry out implementation and advocacy efforts on behalf of families on an ongoing basis is in the formative stages.

A number of governors have set up state-wide speakers services available to children, youth and families, on pertinent topics.

The WHCF staff is using its short implementation period to encourage immediate results and working to assure that key groups with specific interest such as the Maryland Coalition of Families are aware of recommendations that coincide with their concerns, in the hope that they will continue to lobby for implementation even after the March 1981 close of WHCF.

There is a growing coalition of people working to improve the condition of the aged and the issues raised by the WHCF should form a basis for the White House Conference on the Aged to be held in 1981.

A family impact analyses regarding any legislation affecting families has been requested, in response to the complaint that the government interferes too much in family life.

A potential problem involves the media recommendations. There is a strong possibility of conflict with First Amendment rights of free speech and press. However, the conferences are deeply concerned with programming that tends to "glorify" drugs, alcohol and violence, and hope that a strong group working with the media could resolve some of these issues.

CONCLUSION

Centering on the simple concept of the family, WHCF is another voice added to the call for solutions to major domestic issues in the United States. Immediate results cannot be expected to follow from these conferences alone. It is not known whether any of the recommendations will become reality.

But the conferences have brought out the many interests and concerns of American families and generated a great deal of interest, public and private.

¹HARVEY CAREY DZODIN, *The White House Conference on Families: The End of the Beginning, A Report to the Assoc. of Family Conciliation Courts; The White House Conference on Families*, (in press).



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