

## **Heritage Keepers Healthy Marriage Initiative to Improve Child Well-Being**

### **Issue:**

In Charleston, South Carolina, 43% of all babies are born out-of-wedlock; 74% of African-American/Other babies are born to single mothers; 71% of children in out-of-home placement are African-American; divorce affects more than 800 children annually; and 47% of all children in single-parent families live in poverty.

Because of these family formation problems, too many of Charleston's children do not grow up in stable, healthy families. The single most important influence in a child's life is the family, and Charleston's foster kids do not enjoy that. They spend nearly 1/5th of their childhood in out-of-home placements that potentially damage their normal development as stable, secure individuals. They live in five different places while in care, further affecting their ability to learn, establish relationships and develop normally. Moreover, nearly half of Charleston's children in out-of-home placements leave care without being placed in a family environment.

Each year Charleston's Lowcountry Crisis Pregnancy Center (LCPC) sees 3,000 young women who are or may be pregnant. Many desire lifelong, stable relationships. They need help in attaining that desire and in forming healthy marriages where bearing a child does not mean bearing a child at risk of being counted in the next generation of foster kids.

### **Intervention:**

Heritage Community Services (Heritage) and the LCPC are collaborating to help interested unwed and married parents form healthy marriages, and, in turn, improve child well-being. The United States Department of Health and Human Services is funding their long-term demonstration project – *Heritage Keepers Healthy Marriage Initiative* – that tests whether lessons learned from *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* and the guidelines offered by the *Building Strong Families* project have application for the nation's crisis pregnancy centers. The project has two major components.

- The first looks at family formation barriers LCPC couples experience. These may be logistical, cultural, attitudinal or other. The project will identify the barriers through existing literature, and surveys/interviews with prospective participants, and then 'remove' those it can.
- The second provides a healthy marriage program that provides education, dedicated staff, support services (including mentoring couples), and the offering of incentives (for program participation) for couples

### **Impact:**

- *Heritage Keepers Healthy Marriage Initiative* is a 4-year HHS contract to foster healthy marriages in Charleston.
- *Heritage Keepers Healthy Marriage Initiative* will collect detailed data on more than 100 couples and their children.
- *Heritage Keepers Healthy Marriage Initiative* will develop processes and procedures for possible use in more than 1,500 crisis pregnancy centers nationwide.

### **Contact:**

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