

HOW TO TELL IF A POLICY IS FAMILY FRIENDLY

SIX PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPING FAMILY FRIENDLY POLICY

Based on extensive work by a national coalition of family-service organizations and two years of conversations with key Minnesota legislators of both parties and both houses, the *Minnesota Coalition for Family Policy* adopted six broad principles in 1999 that should guide policymaking. Though this coalition was disbanded, the principles and information herein are still relevant to today's family policy issues.

These principles are:

1. Reinforce family, parental and marital commitment and stability, especially when children are involved.

Policies and programs should encourage & reinforce family, parental and marital commitment and stability, especially when children are involved. This, intervention in family membership and living arrangements is justified only to protect family members from serious harm, or at the request of the family itself.

2. Strengthen families' ability to manage & fulfill their own functions.

The first presumption of policies and programs should be to support and supplement family functioning. Services that substitute for family should only be provided in situations where it is clear the family will not be able to function sufficiently, even with support, or when the burden on the family is excessive.

3. Recognize the strength & persistence of family ties.

Policies & programs should recognize the strength and persistence of family ties, even when they are problematic, and the influence family members have on each other.

In general, the most effective and efficient way to help a person in need is to involve, when appropriate, the other members of the family so that the family reinforces, rather than undermines, the goals of the program.

4. Treat families as partners when providing services to each individual.

Policies and programs should treat all families with trust and respect as partners when providing education, health and social services to a family member (for example, a spouse, child, or dependent adult), and should offer a range of levels of involvement depending on the family's wishes and situation. Families need to be empowered by providing them with information and a maximum degree of choice and decision making.

Similarly, policies and programs should take into account the complex responsibilities of families and enhance their ability to manage their dealings with multiple human service institutions.

5. Recognize the diversity of family life.

There are many forms and configurations of families. It's important to consider the different effects policies and programs have on different types of families.

Policies and programs should not discriminate against or penalize families for differing from the perceived or desired norm, whether in structure, roles, heritage, values or life stages.

6. Give top priority to families in greatest economic need, social need, or those most vulnerable to breakdown.

Families in greatest economic and social need, and those most vulnerable to breakdown, should have first priority in government policies and programs. At the same time, policies and programs should seek to prevent serious family crises rather than targeting all resources on remedial and "band-aid" services.

Each of these principles may apply in different ways & to different degrees to any given policy or program.

Key questions should be asked when applying each of the principles to a policy issue.

- How does the policy or program recognize the role family members play in contributing to or alleviating an individual's need for service?
- How does the policy or program strengthen or weaken marital and/or parental commitment? How does it enhance or diminish parental competence?
- Is the program equally accessible to families of various structures, life cycle stages, or ethnic or cultural heritages?
- How does the policy or program help families perform their responsibilities and prevent government activities from inappropriately substituting for that responsibility?
- What efforts does the policy or program make to identify & target those families who are the most vulnerable and least likely to have other sources of support?

themselves.

Families have been helped to fulfill these social responsibilities by other private and public social institutions, including schools, health care systems, social agencies and others. All of society benefits when

TALKING ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY IS NOT ENOUGH:

There is hardly a policy maker from the local to national level, who doesn't believe that families are important. What is needed, however, is for the well-being of all families to become a central and guiding principle in the actions of government.

When every official and political group claims to be "pro-family," what does this mean? How can we establish enough common ground to agree on anything concrete?

WHAT DO PEOPLE MEAN WHEN THEY SAY A PROPOSAL IS "PRO-FAMILY?"

Across the political spectrum, many say they are "pro-family" as a way to re-package political agendas. "Pro-family" has been used for so many different things that its meaning has become unclear. The term "pro-family" is often applied to policies that do not necessarily benefit families.

There are many forms and configurations of families. Some have children at home; other do not. There are two-parent, and one-parent families, families with employed parents and stay-at-home parents, young and old families, families of varied income levels, families from different racial and cultural backgrounds blended, and extended families. There are isolated families and those with a great deal of social support. Which kinds of families does a "pro-family" policy benefit? What aspects of family life does it help? These are complicated questions that need respectful study and debate.

WHAT IS "FAMILY POLICY?"

Some individuals & organizations use "family policy" to mean any policy that gives financial help to families with dependent children, such as increasing the tax exemption for child dependents. Others mean policies that ease the lives of working parents, such as provision of child care or parental leave policies.

But family policy is **fundamentally concerned about the family as the basic social institution**. Society depends on families to perform essential tasks that no other institution is able to carry out as well.

Families do four important things:

- Families provide individuals with their basic personal and social identity.
- Families provide economic support to meet basic needs for food, shelter, health and clothing.
- Families rear and nurture the next generation to be productive members of society.
- Families provide protective care for members of all ages who have disabilities, are frail or vulnerable, or who need support to care for

families perform their functions well. Only when families falter or fail does government action to supplement or supplant the family's role become an issue.

Of course, families are also important to individuals because they provide love, intimacy, affection and recreation, and they transmit cultural, religious and social values. And families provide support and refuge in times of crisis. But social policy is not usually directly concerned with these more intimate aspects of family life.

The MCFR recommends that the term "family Policy" be confined to policies that directly or explicitly concern:

Family Composition:	childbirth, marriage, divorce, adoption and foster care.
Economic Support:	Families' ability to provide for their dependents' basic needs (food, shelter, health & clothing).
Development of Children:	Parents' ability to nurture, rear and educate children.
Family Care:	Families' ability to care for members and relatives who are chronically ill, frail, or have disabilities.

WHAT DOES "FAMILY FRIENDLY" POLICYMAKING MEAN?

Currently, most public policy focuses on individuals with specific needs or problems. "Family friendly" policymaking takes a different approach. It brings a family perspective to the development of policies. It recognizes that the individual's close family is often a part of any problem, is significantly affected by it, and needs to be part of the solution. This is also known as a "family systems perspective."

A family perspective in policymaking helps "**before the fact**" by identifying how policies can support families. In this way family members can do a better job of caring for their members & preventing problems. A family perspective helps "**after the fact**" by ensuring that policies recognize families as part of the solution & equips them to deal with the situation. This approach makes policies more effective & makes good economic sense.

A policy maker using a family perspective will:

- **Acknowledge the power of family ties and the variety of ways that individuals' needs and options are influenced by their family context & responsibilities.** Regrettably, most social programs ignore the family and never deal with family members and relatives. Program staff are not generally expected or trained to work with families, and such work is not usually reimbursed or recognized.
- **Recognize the family as the essential partner in providing health care, education and social services to individuals.** Parents, spouses and other family members play a vital role in the promotion of good health, treatment of illness, in children's school achievement and the creation of responsible, law-abiding citizens. When family members are involved in reinforcing, supplementing and sustaining the efforts of educators, health care professionals, social workers and court officers, these efforts are much more successful.
- **Consider the impact of changes in family life on the other major institutions of society.** Trends such as the decline in family size, the rapid rise in the number of homes where both parents are employed outside the home, changing rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing have had profound effects on society. Yet the public policy response to these trends has been too little, inconsistent, and too late.
- **Be aware of the fact that policies and programs can have varied effects on different types of families, and may affect different aspects of family life than are intended by the policies.** To often, policies target only one type of family and ignore the diverse patterns of families, or they are aimed at just one of the many interrelated functions of families and fail to anticipate their effects on other aspects of family life.
- **View the family as an important unit of concern in policy analysis and program evaluation.** Policies and programs typically look at effects on individuals rather than families.

CAN THERE BE CONSENSUS ON THE MAJOR GOALS OF FAMILY POLICY?

Family issues touch deeply held values and beliefs. Some people claim that the controversies engendered by family policy debates are too bitter to ever realize a consensus on broad policy goals and priorities. The Minnesota Council on Family Relations believes there is less fundamental disagreement among Minnesotans in general than among the interest groups that tend to dominate the political debate.

There is now a broad agreement in Minnesota about the definition of the *problem* and about the *general ends* that need to be achieved on many family issues. Understandably, disagreements arise most often over the *means* to obtain them. For example, policy makers and citizens across the political spectrum agree that in order to be free to work, how income parents need some government assistance with child care. However, there is still a need for further public discussion on how large a role government should play in determining the type of child care for which subsidies are used, and how large the subsidies should be.

A broad consensus is emerging on many other family issues. For example, most Minnesotans believe that absent parents should be required to provide economic support for their children; welfare recipients should be expected and helped to work toward self-sufficiency; young teenagers should delay sexual activity; and employers should modify work schedules and benefits to mesh better with family responsibilities.

With respectful discussion based on such areas of agreement, we can shape public policies that suit both the needs and the values of most of Minnesota's diverse families.

Courtesy of Minnesota Coalition for Family Policy – 1999.