



Office of the Child Advocate

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Working Together to Promote Healthy Marriage in Georgia

By Tom C. Rawlings
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"A Georgia in which the vast majority of children are raised by their parents in healthy, stable families." That's the vision of The Supreme Court of Georgia's Commission on Children, Marriage, and Family Law, led by Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears. "Marriage is the best child welfare, crime prevention, anti-poverty program we have," said Chief Justice Sears. "Without a conscious, combined effort from our legal system, government, civic leaders, educators, and others, family breakdown is likely to become more and more entrenched in our society."

The commission held a planning retreat this past week at Winshape Retreat on the campus of Berry College, bringing together judges, family and marriage experts, and national leaders in the movement to reinforce the importance of healthy marriage as an effective institution within which to raise thriving children. Participants discussed ways to promote the public's understanding of the importance of stable and healthy marriages and to help those who seek marriage to create marriages that are healthy and lasting. "The Commission's goal is to increase the likelihood that, every year, more of Georgia's children are born to and protected by their own two parents in a lasting, healthy marriage," said Chief Justice Sears.

Marriage can be an important source of stability and success for a child. Studies have shown that children raised by parents in healthy marriages are more likely to attend college, more likely to succeed academically, less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, less likely to become teen parents, and less likely to be raised in poverty. "Social science research is clear that children growing up with their two married biological parents, within a low conflict marriage, are better off, on average, than those growing up in other family structures," reports a 2004 University of Michigan study.

Justice Sears' commission intends to bring the leadership of the judiciary to the issue by working with other government agencies, policymakers, and advocates to cut down barriers to healthy marriage. The federal government, for example, reports that our welfare system penalizes low-income persons who marry by depriving them of between \$4,000 and \$8,000 per year in benefits. Additionally, studies show that many single parents – especially those living in poverty – would welcome and benefit from efforts to help them establish those marital bonds.

Here in Georgia, a landmark study is being conducted to determine the actual costs to taxpayers of family breakdown. Dr. Ben Scafidi at Georgia College and State University, with the assistance of the Institute for American Values and the Georgia Family Council, is expected to release the study in the spring. Preliminary indications are that the breakup of families causes a greatly increased need for government services, including welfare and other government support, said Randy Hicks, Georgia Family Council's President. "When families fail, government spending increases," Hicks said.

The Chief Justice's Commission is working in an environment in which many advocates across the country are focusing on the benefits of healthy marriages. President Bush, for example, has instituted a nationwide healthy marriage initiative that is funding many state and local programs designed to support, encourage, and educate those seeking marriage as well as married couples.

The Office of the Child Advocate will work hand in hand with the Chief Justice's efforts to ensure our children are raised in nurturing, thriving environments. For more information on healthy marriage movement, visit www.healthymarriageinfo.org , www.georgiafamily.org , or the federal government's healthy marriage initiative website at www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage . You can find out more about the Supreme Court's efforts at www.gasupreme.us . And if you'd like to know more about the work of the Office of the Child Advocate, visit our website is www.gachildadvocate.org.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached at tom@gachildadvocate.org