The 2000 Census Data tell us that one-half of all children born to unwed mothers are born to parents who are cohabiting. In one WELPAN state, there are over 25,000 such births each year. Research in the Fragile Families Project suggests that 84 percent of children are born to parents who, though unmarried, identify themselves as being in a “committed relationship,” albeit one that may not include cohabitation. With appropriate support and nurturing, it seems possible that many of those “fragile” families might survive (even flourish) as two-parent families rather than dissolve under the stress of child rearing and, often, economic difficulties. At a minimum, the intent of the suggested program would be to stabilize these families and improve their chances of becoming self-sufficient two-parent families. A consequence of the program might well be an increase in the rate of marriage among this population.

Program Design

The Family Support Program would be structured to provide a variety of family interventions and supports through a combination of resources derived from TANF, Child Support, WIA, Food Stamps, and the EITC. All unmarried, cohabiting couples with children and with income under 200% of the federal poverty level would be eligible to participate. Unwed pregnant women identified when prenatal care is provided would be a primary target group and would be offered the opportunity (along with their cohabiting partners) to participate, but the program might well use other points of intervention (e.g., early child development programs) to offer unmarried new parents the opportunity to participate. The program initially would be limited to one or more counties, to enable a better assessment of the availability of service providers.

Participating families would be required to establish paternity, and at least one adult would be required to seek/obtain employment. A single funding pool composed of the funding sources identified above would be established to provide a base monthly income for the family without separate calculations being required for each program. As family earnings from employment increased, the base amount of income (and the individual components of the base amount) would be adjusted, but the family would not be held to specific adjustments to each component, so that there would be no need for separate program eligibility determinations (e.g., for TANF, Food Stamps, and EITC). In other words, the family would only need to understand the single adjustment to the base amount resulting from earnings; they would not need to understand the adjustments to each of the subcomponents, which vary as income increases (e.g., TANF cash and Food Stamps diminish as EITC increases).

Each participating family would be required to develop a “family care plan” that would focus on the care of children in the family but also include the care of both adults. A “medical home” would need to be established for the children. The “family care plan” could include components that focus on childhood development, relationship building, conflict resolution, and family planning. The family would also be required to develop a
“family support plan” that would identify the family’s path to economic self-sufficiency. The “family support plan” could include career counseling, skills development, on-the-job training, GED or post-secondary education, and financial literacy training. Child Support arrearages would be disregarded as long as one family member worked, the family had developed both family care and family support plans, and the family showed evidence of progress in plan achievement.

Waivers Required

**TANF**

- Waiver of cost allocation plan to allow pooled funding;
- Waiver to allow one set of eligibility criteria.

**Child Support**

- Waiver to allow use of IV-D funds for training purposes and other services;
- Waiver of noncustodial requirement for IV-D participation;
- Waiver to allow forgiveness or postponement of arrearages;
- Waiver to allow IV-D as an equal partner in the full array of service and administrative costs of the project.

**Food Stamps**

- Waiver to allow use of FSET for a cohabiting couple rather than just single adults;
- Waiver of reporting/certification period to allow for annual recertification for families who have gone off assistance;
- Waiver to allow Food Stamp allowance to be included in family cost pool;
- Waiver of the requirement that states operate the Food Stamp program in the same way in every part of the state.

**Internal Revenue Service**

- Waiver of EITC payment parameters to allow monthly cost pooling;
- Waiver to allow EITC participation for cohabiting families meeting all project participation requirements.

**WIA**

- Waiver of the percentage-of-poverty restrictions for individuals under the age of 21, to allow WIA participation for young families with incomes up to 200% of poverty.

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