

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** NCFR Members  
**FROM:** NCFR Board of Directors  
**SUBJECT:** National Healthy Marriage Resource Center & Member Concerns  
**DATE:** July 26, 2005

At the June 13-14<sup>th</sup> Board of Director's meeting, the Board addressed four issues that had surfaced from NCFR members with respect to the cooperative agreement between NCFR and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for developing and operating the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC.) These issues were discrimination, censorship, partisanship, and NCFR's reputation. The Board also discussed "deal breakers," that is, actions by ACF that could prompt the Board to direct our Executive Director (ED), Michael Benjamin, to terminate NCFR's cooperative agreement with ACF.

### I. On discrimination

Some NCFR members see participation in the NHMRC as discriminatory since the Center website will not include research on gay and lesbian couples. These members view this limitation as contrary to certain sections of NCFR's By-laws or NCFR's Board Policy Governance.

Our By-laws state, in part, that:

"NCFR is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its program, facilities, and employment without regard to race, religion, color, sex, national origin, disability, age, marital status, veteran status, sexual preference, or status regarding public assistance."

We also examined the following policy governance provisions:

"The purpose of the Board, on behalf of the Members of NCFR, is to see that NCFR (a) achieves results for appropriate persons at an appropriate cost, and (b) avoids unacceptable actions and situations." (Section II, Governance Process, Global Governance Commitment);

"Ensure that both (NCFR conference and publications) are meeting the needs of NCFR members and the field. Ensure that the range of human and professional diversity of the membership is reflected in the outputs. Ensure the intellectual integrity of all written publications." (Section II, Governance Process, Board Job Description);

"Practices, activities, decisions, or organizational circumstances which violate the Board's value that NCFR provide a context supportive of diversity by race, ethnicity, culture, age, gender, religion, physical ability, country of origin, and sexual orientation." (Section III, Executive Limitations, Global Executive Constraint); and

The Executive Director shall not “Fail to establish with members and consumers a clear understanding of what can be expected and what cannot be expected from NCFR services rendered.” (Section III, Executive Limitations, Treatment of the NCFR Members and Consumers).

All persons will have equal access to the public information that is provided on the NHMRC website as well as on the new NCFR’s website providing information on strengthening couple and family relationships (more on this below). We affirmed that the NHMRC does not violate NCFR’s By-law provisions regarding equal access and non-discrimination.

We also affirmed that our participation in the NHMRC does not violate the Board governance policies regarding discrimination, based on the following line of thinking:

Being supporting of diversity does not mean that we cannot choose as an organization from time to time to devote our attention to a specific area of study. Many of us as social science researchers and practitioners concentrate in very specific areas of study. What it means, however, is that where there is a variety of views regarding the social and cultural constructions of family forms, NCFR acknowledges (and in so doing, supports) that reality by providing information to the public that recognizes a broad definition of family forms.

Under the constraints of the NHMRC cooperative agreement we are providing research-based information on heterosexual couples and marriages. This is an external constraint placed on this activity by the ACF, but it clearly does not define or restrain NCFR as an organization. Although limited in scope, we nevertheless believe that the NHMRC is worth our involvement because it will provide a valuable educational resource to the public.

Our compliance to our values of inclusivity and diversity should be seen in our strong efforts to develop live links (discussed more below) and an alternate NCFR website that will include research-based information on same sex couples and their families. These efforts affirm and recognize the importance of a broad definition of family forms insofar as social science research and practice is concerned.

## II. On censorship

Some members asked whether the research posted to the NHMRC website would be censored or edited in any way to make it more palatable to a conservative and/or Bush Administration view point. Clearly, we share the universal concern of scientists that work not be censored or slanted toward a particular view.

We believe that NCFR has the responsibility to ensure the intellectual integrity of all written publications. Consequently, we are very concerned about the possibility that ACF could censor products that go onto the website or could modify the information that is placed on the website. In response to this concern the ED is putting into place a peer review process for all of the policy briefs, fact sheets, and research summaries that are submitted for ACF's final approval. This NCFR Peer Review group and the ED will be able to ascertain if ACF is censoring or modifying the material put on the NHMRC website. Any censoring or modifying research to create an advocacy stance with the material supplied by NCFR or any of its partners (“HUBS”) would be deal breakers that would lead to terminating the cooperative agreement between NCFR and ACF.

Each document (policy brief, fact sheet and research summary) developed for the NHMRC will be reviewed by the author of the original paper and two additional experts in the field prior to submitting to ACF for final approval. Michael Benjamin has developed a list of experts covering a range of issues related to marriage, divorce, stepfamilies, cohabitation, marriage education, and other subjects. He welcomes others who are interested in participating in the peer review process.

In addition to censoring or modifying material to create an advocacy stance, a second deal breaker would be the inability to display the address of NCFR's website on the NHMRC, with or without a live link. Michael Benjamin's e-mail and NCFR's phone number are both currently displayed. Any messages sent to Michael Benjamin's e-mail will generate an automatic message listing the NCFR website. Further, all calls to the NHMRC's toll-free number will be answered at NCFR's headquarters. Both of these features are good for the short run while the NHMRC website becomes operational, but we continue to press for a listing of our NCFR web address. Although there has been the perception that there definitely will be no live links to our web address, that question is still open. Michael Benjamin, on behalf of NCFR, is strongly requesting that a live link to NCFR's website eventually be allowed. The ACF is weighing that issue and will let us know soon, probably within the first few months of the NHMRC's website becoming operational. As a Board we feel very strongly that users of NHMRC will need to have easy access to NCFR's own website to get information about families and relationships of all types.

When the NHMRC website becomes operational later this month, the following information about NCFR will be displayed:

*About NCFR*

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, is the nation's oldest multi-disciplinary family organization. It is the only professional organization focused solely on family research, policy and practice. Founded in 1938, NCFR has approximately 3,800 members who are researchers, family therapists, and family educators. NCFR is recognized as an objective, relevant, and valuable source of information and as a resource on the diversity of family issues. With its respected membership, NCFR publishes two highly regarded scholarly journals in the marriage and family field: *The Journal of Marriage and Family*, and *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*. NCFR's educational mission is to provide a forum for family researchers, educators, and practitioners to share in the development of knowledge about families and relationships, to establish professional standards, and to work to promote family well-being.

The NCFR is committed to a policy of nondiscrimination so that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, religion, color, sex, national origin, disability, age, marital status, veteran status, sexual preference, or status regarding public assistance. Further, NCFR provides a context supportive of diversity by race, ethnicity, culture, age, gender, religion, physical ability, country of origin, and sexual orientation

For more information about NCFR, contact Michael L. Benjamin, M.P.H., NCFR Executive Director and Principal Investigator, National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, at [mlb@ncfr.org](mailto:mlb@ncfr.org) or 888/781-9331.

III. On partisanship

In considering the issue of partisanship, we reviewed the following policy governance provisions:

“The Executive Director shall not enter into co-sponsorship of events or products with organizations unless they are nonpartisan, non-advocacy, nonprofit; and have a mission, goals, and philosophy of family in harmony with NCFR's mission, goals, and philosophy.” (Section III, Executive Limitation – Asset Protection);

“The Executive Director shall not enter into any grant or contract arrangements that fail to emphasize primarily the production of ends and to avoid unacceptable means.” (Section III, Executive Limitation – Ends Focus of Grants or Contracts); and

“The Executive Director shall not initiate policy advocacy actions on behalf of NCFR that do not meet all the following criteria:

The issue is important for families or NCFR members.

The issue is informed by research and member expertise.

There is high level of member consensus.

There is potential to make a timely contribution.

There are resources available to make a difference.” (Section III, Executive Limitation – Public Policy)

The cooperative agreement with ACF is an educational activity, not a political or advocacy activity, although it is aimed in part at achieving goals related to the policy ends of the organization. By providing information related to heterosexual marriage, NCFR is not advocating that heterosexual marriage is better than other relationships nor is the organization supporting advocates of marriage that inappropriately claim causal effects of marriage on adults and children. The website is intended to provide information about marriage to anyone seeking information about this type of relationship. Thus, the cooperative agreement is neither a partisan nor an advocacy activity. NCFR does not and did not endorse any candidate, nor support specific pieces of legislation nor specific platforms. Through the peer review process and the advisory committee, the NHMRC can be actively monitored so that advocacy does not take place. As we noted before, such advocacy would be a deal breaker. In taking the position that the NHMRC is an educational rather than a political activity, we separated the activities of the NHRMC from the legislation that provided the funds for this website and from any advocacy stance taken by the Bush administration or other individuals that support an advocacy stance. We think this is a reasonable position, particularly since we have encouraged Michael Benjamin to do everything in his power as PI of this project to remove advocacy positions from the project website. We recognize that to some NCFR members, the cooperative agreement is “tainted money” because they believe that the educational project cannot be separated from an ideological position that advocates marriage over other forms of relationships and families. We hope that NCFR, like teachers in a classroom, can present information about marriage without being seen as taking a stance.

#### IV. On NCFR’s reputation and leadership in the field

With regard to NCFR’s reputation, we considered the following policy governance provision:

“The Executive Director shall not: Endanger the organization’s public image or credibility, particularly in ways that would hinder its mission.” (Section III – Executive Limitations – Asset Protection).

In addition to the peer review process, Michael Benjamin will institute a nine-member NCFR Advisory Committee that will advise project staff on issues that the NHMRC needs to address. This advisory committee will meet annually in Washington, DC. Michael will be requesting three nominations for membership on this panel from the NCFR Section Chairs, and three nominations from the Association of Councils. Michael will appoint three members-at-large to insure diversity on this panel. In addition, two NCFR Board members will participate on an ex-officio basis. NCFR members will be encouraged to utilize these committee members as a conduit to convey any concerns regarding the work of the project.

Beginning with the initial discussions about writing a proposal for this cooperative agreement, we have planned for a companion NCFR website to be developed that would include information about any types of marriage and family relationships that the ACF might not allow on their web pages. Materials/information that fall outside the purview of the NHMRC will be peer reviewed by NCFR for inclusion on our website. The tentative name for that section of NCFR’s website would be “Strengthening Couple and Family Relationships.”

We hope that monitoring such as the peer review process and the advisory committee the Executive Director is putting in place will alleviate concerns over our organizational reputation. We also believe that our commitment as a Board of Directors to be vigilant in protecting the reputation of NCFR from co-opting by any political party or ideological group will safeguard this important asset (i.e., our reputation).

We have scheduled two opportunities for discussion of the NHMRC at this year's Annual Conference in Phoenix AZ: an open forum for NCFR members as part of the annual business meeting Wednesday, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 4:45 – 6:15 p.m., and a second one on Saturday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 8:30 – 10:00 a.m.

As we have stated before, the NHMRC project is an ongoing process that is subject to change by either ACF or NCFR. We have attempted in this memo not to provide a *rationalization* for NCFR's participation, but to share with you our thinking and discussion regarding a complex but (we believe) ultimately important opportunity for our organization to gain visibility in the national policy scene. This conversation with you, the members, and among ourselves as Board members is far from over. We sincerely intend to be true to both the letter and the spirit of our organizational by-laws and our policy governance provisions. As always, we invite your comments and feedback.