



## Government pumps millions locally into marriage initiative

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Ken and Di Loomis didn't really need someone to tell them how a marriage is supposed to work. After 34 years together, they had pretty much figured it out.

But the former pastor and his wife from Penn Township jumped at the chance to join a marriage enrichment class at their church in Export. It was something they looked forward to for some time.

"I came away with a better understanding of her needs," Ken Loomis said. "Sometimes when you know someone so well, you can lose sight of that."

The course was offered through TWOgether Pittsburgh, an \$8.35 million federally funded, healthy marriage initiative that hopes to work with 5,500 couples over the next five years in a five-county area around Pittsburgh.

It is one of two programs costing almost \$9 million that the federal government is funding here as part of a Bush administration initiative to encourage states to strengthen marriages.

Ayo Siegfried, 27, of Ross, who took the TWOgether Pittsburgh program with her husband, Dan, also 27, described it as a marriage "tune-up."

TWOgether Pittsburgh offers marriage enrichment, divorce prevention, mentoring, parenting and fatherhood training to high school students, married and unmarried couples and individuals at 29 churches in the region.

"Nationwide, there is a real recognition that this is an issue," said Terry Mann, director of TWOgether Pittsburgh.

The second marriage training program, Marriage Works, began two years ago with \$600,000 in federal money. It has targeted what it calls "fragile families" -- those with unmarried parents -- in Pittsburgh's East End, where single-parent-headed households outnumber those of married couples by 4 to 1, said Shawn Pinkston, project director.

"Couples need help; couples need skills. It's not therapy, it's training," he said.

The programs could be beneficial if they teach those hoping to tie the knot that marriage is not all champagne and roses, said Dan Romesberg, a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Pittsburgh.

"One of the biggest contributing factors to divorce is unrealistic expectations," he said.

Critics who once questioned the relevance of marriage education have changed their minds, said Bill Coffin, special assistant for marriage education at the U.S. Administration for Children and Families. The agency funds about \$46 billion worth of programs, including TWOgether Pittsburgh, Marriage Works and Head Start.

"The fewer strong, healthy families in the community, the more social services you need," Coffin said.

Healthy marriages can result in healthier couples and children, increased productivity at work and higher school achievement, said Patty Howell, vice president of the California Healthy Marriage Coalition, which will spend \$2.34 million a year for the next five years to strengthen marriages.

Pinkston said 95 couples from Homewood, East Liberty, Garfield, Lincoln-Lemington and Wilkinsburg have been through the Marriage Works program.

"There is a need. Just 3 percent of African-American churches in America have marriage training at all," Pinkston said.

Catholic bishops also have a multi-year campaign aimed at developing programs to strengthen, sustain and restore marriages.

"Healthy marriages are the bedrock of our church and our society," said Louisville Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, chairman of the Marriage and Family Life Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.