

## AAHMI MISSION

The mission of the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) is to promote and strengthen the institution of healthy marriage in the African American community.

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# AAHMI NEWSLETTER

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## ACF Grantee Director, Nisa Muhammad Featured on CNN Special—Black in America 2



Founder of Wedded Bliss Foundation and Black Marriage Day, Nisa Islam Muhammad was featured in a segment titled “Marriage in Black America,” part of the Black in America 2 series hosted by CNN’s Soledad O’Brien. Nisa will be forever known for her quote refer-

encing marriage in the African American community, “when White America has a cold, Black America has pneumonia.”

Nisa Muhammad has made a life journey to save African American relationships and marriages. Wedded Bliss Foundation helps teens, singles, and couples develop healthy relationships and marriages which create better outcomes for children and strong communities. In partnership with LifeSTARTS Youth & Family Services, men, women, singles, and couples are offered classes using the *Basic Training Series* (Couples, Singles, Men and Women) developed by Nisa and Dr. Rozario Slack. The curriculum is taught in a group setting but can also be used at home. The program is highly effective across ethnicities, races, and classes of people. Wedded Bliss Foundation offers a free eight-week program for couples that teaches dating, engaged, or married couples topics such as the value of commitment, responsibility to the African American community, psychological differences between genders, sexual intimacy, and conflict resolution.

Another signature program of Wedded Bliss Foundation is Black Marriage Day. According to Nisa, “The goal is to change the hearts and minds of the Black community to cherish and celebrate marriages that we currently have while encouraging more to commit themselves to marriage so more children grow up with the gift of a two-parent family.” Started in 2002, Black Marriage Day is observed the fourth Sunday in March every year. Churches, community groups, families and

couples celebrate marriage in the African American community in a variety of ways, such as film festivals, a community march, a Hall of Fame event, dinners, concerts, vow renewals, Jumping the Broom ceremonies, and Tom Thumb weddings for children to name a few. The next observance of Black Marriage Day will be March 28, 2010 with participation expected in over 300 cities nationwide.

The CNN show featured a story on couple James and Tina Barnes of Waldorf, MD who have been married over 21 years and their children Jameeca and Jayda Barnes. The Barnes were ready to divorce in the beginning of the segment. A college student, eldest daughter Jameeca found her grades slipping because of her parents’ marital problems. Youngest daughter Jayda was also concerned about James and Tina’s failing marriage. The audience witnesses the family’s transition from one of despair to one of hope as James and Tina attend the Basic Training for Couples class conducted by Nisa and husband Jamal Muhammad. By the end of the segment, the couple decided on reconciliation and to continue working on rebuilding their family relationship.

*CNN.com* published a similar story on Johnny and Shanna Woodbury of Prince George’s County, MD who outwardly, had what looked like the perfect marriage. Owners of a dream home and parents to four children, the Woodbury’s marriage was in serious trouble. Instead of divorcing, the couple enrolled in the Wedded Bliss Foundation Basic Training for Couples class. Since taking the class, the Woodburys say that their marriage is stronger than ever and enjoy the support they have received from other friends and couples they have met. Shanna Woodbury told CNN, “we have become better parents because for the first time we are on one accord, and there is far less arguing for our children to witness. At the end, our children have been the biggest benefactors and for that we are grateful.”

There are several stories like the Barnes’ and Woodbury’s because of Nisa and the Wedded Bliss Foundation. We proudly applaud Nisa Muhammad for her contribution to and support of the mission of the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative!

**“Marriage belongs to the community. An unhealthy marriage relationship gives children an inaccurate representation of marriage, which in turn replicates for generations.”**

**Nisa Muhammad  
July 2009**

## **Relationship Quality and Changes in Depressive Symptoms Among Urban, Married African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites**

**By Karen Elliott**

The study findings by Jay Fagan, Ph.D., recently reported in the July 2009 *Family Relations* journal, suggest that new federal programs, such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative, should consider that the needs of urban African American and Hispanic couples may differ from those of non-Hispanic Whites. The study findings further suggest the need for additional services such as support groups for mothers and ethnic minority fathers. Previous research has reported that parents reporting depression are at increased risk for marital instability, and the author states there is reason to expect that African American and Hispanic fathers who experience increased depressive symptoms may be less likely to stay together with their partners over time. The author further states that men and women who are struggling with increased depressive symptoms may have less energy and motivation to work through relationship difficulties, and their partners may be less willing to address relationship problems when the spouse lacks the psychological resources to work collaboratively through those difficulties. Men are often reluctant to seek or follow through with marital counseling. The study findings showing higher risk for increased depressive symptoms among African American and Hispanic fathers seem to suggest the need to find alternative approaches to addressing marital problems. “The Responsible Fatherhood Program has revealed that many low-income men are interested in attending support groups on fathering. These groups, which mostly target unmarried fathers, could be extended, as they often are, to address marital relationship issues...The Healthy Marriage Initiative provides an excellent opportunity to assist couples with young children to develop better-quality partner relationships. Policies and programs that help couples to make positive relationship changes may be the most effective in preventing emotional health problems, as well as promoting positive maternal and paternal engagement with children in fragile families and reducing poverty across time.” (*Family Relations* 58, July 2009: 259-274)

## **Award-Winning Documentary “Daddy Hunger” Draws Huge Crowds**

**By Sandy Naatz**

When Rich Batten, Colorado’s Family and Fatherhood Specialist, and Manager of Colorado’s Community Access Grant, decided to show “Daddy Hunger,” he chose the Shadow Theatre thinking that the “smaller venue” would hold the expected 100 people. Never did he imagine that the 190 capacity theatre in Aurora would have a line going out the front door, and that some people would be turned away from the “standing room only” crowd. Since that showing, the award winning documentary has been shown to several different crowds throughout the Denver area and seems to be receiving great reviews.

“Daddy Hunger” was created by Ray Upchurch, who was abandoned by his biological father when he was a young boy. In his own journey of healing, the successful mortgage banker, turned film creator, vowed to make it his mission to help others understand their own daddy issues and calls on people to imagine what the world would be like if every man was simply a father to his own child. The movie “takes viewers on an emotional journey through the lives of fatherless men, women and children as they tell their tales...”

Part of the power of showing the movie “Daddy Hunger” in a community is what can happen when the movie is over. When Ray Upchurch asked the crowd to speak to what they thought of the movie, hands began to shoot up, one after another: A young man who had feelings about his own father, a man who just got out of prison who wanted to know how to connect with his kids, another man who needs help with his child support...In a crowd of people who cared to listen, all of them were, that night, connected with resources in the community.

If ever there were a time for Fatherhood to be an “issue”, it is NOW. If you are looking for a conversation piece to start a great dialogue, think about showing “Daddy Hunger.” I can almost guarantee that you will show it more than once and that many healing conversations will follow.

To buy the movie, or to book an event with Ray Upchurch, log onto [www.daddyhunger.com](http://www.daddyhunger.com).

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## Spotlight on Region V: White House Fatherhood Tour Launched in Chicago



Pictured (l-r): Vander Green, Nancy Sanchez, David Hansell, Mary Ann Wren and Kent Wilcox

The White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, along with the Administration for Children and Families, hosted the first in a series of Town Hall Meetings focused on Fatherhood. The meeting was held in Chicago, Illinois on August 5, 2009 at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The meetings are part of President Obama's commitment to families, which was launched during Father's Day at the White House. The President has remained supportive of the fatherhood initiative. Many local and regional fatherhood experts, practitioners, community service providers, faith-based leaders and fathers were in attendance for this groundbreaking event. The event kicked off with a roundtable meeting that used the following topics as the basis for discussion: Mentoring, Best Practices in Fatherhood Programming, Financial Stability and Violence Prevention. Local experts led these discussion groups, with each

giving highlights to the larger group.

After a brief period of networking, the day ended with the actual Town Hall meeting, which was facilitated by Michael Strautmanis. Nearly 200 participants attended the Town Hall meeting. The meeting began with a videotaped message by President Obama that was recorded specifically for this occasion. Local and celebrity dads spoke on the importance of men being involved in the lives of their children and their families. Participants were able to express how community organizations have provided them with the tools and resources needed to become better fathers. Although the meeting was held in Chicago, participants came from throughout the region to be a part of this occasion. Joshua DuBois, Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; Alexia Kelly, Director of HHS Faith-Based Center and the rest of the team are to be commended for their efforts in launching the Town Hall meeting here in Chicago. The Offices of Family Assistance, Child Support Enforcement and Regional Operations were instrumental in the planning and organizing of this event for ACF. Responsible Fatherhood is a very important part of the President's agenda, in part because of its relevance to strong families and strong communities.

## Spotlight on Health: Surfing for Reliable Health Information

By Barbara Andrews

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the health disparities between African Americans and other racial groups are "striking and apparent" when you examine life expectancy, infant mortality, and other measures of health status. African Americans suffer disproportionately from many diseases and conditions including hypertension, kidney disease, diabetes, heart disease and HIV/AIDS. A multifaceted approach is needed to eliminate health disparities and a key part of this effort is informed individuals—educated consumers. For those who care about their own health and their family's physical and mental well-being, reliable information is crucial. You need to know where you can find trustworthy sources of information. In the twenty-first century, many people turn to the Internet for explanations about health issues and concerns. Unfortunately, not every Internet source is credible, so identifying a dependable source of quality information is critical.

[www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov) is a site that serves as a gateway to information about healthy living, prevention, specific diseases and conditions, services, providers and organizations. Healthfinder.gov also presents daily "health headlines" and includes a news archive and topical newsletters. The site also includes a selection of interactive tools that can be tailored to your personal needs. "Health A-Z," a major component of Healthfinder.gov, is an encyclopedia of more than 1600 health topics drawn from government, non-profit, academic and other respected sources.

MedlinePlus (<http://medlineplus.gov>) compiles information from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Library of Medicine (NLM), other government agencies and health-related organizations. You can access an illustrated medical encyclopedia, a clinical trials registry, interactive tutorials, information about prescription and over-the-counter medicines and supplements, medical journal articles and health news.

The CDC ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) also maintains an index of diseases and conditions, as well as articles about emergency preparedness and response, environmental health, workplace safety and traveler's health. Information is organized by life stages, such as "older adults and seniors," and specific populations, including African Americans.

If you want to learn more about the health of specific racial and ethnic minority populations, including health disparities, the Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities provides links to resources, data, reports and publications. For more information about the health status of African Americans, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/omhd/Populations/BAA/BAA.htm>.

Surfing the Web, even when you visit the most reliable and comprehensive sites, is no substitute for visiting your health professional. Nonetheless, the knowledge you gain will be useful. Using responsible Internet tools will help you to become a better informed health consumer who is better equipped to ask questions, advocate, make decisions and navigate the health care system. Knowledge is power! Be informed!

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## Regional Roundup

### Region IV Hosts Healthy Families/Responsible Fatherhood Forums

Region IV hosted the *Kentucky Healthy Families and Responsible Fatherhood Forum- A Conversation: Connecting, Educating, and Networking with Communities* on September 10, 2009 at the E.S. Good Barn on the campus of the University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY. The North Carolina Forum was held on September 15, 2009 at the Hope Community Church, Raleigh, NC. Carlis Williams, Regional Administrator, Region IV, spoke at both forums.

The goal of the forum was to explore three principal issues related to applying for, receiving and administering HHS/ACF funding/resources: (1) Networking for Success, (2) Identifying and Overcoming Implementation and Operational Challenges, and (3) Exploring and Sharing Resources. This event also provided participants with unique opportunities to exchange views and share information around critical issues impacting families and communities, focusing on healthy families, responsible fatherhood and grant writing.

Partnering with Region IV in planning the event in Kentucky included: the Kentucky State Head Start and Community Action Associations, Healthy Family organizations and OFA Healthy Marriage grantees, National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL) and the University of Kentucky. In North Carolina, the partners were the North Carolina Department of Human Services, the North Carolina Head Start and Community Action Associations, the National Partnership for Community Leadership and the Pastor and members of the Hope Community Church. Region IV has held state forums previously in six states.

### Regional Specialists Present at the OFA Grantee Conference

Regional Healthy Marriage/Responsible Fatherhood Specialists and Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education presented, "Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood: A View from the Regions" at the annual 2009 OFA Conference held August 11-13 in Washington, DC. Specialists Josie Hauer, Barbara Andrews, Darlene Tart, Vander Green, Larry McDowell, Karen Elliott, Mona Mann and Janice Holt planned and implemented the session that was attended by over 40 grantees from all ten regions.

The goal of the session was to address: (1) what is working in marriage and fatherhood programs, (2) best practices for sustainability, (3) how community organizations and state agencies work with regional offices, (4) types of technical assistance available from the regional office and (5) the future of healthy marriage/responsible fatherhood, family strengthening, and the need for partnerships. In addition, participants were asked to list the issues that they wanted addressed.

Karen Elliott facilitated the session which included a brief history of the Healthy Marriage/Responsible Fatherhood Initiative by Bill Coffin followed by an overview of community initiatives including the ACF/HHS structure by Larry McDowell. Vander Green talked about Responsible Fatherhood (mentioning the Town Hall meeting recently held in Chicago and the Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009). Karen Elliott led the discussion on Extension (research-based resources) and marriage education and Josie Hauer presented on the free and low cost curriculum guide. The 90-minute session ended with a dialogue about sustainability led by Barbara Andrews. A preliminary review of the evaluations indicated that the session was well-received.

## ACF Happenings

### ACF Regional Liaisons hold Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnership Meeting in Washington, DC



Pictured (l-r): Seated—Darlene Tart, Mary Ann Wren, and Marilyn Lasky, Second row—Gwen Johnson, David Hansell, Joyce A. Thomas, Carol Osborne, Joan Gibson, Mae Rowlett and Dan Houlihan. Back row—Dan Osburn, Sharon Butler, Sandy Naatz, Caron Dwyer and Daniel Hekman.

ACF Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Liaisons held their first face-to-face meeting in Washington, DC from July 21—July 23, 2009. Region II Administrator Joyce A. Thomas serves as the Lead for this initiative.

Tuesday afternoon began with welcome and introductions from Joyce and Alexia Kelley (HHS Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships). It was immediately followed by a discussion "Where We Are Now" facilitated by Sandy Naatz and Darlene Tart. Liaisons and partici-

pants talked about their current responsibilities, background, experience, and areas of expertise relevant to forming ongoing collaborations between them. The afternoon ended with a discussion on "Capacity Building and Economic Recovery," facilitated by Caron Dwyer and featuring speakers Dr. Scott Wituk, Director of the Center for Community Support and Research at Wichita State University; Dr. Jennifer W. Troke of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Workforce Investment; and John Gardner, Construction Apprentice and Workforce Solutions Investment Manager at Worksystems, Inc. The focus was on strategies and lessons learned and how the work supports economic recovery.

The Wednesday sessions were sponsored by the HHS Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships and were opened by Alexia Kelley, Joshua DuBois (White House Office for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships), David Hansell and Diann Dawson (both of Administration for Children and Families). Following were program highlights from HHS offices; a discussion about the goal inter-relatedness between reducing unintended pregnancy/supporting maternal and child health/responsible fatherhood (Dr. Kyu Rhee—NIH, Dr. Wesley Clark—SAMHSA, Scott Santibanez—CDC and Miguel Gomez, Office of AIDS Policy); a talk on supporting responsible fatherhood and healthy families (Vicki Turetsky—OCSE, Robin McDonald—OFA, and Linda Mellgren (ASPE); presentations on reducing unintended and teen pregnancy/promoting maternal child health (Barbara Broman—ASPE, Evelyn Kappler—Office of Population Affairs, CAPT. Karen Hench—HRSA and Kay Hayes—Office of Women's Health); a conversation about HHS resources and programs on economic recovery (John Monahan—Counselor to the Secretary, Yolanda Butler—OCS, Lisa Washington-Thomas—OFA and Henry Lopez—HRSA). Facilitator Dan Houlihan introduced Clayton F. Old Elk and Dr. Yvette Roubideaux of the HHS Indian Health Services, and Caroline Gary of ANA to the ACF Liaisons as panelists for a discussion about involving tribal organizations in the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships work. Immediately following, the liaisons were treated to a tour of the National Museum of the American Indians.

The last day of the meeting featured a session on supporting fathers facilitated by Marilyn Lasky and presented by Roland Warren of the National Fatherhood Initiative. The meeting ended with the ACF liaisons strategizing about topical presentations for future video conference calls as well as pledging to continue to fully support the tenets of the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Initiative.