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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Baylor Social Work Professors Evaluate Program to  
Strengthen Marriages of Hispanic Couples**

Hispanic couples and families are the focus of a new \$2.5 million grant aimed at creating healthy relationships. Two Baylor School of Social Work professors, Dr. Preston Dyer and Dr. Kim Kotrla, will be evaluating the new five-year Hispanic Active Relationship Project (HARP), created by the Active Relationship Center (ARC) in Dallas, which received the grant.

The Hispanic population is growing faster than all other ethnic or racial groups, according to U.S. Census data. Hispanics face a 34 percent chance that their first marriages will end in separation or divorce within 10 years, according to data from the National Survey of Family Growth. For all women, the likelihood of divorce is increased by factors such as marrying at a younger age, having a lower level of education or having a child prior to getting married, according to National Center for Health Statistics data.

ARC created a program specifically designed to provide skills in building healthy stable, relationships in Hispanic couples then pilot-tested the program at eight sites throughout Texas in 2006.

The pilot study was unique in several ways, Kotrla said. "As far as we know, this is the first study on marriage education with participants who are primarily Hispanic," she said. "At least half of them were first-generation immigrants." Recruiting was done

largely through churches. The pilot program began with 177 individuals who were surveyed before, immediately following and three months after completing the program.

Dyer and Kotrla were asked by the ARC to evaluate the program and what they found is encouraging, Dyer said. Evaluation of the pilot revealed that participants had increased marital satisfaction, improved communication and conflict resolution skills, and decreased negative interactions.

At the completion of the workshop, 93 percent of the participants had more confidence that they would be with their partner in years to come, while three months later, 97 percent of the participants felt this way. Just following the workshop, 97 percent reported they were spending more time having fun and enjoying friends with their partner/spouse, while three months later, 99 percent reported this.

Of those completing the program, 97 percent at the conclusion and the three-month follow-up agreed that they possessed the tools to discuss issues with their partners without fighting. After the workshop, 98 percent of the attendees said they would invest more time in their relationship; 99 percent said they would do this three months later.

Dyer, who is a certified marriage enrichment leader and trainer and has led marriage enrichment events across the United States, is excited to see the skills learned in the workshops being used by couples months after the sessions ended.

“It’s not just comprehension of the content,” Dyer said of the results. “We looked at how couples changed their behaviors into the future.”

After evaluating the 10-month pilot project, Dyer and Kotrla were asked by the Active Relationship Center to submit a program evaluation plan to accompany a grant application to the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Of the more than 1,600 applications that were received, the ARC was one of 126 that received funding for marriage education. The \$2.5 million grant will be used to implement the HARP program in Cameron County, Texas, which lies at the southernmost tip of the state.

Cameron County is 86 percent Hispanic. Significant proportions of the adult populations do not have a high school degree, and one-third of families, and more than half of children, live in poverty; almost one-fifth of the families live on less than \$10,000 per year.

The center chose to focus its efforts in a community where there are high rates of poverty, out-of-wedlock births, and low levels of educations and incomes, all of which can be significant stressors on relationships, according to Kotrla.

Dyer and Kotrla will continue to work with the ARC in implementing the HARP-Cameron County project and currently are in the process of developing evaluation instruments, which they will use to track the progress and effectiveness of the program. The first workshops are scheduled to begin in March.

“The ultimate goal of the project is to strengthen relationships,” Kotrla said, “which in turn, will hopefully strengthen families, create better outcomes for children, and eventually strengthen communities.”

Dyer agreed, adding that when adults and children feel safe in a marriage or relationship, everyone benefits.

For more information , contact Dyer (254-710-6230) or Kotrla (254-710-4434) at the Baylor School of Social Work.