

## Kansas House panel investigates 'decline of the institution of marriage'

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Rep. Steve Brunk, R-Wichita, who chairs the Committee on Federal and State Affairs, explained his goal was to investigate "the decline of the institution of marriage over the last number of decades," which he argued had led to a "degeneration of the culture." BO RADER / FILE PHOTO

A Kansas House panel began a two-day review of marriage on Wednesday, with the stated goal of combating divorce.

Rep. Steve Brunk, R-Wichita, who chairs the Committee on Federal and State Affairs, said his goal was to investigate "the decline of the institution of marriage over the last number of decades," which he said had led to a "degeneration of the culture."

He said the committee was not considering a particular bill and that the hope was to decide whether the state had a role in preventing divorce.

Some members of the committee questioned whether two days of hearings on marriage was the best use of taxpayer money. Rep. Stephanie Clayton, R-Overland Park, said before the hearing that she opposed it as a taxpayer but would give the matter fair consideration as a lawmaker.

Toward the end of the hearing, Clayton, who has been married for 13 years, noted on Twitter her frustration with the hearing's testimony.

"There is one word that I haven't heard from the proponents of marriage: love. What I'm hearing is advocacy for a loveless marriage," she tweeted.

The hearing began with testimony from Glenn Stanton, a director of family formation studies for Focus on the Family, a Colorado-based evangelical organization that promotes social conservative policies and traditional gender roles.

Stanton said that children fare best when raised by two biological parents.

"If you look at the newspapers of stories of when a child has suffered domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, it is nearly always the case that his mom's boyfriend or even a stepdad, unfortunately, perpetrated that act," Stanton told the committee.

He also said that students being raised by stepparents are more likely to be malnourished and less likely to do well in school.

Ron Nelson, legislative liaison for the Kansas Bar Association, said most of Stanton's assertions about the superiority of biological parents had been debunked.

"Some of the research that he used has been specifically discounted by federal judges in same-sex marriage cases as quackery. There's simply no basis, no factual basis, no research basis," Nelson said.

Nelson, a family law expert who has practiced law for three decades, said the hearing failed to look at the real reasons many people get divorced.

"There's no question that marriage is good. But not all marriages are good," he said. "You have to look at the individual situation. ... There should be testimony from people who divorce saved their lives because of the abuse that they had."

Brunk said that if the committee does decide to take up a bill, it will hear from experts on domestic violence and other areas to ensure all sides of the issue are reviewed.

Last year, Rep. John Bradford, R-Lansing, who sits on the committee, pushed for a bill that would have made it more difficult to obtain a divorce by removing incompatibility as a reason for separating.

Sherdeill Breathett, a Wichita resident, testified that he came from a broken home, which scarred him and his siblings. He suggested that the state provide premarital classes and post-marriage checkups to prevent divorce and ensure healthy marriages.

"The fourth floor at the Sedgwick County Courthouse is a zoo on some occasions," Breathett said, referring to the floor where divorce cases are heard.

Teresa Collett, a professor from the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, said that Ramsey County in Minnesota had instituted a reflections and reconciliation program for couples considering divorce.

She contended that preventing divorce was something government should pursue. "Married couples take care of each other, which reduces the need of the state to do so," she said.

House Majority Leader Jene Vickrey, R-Louisburg, supported Brunk's decision to hold hearings on marriage, saying that there is nothing more important than the family.

The national divorce rate has fallen steadily since 1981, according to U.S. Census data. It was at 3.6 per 1,000 people as of 2011, the most recent data available, down from 4 a decade earlier.

Brunk said the divorce rate had dropped because fewer people are marrying in the first place. He said divorce "is just a huge financial cost, huge cultural cost ... it does cause social deterioration."

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