

## JOINT STATEMENT BY PARTICIPANTS IN EQUAL PARENTS' WEEK

We recognize that there are serious breakdowns in our justice system which have adversely affected unmarried parents and their children for decades. Some of the most fundamental and prevalent of these breakdowns are: failure of courts to thoroughly and objectively scrutinize custody issues, resulting in custody determinations which are detrimental to children; lack of court intervention to eliminate and prevent obstruction of co-parenting of and access to children; legislation and enforcement of child support laws which result in failure to require some parents to support their children, while requiring other parents to pay levels of child support which are unaffordable. These and related problems originate from a misperception which prevails throughout society and our justice system: unmarried parents are not given equal status as parents.

These are not partisan or political issues. We advocate equity and equality of unmarried parents in furtherance of a genuine focus on the needs and rights of children and in recognition of this fundamental truth: issues that adversely affect a parent's ability to raise and nurture their children adversely affect children. Society's perception of unmarried parents and their roles must change to realize the needs of children cannot be fully and adequately met unless unmarried parents share equal rights and responsibility in raising their children. We promote the right of children to continue to receive the same access to both parents that is acknowledged and sanctioned in families with married parents, recognizing that a divorced family is still a family, and that family values often cannot survive when broken families disintegrate from the loss of a parent and perpetuation of parental irresponsibility and abuse.

There are numerous and complex issues which are generated by these breakdowns in our justice system. While each organization joining in this event focuses on certain issues, our focuses address a common objective: eliminating barriers and inequities in our justice system which deprive unmarried parents and their children of the civil rights and human rights that protect them individually and their right to exist and function as a family.

The goal of this important event is to gain public recognition of these urgent social issues, gain public support for critically needed reform, and, most importantly, to call attention to the reason why our system must be reformed: our love for our children, and the desperate need of our children to have both parents meaningfully involved in their lives.

*If we as a society fail to recognize that there is no substitute for the love of a parent in children's lives, and there is no substitute for the equal presence of both parents in children's lives to meet their children's need for that love, we have lost the ability to see, feel, and touch the very thing we live, breathe and feel as the very heart and soul of our humanity: our own human love. This is what we mean when we say*

***"The best parent is both parents."***