

ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

The Promise and Challenge of Using Volunteers to Provide Community-Based Marriage Education

The goal of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) is to make information about the skills needed to build and sustain healthy marriages broadly available throughout the state. To pursue the mission of changing the culture of marriage and divorce, OMI leaders decided to engage the support of grass-roots volunteers in communities across the state. By the end of 2007 over 120,000 individuals had participated in OMI marriage education workshops. Overall, workshops and large-scale events offered through the community sector account for about a quarter of the OMI's productivity, including six percent of OMI workshop participants who were served by the faith sector. While other briefs in this series focus on implementation of the OMI in public agencies, this brief focuses on one smaller piece of the overall initiative: how the OMI has recruited and mobilized a volunteer workforce—in the broader public and in the faith community—to provide marriage education services in local communities. It also highlights the role of large, regional one-day community events in introducing and stimulating interest in OMI workshops.

The OMI seeks to engage both the public and private sector in efforts to strengthen marriage throughout the state. In the public sector, OMI staff provide training and resources to staff at educational, correctional, human services, and health agencies that provide marriage education as part of their services. The focus of this brief is on efforts to engage the private sector in furthering the goals of the OMI. In particular, the brief explores work with the faith community as well as broader efforts that include members of the general public.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

This ASPE Research Brief describes lessons learned during the establishment of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, drawing on findings from an in-depth process evaluation conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. under contract to ASPE. This brief was prepared by Robin Dion and Sarah Avellar. Other briefs focus on other aspects of the OMI's implementation, including its successes and challenges, and strategies used to address obstacles encountered.

Office of the Assistant Secretary
for Planning and Evaluation

US Department of Health
and Human Services
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Creating a Community- and Faith-Based Volunteer Workforce

The goal of the OMI is to strengthen marriages and reduce divorce by encouraging broad participation in skills-based marriage education. Achieving this objective requires that marriage education programs be widely available and accessible, and that people are aware that these services exist. Even so, participation in such services is not likely to be high unless people understand their potential benefits. The OMI staff have implemented two complementary strategies to achieve these aims. They provide free training to volunteers throughout the state who wish to lead marriage education workshops, and they conducts large community events that provide a taste of the workshop and increase awareness of marriage education services available in the community. The OMI uses the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) as the core curriculum for marriage education.

The OMI has trained community volunteers from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. The OMI offers free training in the 12-hour PREP curriculum. The three-day training is conducted by experts—the curriculum authors. In exchange for the free training, the trained leaders are asked to agree to conduct four free workshops in their communities within one year of training. By the end of 2007, nearly 2,000 volunteer workshop leaders had been trained and had conducted 1,500 workshops, including those in the faith community. OMI workshop leaders are from a wide range of backgrounds¹, including:

- Clergy and lay leaders in churches
- Private counselors and mental health professionals
- Marriage and family therapists
- Social workers offering community-based services
- Retired individuals and couples
- Representatives of minority groups
- Business leaders and law enforcement officials

Community and faith-based volunteers made a substantial contribution to the OMI's overall productivity across the state. Workshops offered by community volunteers accounted for around 20 percent of all workshops offered and participants served. By the end of 2007, an estimated 7,078 workshops had been conducted overall, serving over 120,000 individuals. The community sector provided 1,500 of these workshop and 50 large scale community events such as All About Us or Sweethearts Weekends, described later in this brief. Faith-based volunteers alone provided about six percent of workshops, accounting for just under six percent of total participants served. (see Table 1).

The community volunteer approach has potential advantages, but productivity and recruitment challenges require continual attention. The OMI is predicated on engaging the public as a fundamental strategy for creating broad societal change. Although training volunteers to conduct workshops is expected to lead to greater workshop availability in the community, there may be other advantages to training volunteers that go beyond their potential productivity. Being trained in the curriculum can result in a greater understanding that change is possible at the individual as well as broad societal level. Thus, although not all trained individuals will go on to lead workshops, they spread the OMI's message through word of mouth, and may even refer individuals to other available workshops or, OMI staff believe, may use PREP skills in their own counseling work.

¹ The OMI categorizes volunteer workshop leaders based on their primary occupations, even though they usually do not offer OMI workshops as part of their paid job responsibilities. Because members of the faith community may hold primary jobs outside of their religious institution, there is no clear distinction between volunteers classified as being in the faith community vs. the broader community.

Nevertheless, the “return on investment” in the form of workshops held by trained volunteers is an important issue. Most workshops are being led by a small proportion of the volunteers trained (see Table 2). This is due partly to changes in individuals’ life circumstances among trained volunteers. For example, some may take on new job responsibilities that reduce their available time for voluntary activities, or they may move out of the state. A primary reason for variations in productivity, however, appears to be linked to the workshop leader’s access to a ready source of potential participants. OMI staff maintain regular contact with the volunteer network to provide ongoing encouragement and assistance in order to identify challenges and possible solutions.

TABLE 1
OMI WORKSHOPS AND PARTICIPANTS, 2001-2007

| SECTOR | WORKSHOPS CONDUCTED | PARTICIPANTS |
|---|------------------------|----------------|
| Community Volunteers | | |
| Faith | 424 | 7,205 |
| Counseling | 198 | 2,238 |
| General Community Services* | 774 | 1,788 |
| Native American Services | 34 | 2,828 |
| Hispanic Services | 70 | 1,375 |
| Subtotal | 1,500 | 25,404 |
| Public Sector (includes schools, youth services, TANF agencies, and others) | | |
| | 5,525 | 90,472 |
| Large-Scale Community Events | | |
| | 53 | 6,258 |
| Total | 7,078 | 122,134 |

Source: OMI management information system.

* Includes social workers, military personnel, and others.

Volunteers with ready access to a recruitment source tend to be the most productive. Interviews with community volunteer workshop leaders suggested that for some, recruitment of workshop participants is relatively easy, but for others it is a substantial challenge. Community workshop leaders who did not think recruitment was an issue often had a single recruitment source, such as clients they encounter in their profession or members of their church. These connections provided access to a pool of potential workshop participants. Leaders who described recruitment as a “major problem” indicated that although they thought highly of the curriculum, they did not feel their training had prepared them to find participants. These leaders often struggled to cobble together recruitment sources throughout their community, and felt that their inability to find productive recruitment sources severely restricted the number of workshops they offered. One suggested that OMI staff should be responsible for recruiting participants and assigning them to existing classes in the community.

The OMI staff have recognized this issue and have taken steps to address it. First, they have begun to be more selective in choosing whom to train. The training application process requires that potential leaders provide a basic recruitment plan for each of their required workshops and a letter of support from someone in the community. This process helps individuals and the OMI evaluate both workshop potential and individual training and technical assistance needs. The leader training now also goes beyond a focus on the curriculum to include some attention to recruitment and retention. Further, an

additional optional day of training is provided so that trainees have the opportunity to teach of portion of the program in front of their peers.

TABLE 2
ACTIVITY LEVEL OF OMI VOLUNTEER WORKSHOP LEADERS

| PRIMARY JOB CLASSIFICATION | TRAINED LEADERS | PERCENTAGE OF LEADERS WHO HAVE LED TWO OR MORE WORKSHOPS | WORKSHOPS CONDUCTED 2001-2007 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Faith | 493 | 40% | 424 |
| Counseling | 277 | 36% | 198 |
| General Community Services* | 306 | 60% | 774 |
| Native American Services | 38 | 34% | 34 |
| Hispanic Services | 80 | 31% | 70 |
| Total | 1,194 | 38% | 1,500 |

Source: OMI management information system.

* Includes social workers, military personnel, and others.

Volunteers offer workshops to individuals from varied walks of life, so they tailor the curriculum to suit varied needs. The diversity of community settings and formats of workshops have been recognized as requiring some modifications in PREP, particularly to achieve cultural sensitivity and specificity. Although most community workshop leaders interviewed were positive about PREP, many did not find the curriculum equally applicable to all families. Some thought it had been created for “middle-class, white people.” Although many of the concepts seem to resonate with other populations, workshop leaders often modify the language or emphasis of the material depending on the participants. Leaders working with African-American families, for instance, wanted to focus on keeping the father connected to the family, since many men did not grow up with the role model of an involved father. The flexibility of the curriculum allowed workshop leaders to make the modifications they felt were necessary. The workshop leaders appreciated that PREP could be “individualized” to their groups, and felt that the curriculum developers encouraged them to make adaptations as they saw fit. When significant needs are identified, the OMI staff work with PREP to develop more formal adaptations.

Maintaining a volunteer workforce requires sustained effort . Even when recruitment is not an issue, the OMI found that it must provide ongoing assistance to volunteer leaders to ensure workshop productivity. For example, some leaders may have access to a group of ready participants, but need help identifying a facility where they can hold workshops. Other volunteers want to conduct workshops but need assistance building the public speaking skills needed to be an effective presenter. Management staff also work with workshop leaders to ensure that services are being documented correctly in the online management information system. Using this system, OMI staff classify trained workshop leaders by their level of activity, and regularly contact those with lower levels of activity to offer assistance.

In sum, building a network of volunteers to carry out the OMI mission is an important activity that poses challenges. Although some trained individuals are active, many are not, and the OMI staff must continually conduct training to build and replenish the ranks of volunteer leaders. Substantial effort also must also be devoted to monitoring the progress of volunteers and providing technical assistance.

The faith community seemed like a natural fit and is a source of many volunteers. With a common interest in strengthening families and marriage, the faith community offers promising opportunities for the OMI. More than 67 percent of Oklahomans claim affiliation with a church, and 75 percent of first marriages occur in a church setting. Early on in the initiative, the OMI brought together leaders of every major denomination in the state to join with the Governor to create a marriage covenant and pledge support for the initiative. A group of clerical leaders publicly pledged support for the OMI in February

2000, and were encouraged to work within their denominations. Eventually almost 1,500 clergy signed a covenant, agreeing to require marriage preparation for couples who wish to marry within their religious institution, require waiting periods prior to marriage, and develop marriage mentors within their congregations. The goal of these early strategies was to heighten awareness about the potential for marriage education in churches. Since those early days, the OMI has gone on to train clergy and other individuals active in the faith community, as well as other volunteers, to provide PREP² workshop.

By the end of 2007, approximately 493 individuals trained by the OMI identified themselves as representatives of the faith community, and these individuals provided a total of 424 PREP workshops.³ About 40 percent of these 493 individuals led at least two workshops, suggesting that a small cadre of workshop leaders were the most active. A similar pattern emerged in other areas of the community (see Table 2).

Interviews with workshop leaders in the faith sector confirmed that many are passionate about the potential for OMI workshops to help change the culture of marriage and divorce in Oklahoma. Some felt that offering workshops was their mission, and they wanted to serve as many people as possible. Workshop leaders indicated that although the skills emphasized in the curriculum are important, participation in the workshops alone may offer individuals hope for the possibility of change and improvement.

The OMI is implementing three new approaches involving the faith sector. OMI staff encountered a few challenges to implementation in the faith sector. For example, they found that religious institutions such as churches and temples rely on volunteers to carry out their missions, and these volunteers often are already spread too thin. The additional responsibilities associated with providing OMI services may be daunting to already overcommitted organizations. Nevertheless, the OMI remains committed to involving the faith community in its efforts and therefore is implementing three new approaches. First, retreats for pastors and their spouses are being conducted to provide them with a clear understanding of the curriculum and at the same time offer information that might refresh and renew their own marriages. Second, OMI staff have begun to work with specific churches, temples, and other religious organizations to implement in-house services for congregants and community members. Third, OMI staff are providing mentor and small group workshop leader trainings to encourage the implementation of workshops for neighborhood-based congregational groups.

Large-Scale Community Events to Raise Awareness and Promote Interest in Services

To increase public awareness and understanding of the OMI services, and to increase demand for community-based workshops, the OMI staff began to organize, offer, and publicize free large community events. Since 2004, for example, the OMI has held “Sweethearts’ Weekends,” one- or two-day weekend events at which a substantial portion of the PREP curriculum was presented in a condensed format.⁴ These events, targeted to the general public and typically held in the Oklahoma City or Tulsa metro areas around Valentine’s Day, attracted up to 600 participants each.

The main objectives of the Sweethearts’ Weekend events were to broaden visibility of the OMI, increase awareness of the availability of marriage education services, recruit participants into full-length community workshops, and provide novice volunteers with an opportunity to see and participate in a

² The OMI generally uses a single marriage education curriculum, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), although some adaptations of this curriculum are also in use in various sectors.

³ The OMI’s efforts in the faith- and community-based sector are only one small part of its broader activities. Including activity in public sectors, the OMI has trained many more workshop leaders.

⁴ The standard PREP format is 12 hours of material typically offered over a six-week period, whereas Sweethearts Weekend provided 7-8 hours of material in a single event.

workshop. The large-scale format of these events increased the OMI's visibility because of the publicity that accompanied them. To meet recruitment targets, the OMI engaged in public relations campaigns involving some paid newspaper ads and radio commercials. To further drive demand for the traditional 12-hour community-based workshops, the events included a substantial dose of the curriculum material, giving participants the opportunity to "sample" the content of the workshops available in their communities. OMI staff also believed that the sheer size of the events could help normalize the experience of receiving marriage education and help for relationships, because participants see that many other people are seeking the same services.

The success of Sweethearts' Weekends led to a broader effort: The "All About Us" Statewide Tour. Building on the Sweethearts' Weekends, the OMI staff aimed to make the events more widely available and frequent. In 2007, the Sweethearts' Weekend was transformed into a series of highly promoted one-day events throughout the state, renamed "All About Us" (AAU). Twenty All About Us events were held in 2007, and according to OMI staff, more than 6,200 Oklahomans have so far attended either the Sweethearts' Weekend or an All About Us event.

Organizing and conducting these events throughout the state requires substantial involvement by the OMI. Staff are assigned specific geographic regions of the state, in which they are responsible for identifying communities or organizations interested in an AAU "tour stop" in their area, and also for locating and recruiting partnership organizations, sponsors, and venues. Interested participants register with the OMI online or by telephone. The OMI also identifies workshop leaders, often selecting from among local leaders considered especially active or effective. However, because staff have found that participants sometimes do not consider other locals to be "experts," the OMI may bring in high quality leaders from other parts of the state or provide OMI staff to lead the events.

Publicity, incentives, and word of mouth stimulate interest in AAU events, though not all who register for free public events show up. Although the OMI provides promotional materials for the events, including flyers and media announcements, both the local organizations and OMI staff recruit workshop participants. The OMI staff strives to reach a recruitment target of 1,000 individuals registered for each event in the Oklahoma City or Tulsa metro areas, and 100 in smaller communities. To encourage attendance, door prizes (like a free hotel stay) and other incentives are offered. Those who attend can obtain a marriage license at the discounted price of five dollars, and this opportunity is advertised. In interviews with past participants, many indicated that they had learned about the event through their employment at various agencies, including a military base, the juvenile court, and a social services agency. Some saw flyers or received emails about the event. Some came after hearing about the event from a relative who had attended a previous event. Usually more people register than attend, even counting for people who show up without pre-registering. The OMI notes that attrition is an evitable aspect of recruitment for any large-scale event, and so they over-recruit accordingly. On average, OMI staff thinks that about 60 percent of those who registered actually show up, which may be typical for many types of public events.

People who attend the events often are looking to prevent future problems. Interviews with past participants suggested that couples with varying levels of relationship issues attend, but many are looking to avoid or prevent future problems. For example, one couple attended because they were newly married and thought it would be a nice way to spend Valentine's Day. Another indicated that they wanted to learn how to "solve problems before they become problems," because many of the people they know are divorced. One woman said she was looking for more effective ways to communicate with her spouse, and another couple attended because they heard great reviews from a relative who indicated it had helped him.

Most who attend AAU events find them helpful, though they are not necessarily a substitute for the full-length community workshops. Past event participants typically rate the experience highly and perceive some benefit to their relationships. Participants were able to recall some of the basic concepts, which include the importance of communicating and listening, validation, and filters. They indicated that interacting with other couples about relationship topics helped normalize their own issues. Several participants reported that after attending, they had made some changes in their relationships, such as spending more time with their spouse or putting more effort into the relationship.

Nevertheless, there are trade-offs with this kind of approach. Some participants questioned whether they really had absorbed the information and learned to apply the skills correctly. Sweethearts' Weekend and the All About Us events provide a shortened version of PREP. Some material has been eliminated, with the remainder compressed into one day. Initially, the Sweethearts' Weekend spanned two days (Friday and Saturday), but attrition on the second day prompted the OMI to condense the event, as part of a larger change in strategy. Participants indicated that it was a lot of information to absorb in a short time, and suggested that the large-group format was not the best for digesting more than a few key points. These concerns were echoed by some AAU event leaders, who expressed concern that couples do not have enough time to process or practice the skills in a one-day format and suggested that OMI staff follow up with event participants.

Some participants did go on to take the full-length workshop after the event, however, and thought that the large-scale event was useful in providing an overview of the curriculum. Further, the AAU events may attract people who would not attend the traditional workshops. The events offer an alternative to couples who cannot attend the traditional workshops, either because of time constraints or if workshops are not offered in their community. In addition, the relative anonymity of participation in the large events may be appealing for some.

The OMI experience suggests that practitioners wishing to engage the general public in learning, using, or teaching marriage and relationship skills may benefit from considering some key questions:

- *How will you mobilize and sustain a reliable network of productive volunteers?* By definition, there is no real leverage with volunteers. Initiatives must find creative ways to encourage volunteers to continue conducting community workshops. The OMI found that setting expectations for productivity prior to training and proactively following up with trained volunteers on a regular basis were necessary steps. Ensuring that volunteers quickly become involved with assisting or leading workshops soon after training appeared helpful. To maintain the network, the OMI staff found it necessary to conduct regular training to replace volunteers who are no longer producing and to refresh the skills of productive volunteers.
- *How will you address recruitment?* Although many individuals may accept the offer of free training, not all will have ready access to a source of potential workshop participants. By asking prospective trainees prior to training to consider how they will find participants prior to training, the OMI has been able to be more strategic in selecting the individuals in whom they invest. Including information and assistance on recruitment during curriculum training was also key.
- *How will you familiarize the public with what marriage education is?* Marriage education is not yet a household word, and there may be many misconceptions about it that have the effect of holding people back from participating in community workshops. The OMI staff believe it is useful to put on large-scale fun events that, for participants, do not require a large investment of

time or effort but help acquaint members of the public with the idea of marriage education. Even if people do not come away from the events with deep knowledge of new concepts, they will have learned that help is easily available for them in their communities and offered by local workshop leaders.

- ***Will you engage the faith community and how?*** Even in a relatively religious state like Oklahoma, engaging the faith sector is not simple. Some denominations are structured around a culture of local autonomy, so Oklahoma learned to work directly with specific churches, temples, and other religious institutions to implement workshops for their congregations. They also found that the strategy of providing small-group training or retreats for faith leaders and their spouses was a well-received strategy.

Evaluation Methodology for the OMI Process Study

Information reported in the OMI research brief series is based on an analysis of data gathered during an ongoing multiyear study of the initiative's design, development, and implementation. Study methodologies include semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups, direct observation of program operations, focus groups with staff and participants, and secondary analysis of data from existing reports and surveys. The research team met directly with more than 160 individuals involved with the OMI in various ways, focusing on implementation in the education, social services, health, and community volunteer sectors, and including a special emphasis on OMI services within the state's correctional system. A full report on the findings of this study will be produced in December 2008. Mathematica's research team is led by M. Robin Dion, and includes Alan M. Hershey, Debra A. Strong, Heather Zaveri, Sarah Avellar, Nikki Aikens, and Timothy Silman.

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