

# 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

### A Process Evaluation

*In the late 1990s the State of Oklahoma, recognizing the economic and social consequences of its high rates of divorce and non-marital childbearing, undertook an innovative strategy to strengthen families. At the direction of the Governor, the state initiated an effort to reduce divorce and decrease non-marital childbearing. This pioneering effort became the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI), now the nation's longest running and most comprehensive set of programs to strengthen marriage. Although many communities and a few states have begun activities to support marriage, facilitated in part by the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative of the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services, Oklahoma was the first to commit to making marriage and relationship education services accessible in every county in the state and to citizens from all walks of life. Approximately five to ten percent of Oklahoma households have participated in OMI workshops.*

The OMI has gained momentum as concern about the often negative effects of divorce and nonmarital childbearing on children, communities, and the broader society has come to light. A consensus of social science research has found that children raised in single parent families are, on average, at higher risk of poverty and a wide range of negative consequences. By giving the OMI a broad mission to strengthen and improve relationships, the creators and leaders of the initiative hope to create widespread social change with respect to marriage and divorce. They expect that helping people develop better relationship skills will prevent the kind of marital distress that leads to divorce, prepare unmarried individuals for a healthy marriage, and reduce the number of children who grow up in single parent households, thereby improving the wellbeing of Oklahoma's children and their families. As the initiative's

### ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

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*The brief summarizes the findings from an in-depth process evaluation. The full report, and additional briefs focusing on specific aspects of the OMI's implementation, are available at ASPE's web site: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/OMI>*

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services become more widely available, known and used, OMI leaders anticipate that changes in norms and attitudes about marriage will follow, strengthening the institution of marriage at the individual and community level. To create this widespread societal change, the OMI focuses on improving the relationship skills of its residents.

## **WHAT IS THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE?**

The OMI is a statewide, publicly-funded effort that seeks to strengthen families and enhance the well-being of children by reducing divorce and nonmarital childbearing through a range of approaches, most prominently marriage education. The OMI began operations in 2001 after an initial planning period. Since then, its approach has featured six consistent hallmarks, even while its specific strategies have continued to evolve:

**Public-private partnership.** The OMI is funded by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) and managed through a contract with Public Strategies, Inc. (PSI), a local private-sector firm. The combination of public and private resources is also found in the implementation of OMI services, which are provided by public agencies and institutions, nonprofit community-based organizations, and individual community volunteers.

**Focus on an intervention to improve marriage and relationship skills.** OMI leaders believe that the key to achieving the initiative's goals is instruction in skills that research has shown are associated with healthy and stable marriage. The initiative adopted as its core curriculum the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP®), which focuses on skills for effective communication, conflict management, and enhancement of commitment, fun, and friendship. The curriculum, in various forms, is provided in workshops for groups of couples or individuals and in a variety of formats and venues.

**Dynamic effort to achieve statewide saturation.** The OMI is an ever-growing initiative that aims to blanket the state with its message and services. To achieve saturation, it works to make services accessible in every area of the state and to individuals from diverse backgrounds and in various relationship circumstances, including both single and married individuals.

**System to build statewide capacity for delivering relationship skills training.** The OMI's primary strategy is to build capacity for providing instruction in the PREP® curriculum and various adaptations of it. It supports and facilitates free training of workshop leaders by the curriculum authors, and provides curriculum materials and assistance to community volunteers and staff at public and private agencies and institutions. In exchange, these workshop leaders are asked to commit to providing several free workshops during the year after their training.

**Network of individual and institutional volunteers.** Individuals in the general community volunteer their time to offer OMI workshops. Agencies or organizations that decide that relationship skills training should be a priority for their clients encourage their staff to offer OMI services as part of their regular duties, and thus "volunteer" their staff's time (although some agencies have also entered into contracts to offer services).

**Awareness-raising about the importance of healthy relationships and marriage and the availability of services.** As the state's supply of providers has grown, the initiative has increasingly focused on building public awareness of the free workshops, primarily through large-scale

community events that garner publicity and media attention and provide a taste of the curriculum in a one-day format. These events occur in communities throughout the state, in a statewide “marriage education tour.”

### **THE EXTENT AND BREADTH OF THE OMI’S REACH**

Between 2001 and 2007, the OMI has made steady and substantial progress in training workshop leaders and promoting participation in workshops:

- Approximately five to ten percent of Oklahoma households (122,134 individuals) participated in OMI workshops.
- The OMI trained 2,277 individuals to deliver relationship skills workshops.
- These workshop leaders conducted an estimated 7,078 workshops, usually 7-12 hours in length, ranging from one-day events to a series of weekly meetings.
- The geographic distribution of workshops roughly corresponds to the population densities of the state’s urban and rural areas. Every county in the state has been reached to some extent.

### **WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE OMI AND IN WHAT SETTINGS?**

By design, OMI workshops are offered to both couples and single individuals. The initiative aims to have positive effects on the relationships of both married and unmarried couples. For single adults and high school students, the aim is to enhance individuals’ ability to form strong relationships and marriages in the future.

The breakdown of OMI workshop participants reflects this broad definition of goals and the institutional partnerships that the OMI has formed. Between 2001 and 2007:

- More than 53 percent of workshop participants were youth (high school students and first-time juvenile offenders).
- About 21 percent were adult clients of institutions (welfare recipients, adoptive parents, prison inmates, parents of juvenile offenders, and others).
- About 20 percent were adults served by volunteers in the general community (in faith, counseling, community services, and related settings).
- Five percent were adults who received an abbreviated form of the workshop in a one- or two-day large-scale community event.

The initiative’s aim is to serve people in different stages of relationship and marriage. About three-quarters of workshop participants during the period were youth or adult clients of agencies that serve single adults. Most of these individuals attended without a partner or spouse, even though some might have been in relationships.

The overall pattern of participation results from several factors. First, the OMI has intentionally focused on educating young people, who in Oklahoma tend to marry young and thereby become at high risk for divorce. Second, it has focused on low-income groups, who are also known to be at special risk for divorce and nonmarital childbearing. Third, because few agencies and institutions target couples—in Oklahoma and elsewhere—it has been difficult to identify major “sources” of couples for identifying and offering OMI services.<sup>1</sup> Most couples who have participated in OMI services have done so within faith, counseling, or related settings.

## **WHAT FACTORS APPEAR TO PROMOTE OMI EXPANSION?**

An analysis of the OMI’s implementation so far reveals three factors that appear to facilitate recruitment of workshop participants and delivery of OMI services:

**An ongoing source of prospective participants facilitates recruitment.** Recruitment of couples or individuals was easier when workshop leaders or sponsoring agencies had access to a continuous source of prospective participants. Agencies and institutions that could recruit participants from their existing clientele were more likely to succeed in implementing workshops and continuing them. Community volunteers unaffiliated with such an agency or organization often had difficulty recruiting participants for workshops, as did agency staff who were expected to go beyond their existing clientele to find participants. OMI staff found that individuals and agencies without a steady source of participants were especially likely to need additional training and follow-up assistance to help them identify such sources.

**Existing infrastructure, such as an established enrollment process, pre-existing classes, and reliable venue, supports efficient workshop delivery.** Organizations that had pre-existing classes or group-based instruction on related topics, such as high school classes on marriage and family life, found it straightforward to incorporate OMI workshops. An established process for enrollment, such as class registration at high schools or the application process for TANF recipients, has also simplified recruitment. Having a reliable location for holding workshops was particularly important for community volunteers.

**Responsiveness of the curriculum to the target population’s needs is essential to engage both service providers and participants.** Any statewide initiative that strives to bring about widespread change in behavior and attitudes regarding family formation and structure must speak to the needs and interests of individuals in diverse relationship circumstances—for example, singles as well as married couples, dating adolescents as well as parents, and low-income as well as middle-class families. In the OMI’s case, it appears that local implementation was more likely when the curriculum was adapted to be responsive to the circumstances of the specific population served. For example, agencies serving single parents with a history of involvement in abusive relationships were more likely to use the OMI curriculum once it was adapted to include an emphasis on how to recognize and choose healthy partners in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is couples who are expecting a baby, who can be easily identified through the maternal health system. The OMI includes the Family Expectations program, which is part of two national experimental evaluations of programs for low-income married and unmarried expectant couples. Because of the relatively recent implementation of this program, Family Expectations couples are not included in the estimates shown here. For more information about this program, see Dion, et al. 2007, *Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program*, Washington DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

The OMI's experience to date also highlights the importance of addressing issues that can arise in the organizations enlisted as partners in a marriage initiative. Two of these issues—closely related to each other—concern “buy-in” from staff, and the degree of “fit” between the goals of the marriage initiative and the partner organization.

**Buy-in of agency frontline staff promotes implementation success.** The experiences of several agencies in the OMI's early years indicates that although an organization or agency may have the right “tracks” on which to run the OMI workshops, and even have the support of high level leadership, frontline staff might not automatically welcome or wholeheartedly support it. Lack of buy-in by frontline staff was associated with a lower volume of workshops. Relatedly, when high-level agency support changed, services simply withered. These experiences suggest that inviting the input and feedback of frontline staff and responding to their concerns is important to strong and sustained implementation.

**The fit between OMI goals and the mission and priorities of partnering organizations is critical.** Some institutions, agencies, or organizations may be attractive as marriage initiative partners due to their focus on families, their accessibility to potential participants, or their management of a statewide infrastructure. However, agency culture and mission usually entail well-defined priorities, such as rehabilitation for prison inmates, prevention of further offenses among juvenile offenders, general education of youth, or employment for parents receiving government assistance. Instruction in relationship skills was well aligned with the youth-focused education mission of Family and Consumer Sciences teachers in Oklahoma's high schools, which contributed to their enthusiastic and widespread use of the OMI's curriculum. In general, leadership and staff were most likely to embrace a marriage initiative's goals when they were supportive of and in line with the agency's pre-existing priorities.

## **WHAT LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE OMI EXPERIENCE ABOUT “GOING TO SCALE”?**

The OMI has been working to reach a broad state population. This effort to scale up the initiative has yielded three general lessons of potential value to other states:

**Saturation is likely to require a multi-modal approach.** The OMI has found different ways to engage communities, agency staff, and individual volunteers. Each method has reached different segments and levels of society, and each has had distinct advantages and challenges. Training institutional staff gave the OMI efficient access to large numbers of participants, such as students and low-income or at-risk groups, who otherwise would be difficult to reach. Individual community volunteers brought a grass-roots element to the initiative and helped to spread the message. Large-scale community events both stimulated awareness and provided an alternative for individuals who otherwise might not attend a full-length workshop.

**Ongoing effort is needed to maintain a volunteer workforce.** Although many people volunteered to be trained, relatively few went on to lead workshops. About one-third of trained workshop leaders, whether institutional or individual, ever led a workshop.<sup>2</sup> Most workshops therefore were conducted by a small cadre of highly active individuals. Because of high turnover, developing, growing, and maintaining a volunteer workforce required an ongoing effort to recruit, manage, and motivate volunteers and sustain their interest.

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<sup>2</sup> This percentage excludes data for the number of workshops/classes held by trained high school teachers, which is not available.

**Decentralization of state-level agencies may require an individualized approach to agency partnerships.** Commitment from state-level leadership is not necessarily a guarantee of action within some public systems. When state agencies are decentralized and local offices have substantial autonomy, issues might have to be addressed with management at each regional or county-level location. In Oklahoma, so far decentralization has meant that in agencies or institutions with a statewide infrastructure implementation is sometimes still partial.

#### **WHAT ARE THE KEY LEADERSHIP INGREDIENTS?**

Although each state must adjust an initiative to fit its own cultural and political context, the OMI experience suggests that the replicability and sustainability of all similar initiatives are likely to depend on three key qualities:

**Strong leadership, management, and fiscal support.** The OMI has shown that running a statewide marriage initiative is a complex, demanding challenge requiring strong management and considerable resources. Funding is needed to sponsor training and supplies for workshop leaders, provide them with technical assistance and support, arrange and conduct large community-wide events, maintain a management information system, foster research activities to inform development and expansion, and recruit and monitor the progress of public agencies. Disciplined management is needed to set goals and monitor progress towards them.

**Persistence, flexibility, and creativity.** Rolling out marriage education services statewide is no simple task, and pre-defined solutions are rarely likely to work just as planned. The OMI experience shows that developing and carrying out a statewide initiative requires patience, determination, and the flexibility to come up with creative solutions to obstacles. Developing a keen eye for implementation opportunities and moving quickly to take advantage of them is important. The success of Oklahoma's decision to contract out its initiative's management to a private firm illustrates how this strategy can promote nimble assessment of and response to problems in a way that public agencies, with their constraints, often find difficult.

**Responsiveness to a diversity of perspectives while maintaining core mission.** In the long term, sustaining a marriage initiative requires surviving transitions of state leadership. The Oklahoma experience is instructive about the elements needed for such survival. The OMI's emphasis on services as well as social values made it possible to appeal to a wide range of political perspectives. Attention to a variety of supporters and potential skeptics in the planning stage as well as later phases of implementation underscored the fact that the OMI's focus is on finding solutions rather than serving political purposes. While the initiative was launched and developed under a Republican governor, the initiative has grown and matured under a Democratic administration.

#### **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Oklahoma pioneered implementation of the first statewide marriage initiative in the nation, and continues to refine strategies and develop new ideas. Their experience provides rich lessons that are instructive for a range of policy interventions. This evaluation examined the implementation of the OMI, but not the extent to which its ultimate goals have been achieved: reductions in divorce and nonmarital childbearing, and increases in the number of children growing up with their own parents in a healthy marriage. The OMI will continue to be of great interest to policy makers, program practitioners, and evaluators as the initiative continues to evolve and adapt.

### *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. 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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