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**The Oklahoma
Marriage Initiative:
A Process
Evaluation**

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.¹

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 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.

¹ The State of Texas launched a statewide strategy in 2007, with plans to offer free marriage education classes beginning in September 2008.

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 public agencies, programs, or 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.² 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

² 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.

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.

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.³ 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.

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

³ This percentage excludes data for the number of workshops/classes held by trained high school teachers, which is not available.

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.

CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW OF THE OMI AND 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 state committed to making marriage and relationship education services accessible in every county in the state and to citizens from all walks of life.⁴

By giving 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 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.

In 2005, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to conduct a process evaluation of the OMI, focusing on three primary goals:

⁴ For example, the State of Texas launched a statewide strategy in 2007, with plans to offer free marriage education classes beginning in September 2008.

- To document and chronicle the conception, development, and implementation of the initiative
- To analyze the OMI's program strategy and understand as well as possible the consequences of the implementation approaches taken
- To identify lessons and implications for both the continuation of the OMI and the development of marriage initiatives in other states.

To fulfill these goals, the MPR study team explored the evolution of the OMI from beginning to present. The evaluation examined the context in which the OMI developed, OMI strategies for implementing services for a variety of population sectors, the role of research and information in the design, implementation, and expansion of the initiative, and the initiative's strategies for changing the systems and culture within which it operates.

This process evaluation is intended to provide information about the OMI model and implementation experiences for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. It differs from an outcome or impact evaluation in that it is not designed to assess the effect of the initiative on Oklahoma's families, children, or communities. It is likely that any effect which an initiative like OMI might have on divorce rates, attitudes towards marriage, or other social indicators would take some time to occur. Detecting such effects, moreover, would require a different kind of research design—well beyond the intended scope of this study—to avoid confusing the effects of other factors and trends with those of the OMI itself. However, information from the OMI experience may be useful in informing similar emerging initiatives in other states and communities, addressing such matters as replicability.

This report presents a comprehensive look at the key findings from MPR's process evaluation. The remainder of this introductory chapter describes the priorities and research questions of the study, provides an overview of the evaluation's methodological approach, and outlines the organization of the overall report.

A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The OMI is a complex, multifaceted, and ever-evolving initiative. It seeks to involve every societal sector and institution, from high schools to welfare agencies, and relies on a mix of volunteers, public and private agency staff, and paid employees to carry out its services. It involves many partners, from curriculum developers to researchers to policymakers. It grows and changes as lessons are learned, opportunities arise, and priorities shift. It aims to change both the attitudes and the behavior of individuals, organizations, and communities. Although the OMI clearly focuses on building a ready supply of marriage support services throughout the state, it also works to promote awareness of the availability of services, build sustainable capacity, and promote policies that improve supports for marital relationships.

From these many layers of activity, ASPE sought to obtain a general picture of the initiative's goals, activities, and achievements to date, as well as learn how it initially

developed and has evolved over time. The study focuses on OMI experiences in selected sectors, to gain a broad and in-depth understanding of the successes and challenges encountered by the OMI that would yield useful implications, lessons, and insights. The study addresses eight questions:

- How did the Oklahoma context shape the philosophy, strategy, and organization at the start of the OMI and in ongoing course adjustments?
- How did the OMI develop its vision and build broad support for focusing on marriage?
- What is the overarching OMI philosophy, and how is it reflected in overall strategy, implementation decisions and methods, and adjustments over time?
- What part has been played by research and information in the OMI's implementation?
- What are the reasons for and implications of focusing on marriage education as a vehicle for change, and of choosing a single curriculum as the foundation for the OMI?
- What goals for changing systems and culture does the OMI address?
- What responses has the OMI elicited in the form of participation in the workshops that constitute its main service delivery activity?
- What have been the major accomplishments, benefits, and challenges of implementing the OMI through both volunteer-based and institutional avenues?

B. METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

To address these research questions, the OMI evaluation relied on multiple methods for collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were collected in the field through five site visits, each conducted by two people and lasting up to a week. Quantitative data recorded in the OMI management information system were also analyzed to assess the extent of participation in OMI activities.

1. Overview of Methods and Respondents

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, secondary data analysis, and review of documentary information and records. The qualitative data collection included sampling individuals with different roles and perspectives, at the leadership and management level as well as within different public- and private-sector organizations. The study team conducted interviews with 163 respondents with various OMI roles and across multiple sectors, and analyzed administrative data about more than 2,000 workshop leaders and nearly 130,000 participants.

Semi-structured Interviews

- OMI Staff
- Research Advisory Group Members
- Curriculum Developers
- Management Staff at Public and Private Agencies

Focus Groups

- Community Volunteer Workshop Leaders
- Workshop Leaders at Public and Private Agencies
- Participants in Community-Level Workshops
- Participants in Workshops at Public and Private Agencies

Analysis of Administrative Data

- Number of workshops held
- Number of participants
- Number of workshops led by trained workshop leaders
- Geographic distribution of services
- Participant characteristics

Review of Documents and Records

- Reports on research findings
- Documents prepared for research advisory group meetings
- Recruitment materials (flyers, brochures)
- Curriculum and curriculum adaptations

Collecting data for this evaluation was challenging because there are few contractual obligations between the OMI and the agencies and individuals who voluntarily deliver services. The absence of formal obligations is consistent with the OMI's grassroots approach and reflects the broad support it has enjoyed. However, it also means that neither

the OMI nor researchers can prescribe consistent reporting or hold volunteers accountable for providing data.

These factors become evident in any effort to collect rigorous information about OMI workshop activity. The initiative implemented a web-based system for electronically recording information about workshop leaders and participants across all of its sectors. However, the volunteer workshop leaders often do not report consistently about the workshops they have completed. Consistent information about workshop participants is also difficult to obtain. The OMI designed a simple two-page form to be completed by each participant, but not all workshop leaders emphasize the importance of these forms because of privacy concerns or simply because they take too much time away from workshop delivery. Participants often respond to some questions but not others, leaving large amounts of missing data. No identifying information is collected, out of concern for participants' confidentiality, so researchers cannot directly seek out participants from past workshops for interviews or focus groups.

2. Approach to Qualitative Data Collection

The 163 respondents interviewed were workshop leaders and participants in a wide range of sectors (described below). They included 18 OMI management staff, 8 members of the OMI's research advisory group and curriculum developers, 24 state or local managers at the public and private agencies that deliver OMI services, 42 workshop leaders, and 71 workshop participants. Respondents were from high schools, welfare agencies, adoptive/foster parent services, state prisons, juvenile offender programs, Cooperative Extension Services, and Head Start programs, as well as members of the faith community, mental health counselors, and others delivering services in the general community. Most of these respondents were located in either the Oklahoma City or Tulsa metro areas, although some were in rural areas (such as correctional centers).

Timing. Qualitative data were collected in the field on three occasions. Early in the project (late 2005), a first site visit was conducted to explore the broad implementation approach and refine the evaluation design. A second visit, in April 2006, gathered information from Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) staff, who fund and oversee the initiative, and from OMI staff at Public Strategies, Inc. (PSI), the firm responsible for day-to-day operations. In October, November, and December 2007, the study team conducted three week-long visits to numerous institutions, communities, and individuals implementing OMI services to ascertain their perspectives on how services are provided and received. During these visits, we convened meetings with management staff at institutions, held group interviews with workshop leaders in various sectors who facilitated OMI services, and conducted focus groups with people who had participated in workshops in several different OMI sectors.

Each semi-structured interview and focus group was conducted in person by a team of two experienced researchers, except for interviews with research advisory group members, which were conducted by telephone. Each interview and focus group was guided by a

detailed protocol and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Responses to questions were documented with detailed notes and audio recordings.

Triangulation. By exploring specific topics from the perspectives of multiple sources, the study team was able to develop a detailed and nuanced understanding of the OMI. For instance, similar questions were asked of respondents who were representatives of organizational management, workshop leaders, and workshop participants, to gain their different perspectives. This strategy was followed in each of the selected sectors.

Selection of sectors. The OMI is or has been active in a wide array of sectors, representing diverse institutions and populations (see Table I.1). The study classified these sectors under two overarching heads: institutional and community. The five institutional sectors are education, corrections, health, social services, and the military. The five sectors classified as community-based are faith, counseling, mental health services, community services and “other,” and the Hispanic and Native American communities.

We focused on sectors that are especially active today, but also included several agencies or sectors that have been active in the past but are less so now. Such sectors were included so the study could identify lessons from OMI experiences in efforts that were not sustained or did not grow as expected, in order to inform new and developing state and community initiatives.

Sampling strategy. Our plan for identifying, selecting, and contacting respondents for the interviews and focus groups relied on a combination of purposeful identification and representative sampling. Purposeful identification was most appropriate when information and insights could come only from certain individuals with particular roles or knowledge, such as DHS officials, senior OMI staff, curriculum developers, members of the research advisory group, and lead staff at public and private agencies that deliver OMI services. In contrast, a representative approach was more appropriate in collecting information that would be used to characterize the experiences or attitudes of large numbers of workshop leaders and participants.

To select workshop leaders, we first identified trained leaders in each sector and agency from the OMI management information system. In this process, we stratified leaders by sector and activity level, in order to include both leaders who had conducted many workshops and those who had conducted fewer or none. This method was intended to help us address questions about why some workshop leaders are trained but do not conduct workshops. In selecting leaders for the interviews, it was necessary to consider geographic location as well as our desire to triangulate interviews from different levels within a given agency or sector. Selected leaders were mailed an invitation to attend an interview or focus group, and asked to dial into MPR’s toll-free number to register. After obtaining information about availability from interested respondents, we contacted them again to advise them of the date, place, and time, and provided multiple reminders. Interviews and focus groups were usually held at a neutral location, such as a local library or community center, unless that was infeasible.

Table I.1. Major OMI Service Delivery Sectors

Sector	Agency Sponsor	Target Population	Workshop Leaders	Curriculum Adaptation(s)
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR				
Education	OK Dept. of Career Technology	High school students	Family and Consumer Sciences teachers	Connections-PREP®
	OSU Cooperative Extension Services	Adult students in community education	OSU educators	PREP®
Corrections	OK Dept. of Corrections (DOC)	Prison inmates and their partners/spouses	Prison chaplains and trained inmates	PREP®, Within My Reach
	OK Association of Youth Services (OAYS)	Adolescent first offenders and their parents	Trained, sometimes licensed facilitators and OAYS contractors	PREP®
Health	OK Dept. of Health, Child Guidance	Parents	OK Dept. of Health professional psychologists and clinicians	PREP®
Social Services	OK Dept. of Human Services (DHS)	TANF recipients	Career Development Specialists	Within My Reach, PREP®
	OK Dept. of Human Services	Adoptive/foster parents/grandparents, parents of special-needs children	OK Dept. of Health professional psychologists and clinicians	ENRICH, PREP®
	Community Action Agencies or Head Start Agencies	Head Start parents	Head Start staff	PREP®
Military	Army, Air Force, and National Guard bases	Members of the military and their partners/spouses; base and post employees	Family advocacy and family support staff; chaplains; employee assistance counselors	PREP® or Christian PREP®
COMMUNITY SECTOR				
Faith	N/A	Church and synagogue congregation members and general public	Pastors, other clergy, and lay people	PREP®; Christian PREP®; Jewish PREP®
Counseling; Mental Health Services	N/A	Private clients and general public	Various licensed professionals, such as counselors, social workers, and psychologists.	PREP®; Christian PREP®
Community Services and Other	N/A	Employees and general public	Various volunteers	PREP®
Hispanics	N/A	Hispanic/Latino adults	Volunteers who focus on Hispanic families	PREP® for Latinos; Christian PREP® for Latinos
Native Americans	N/A	Native American adults	Volunteers who focus on Native Americans	PREP®; Christian PREP®

Note: Institutional sector means services are typically provided by agency staff as part of their regular jobs. Community/volunteer sector means services are usually provided by individual volunteers on their own time.

Obtaining a strictly random sample of workshop leaders and participants was not always possible. Some self-selection inevitably occurred, as some invited leaders and participants responded and others did not. At state prisons and juvenile offender programs, we selected sites to visit and interviewed workshop leaders at those sites. At two prisons, the chaplain who led the workshops brought to the participant focus groups some prisoners who had not been invited. Due to the wide geographic distribution of teachers in high schools, we capitalized on a statewide conference during a study site visit, and invited teachers attending the conference to participate in our discussion group.

C. ORGANIZATION OF REPORT

The remainder of this report presents our study findings. Chapter II describes the development and evolution of the initiative and presents a framework for understanding the initiative's current implementation approach. Chapter III highlights one of the OMI's key deployment strategies—delivery of workshops through a network of trained volunteers in communities throughout the state. Chapter IV describes how the OMI partners with an array of public and private institutions to offer marriage education services to their clients. Chapter V discusses the extent of implementation by looking at the availability and provision of services throughout the state, the extent of workshop leader training, and the characteristics of individuals who choose to participate in the workshops. The report concludes, in Chapter VI, by highlighting the main study findings and several overarching lessons and implications arising from the OMI experience.

CHAPTER II

DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION OF A BROAD INITIATIVE

The OMI began with high-level leadership commitment and a bold public goal, although there was little precedent to guide its development. It then set out to define its philosophy for creating broad social change, design for an intervention strategy, and gain support for its goals and the activities in order to implement its strategy for change throughout the state. This chapter describes how the OMI was first developed and how it evolved over the first seven years of its existence. It focuses especially on the initial three years of the initiative (1999-2001), describing what motivated its creation, how public support and interest developed, and how its intervention strategy was selected and initially implemented. It then introduces how the strategies and operations have evolved, from 2002 to 2007, focusing on the role of curriculum adaptations and research, and concludes with a model of the “current OMI” showing how the initiative was operating at the time of this study in 2007. Later chapters detail the successes and challenges encountered in implementing the OMI model.

A. THE BEGINNINGS OF A STATEWIDE MARRIAGE INITIATIVE: 1999-2001

To gain a better understanding of why and how the nation’s first statewide marriage initiative sprang up in Oklahoma, it may be useful to first review the state’s demographic characteristics. Oklahoma’s population is relatively religious, with high numbers of people adhering to the Christian, mostly Protestant, faith. In 2007, about 69 percent of residents reported being “evangelical” or “mainline Protestant”—25 percentage points higher than in the nation as a whole—while 12 percent reported being Catholic, compared to 24 percent nationally (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007). Although most marriages in Oklahoma take place under church auspices, the state has had one of the highest divorce rates in the nation (National Center for Health Statistics 1995).

Many Oklahomans live in rural areas, and on average have somewhat lower levels of education and household income compared to the rest of the nation. Of the state’s 3.6 million residents, 42 percent live in a non-urban setting; while 58 percent reside within one of the state’s two metropolitan areas: Oklahoma City and Tulsa (U.S. Census Bureau 2007a,

2007b). Approximately 22 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher, about five percentage points below the national average; and in 2006 the median household income was approximately \$38,770, about \$10,000 less than the national figure (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a). The vast majority of Oklahomans identify themselves as white, but many are American Indian. Eight percent are American Indian or Alaskan Native; another eight percent are Black or African American (about five percentage points less than the national average) (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

Oklahoma's interest in a statewide initiative grew from emerging public policy concerns and research about the consequences of family structure. At the federal level, the 1996 welfare reform legislation that established Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) included two objectives related to family structure: reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. There was also a growing body of research confirming the benefits to children of growing up in families with two married parents. At the same time, a state economic report suggested that along with strengthening education and taking other steps that could directly improve productivity, Oklahoma should increase its attention to family and social conditions that might indirectly affect the state's prospects for economic growth (Holmes et al. 1998). These conditions included high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing: at the time, Oklahoma's divorce rate was the second highest in the nation (National Center for Health Statistics 1995).

In response to these trends and policy concerns, key state leaders concluded that addressing the divorce rate was an important priority for Oklahoma. In 1998, Oklahoma's then-cabinet secretary for Health and Human Services, Jerry Regier, encouraged then-governor Frank Keating to take action to strengthen the state's families. In January 1999, Governor Keating gave public recognition to the issue by announcing the initiative in his state-of-the-state address, and boldly setting a goal of reducing the divorce rate by one-third by the year 2010.

1. Deciding on a Strategy for Creating Change: 1999

In March 1999, shortly after announcing the initiative, the governor's office convened the Governor's and First Lady's Conference on Marriage, bringing together leaders from a variety of public and private sectors around the state to discuss the initiative and pledge support. The event, coordinated by the Secretary and implemented by PSI, was attended by more than 200 individuals from six sectors: business, faith, education, government, social service providers, and media. The response was largely supportive, and the governor called for Health and Human Services to lead the initiative and develop a plan of action.

The first tasks facing the OMI were to define its philosophy for creating broad social change, and identify a reasonable approach for achieving this mission. At the time, there was no evidence to suggest what directions or approaches might be fruitful or what pitfalls might lie ahead. The general philosophy—what would serve as the main vehicle for change—would evolve over the first few years, as DHS and PSI considered and tried various approaches.

Starting with the faith community. Because a majority of marriages take place in houses of worship, one of the initiative's first activities was to mobilize the faith community. The OMI brought together religious leaders of every major denominations in the state to pledge their support for the initiative, and to seek agreement on a marriage covenant. The covenant outlined minimum requirements related to preparation for marriage that clergy pledged to uphold as part of their agreement to marry a couple in their religious institution. Eventually more than 1,500 faith leaders signed the covenant, and OMI built on this initial network as its work continued. These efforts were intended to serve as a public statement by clergy and the faith community that marriage preparation is important.

Trying a sectoral approach. At the same time, OMI leaders wanted to ensure that support for the initiative would not be limited to the faith sector. They sought to build on the support shown at the governor's conference by enlisting representatives of the major sectors of society to develop and initiate activities they thought would support marriage within each of their sectors. Despite relatively high interest and support for the initiative, however, little progress was made. In some sectors, interested groups were uncertain of what action to take. Other sectors that tried to take action faced coordination difficulties, shortage of resources, or a lack of fit between the new initiative and their core missions.

Choosing a vehicle for change. The early challenges that the OMI encountered in what came to be known as the sectoral approach prompted OMI leadership to consider the implementation of a specific intervention that could be more uniformly applied across sectors and regions of the state. They considered two main approaches. First, they discussed using media campaigns to promote the value of marriage and educate the public on its benefits for adults, children, and society as a whole. However, concern was raised by some OMI leaders that this approach would not go far enough to be effective, and that some type of focused services for couples and individuals would be necessary to create not just attitudinal but also behavioral change. As OMI leaders considered direct services, they investigated what those services might entail. Questions were raised about whether traditional marriage counseling would be the best approach, since it is not often used as a preventive approach, and there was concern that couples might resist counseling due to perceptions of stigma or misinformation about the nature of counseling.

A service with potential for broad implementation. In July 1999, OMI leaders attended the annual Smart Marriages conference, which provided an introduction to marriage education. Marriage education refers to a variety of services, programs, and curricula that teach skills and provide information to couples with the goal of helping them prepare for and sustain healthy and satisfying marriages (Dion et al. 2003).⁵ These structured, curriculum-based programs seek to prevent marital distress and dissolution by educating couples in relationship skills. They generally take a psycho-educational rather than a therapeutic approach and need not be delivered by professional counselors. Some of these programs are based on a substantial foundation of research.

⁵ For more information about marriage education, visit the Smart Marriages website at www.smartmarriages.com.

OMI leadership learned that marriage education services such as these were in short supply in the state, and could be prohibitively expensive for some, especially low-income families. Therefore, selecting a marriage education program and making it widely available to Oklahomans seemed to OMI's leaders to be a concrete and feasible strategy for helping more couples enter and sustain healthy marriages. Because of concern that media campaigns stressing the importance of healthy marriage could stimulate a demand for services that could not be met until capacity was developed, they decided to put the higher priority on creating a mechanism for delivering marriage education services.

2. Building Public Support, Obtaining Resources, and Grounding the OMI in Research: 2000

The second year of the initiative involved multiple activities to develop support and stakeholder buy-in, and to begin laying the foundation for implementation of services.

Developing broad interest. From the outset, Oklahoma recognized the need to develop broad support for an initiative focusing on marriage. OMI leadership realized early that marriage can be a sensitive and personal issue for many, and that an initiative promoting marriage could be seen as politically or religiously motivated. They knew that such fears by the public could obscure the potential advantages of taking action to strengthen families. For these reasons, they began to engage experts and key leaders to help build public awareness of the initiative, develop credibility, and address the concerns raised by some groups. First, they established a steering committee to help plan and advance the initiative. Howard Hendrick, director of DHS, became an important member of the group. Prior to being named DHS director in 1998, he had served for 12 years in the Oklahoma State Senate, where he developed close relationships with other legislators. These relationships proved useful in keeping communication open as OMI developed.

The OMI also engaged experts to collaborate in planning and to speak to interested groups. Engaging leaders and experts with strong reputations and potentially different perspectives on issues helped OMI prepare for and address initial skeptics and opponents. Experts working with the steering committee included, for example, Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University, and Theodora Ooms of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).⁶ Advocates for domestic violence services were also included as partners, adding depth and diversity to the team.

⁶ The Center for Relationship Development was established to help students learn to build healthy, lasting relationships; to foster positive relationships with their classmates, roommates, parents, teammates, siblings, bosses, and potential marriage partners; and to solve relationship problems (www.spu.edu/depts/spfc/undergrad/ops/realrelationships.asp). CLASP is a national nonprofit organization that conducts research, policy analysis, and advocacy and provides information and technical assistance to improve the lives of low-income people (www.clasp.org/about.php).

To build public support, OMI delivered its message to key leaders and larger audiences of individual citizens. Secretary Regier and other OMI leaders met with leaders from a range of Oklahoma's sectors to encourage them to seek ways to speak up for and support marriage. To present a case for taking action, they often drew on existing research showing how marriage affects family and child outcomes. Relationship experts were retained to speak to a variety of audiences around the state. Dr. Parrot first spoke at a state health department-sponsored conference of more than 800 public health nurses. He and his wife moved to Oklahoma for a year and were named scholars in residence at Oklahoma State University. In this role, they made appearances as OMI "marriage ambassadors" throughout the state, including at college and university venues.

Securing funding. In 2000, the state leaders realized that substantial funding would be needed to implement the initiative on the broad scale envisioned. The governor asked DHS, then headed by Howard Hendrick, to commit \$10 million to the effort from surplus funds in its federal TANF block grant. The surplus funds were the result of dramatic declines in Oklahoma's TANF caseload in the years following the 1996 welfare reform. DHS met Keating's request and pledged 10 percent of the \$100 million surplus funds to OMI. The result was a large pool of funding to sustain the planning and implementation process, as well as a highly public endorsement of the OMI's importance.

Developing a public-private partnership. With the newly committed funds, DHS initiated a competitive bid process for the development and management of the initiative. It contracted with PSI, which had been involved with OMI since the 1999 Governor's Conference on Marriage, for which it had been hired to boost attendance and increase representation across sectors. After the conference, PSI continued to work on the OMI through a small planning grant, and then on a voluntary basis prior to the competitive bid announcement.

Both DHS and PSI saw important benefits for OMI in this partnership. As a private entity, PSI had the flexibility to develop staffing that suited the OMI's needs and to make changes quickly as the initiative evolved. Outsourcing lessened the perception that the OMI was a "government program" and reassured some groups that may have been skeptical about partnering with the government. However, PSI did not have experience with marriage programming or delivering services. Retaining DHS as the lead agency gave PSI credibility within state government and helped ensure that the OMI would have access to major social service programs and providers as possible venues and referral sources for marriage education activities.

Grounding the initiative in research. The OMI made an early commitment to rely on research to guide its development. Research has been an integral to its development, from the findings on family structure that first stimulated the idea for the initiative, to subsequent strategies and approaches for implementation. Almost from its inception, it has been guided by a panel of state and national experts on marriage, divorce, and low-income families. The interdisciplinary Research Advisory Group (RAG), formed in 2000, is a panel of academic scholars, university-based practitioners and researchers, and policy experts and evaluators that meets annually and whose members may contribute to research activities

throughout the year (see Appendix A). The RAG provides information on which the OMI can base its continued development and the improvement of program operations, lending credibility to the mission and services of the initiative.

One of the first activities of the RAG was to develop a survey of Oklahoma's citizens, focusing on attitudes and behavior regarding marriage and divorce. The 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce provided a "baseline" against which to assess later changes in such measures—and provided information that could inform development of the initiative. The survey randomly sampled 2,020 adults in the general population and 303 Medicaid clients (Johnson et al. 2002). Members of the RAG worked together with the Oklahoma State University Bureau of Social Research to design the survey, analyze the data, and report on the results.

Among other findings, the survey identified key population groups that could be targeted by the initiative. For example, it showed that the average age at first marriage was lower in Oklahoma than in other states, suggesting that it might be useful to direct services to young people, such as high school students. Analysis of the oversample of low-income individuals revealed that, despite a less positive view of marriage, they would be interested in marriage education services. These findings contributed to a focus on services for the low-income population.

3. Developing a Service Delivery System and Initiating Implementation: 2001

At the end of 2001, Hendrick succeeded Regier as cabinet secretary for Health and Human Services and used his agency to continue leadership and support for the initiative, guiding its evolution and eventually its full-scale implementation. Hendrick strongly believed that marriage education services had great potential as a vehicle for the kind of change sought by the initiative. With funding secure and a clear direction for implementation, the OMI embarked on an intensive set of activities, aimed primarily at defining the services that would be provided and developing a system for delivering them. The initiative took its first steps toward implementation of services in 2001.

Curriculum selection: PREP®. In January 2001, Oklahoma selected the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP®) as its core curriculum, after a search of the literature and research on curriculum effectiveness. PREP®'s developers, Drs. Markman and Stanley, were known to many academics and professionals in the marriage, relationship, and counseling fields, so OMI leaders thought their involvement would enhance acceptance of the initiative's marriage education strategy among those groups. OMI leaders also expected that using a single curriculum would simplify the adaptation of materials for alternative settings and audiences, and that it might promote coherence and uniformity in the initiative's activities and messages.

PREP® is a research-based 10 to 12 hour educational curriculum that teaches skills and principles associated with healthy relationships and marriage. The curriculum takes an educational rather than a therapeutic approach. It aims to help couples:

-
- Develop and use constructive communication and conflict management skills
 - Clarify and modify unrealistic beliefs and expectations about relationships and marriage
 - Maintain and enhance fun, friendship, and spiritual connection in intimate relationships
 - Develop ground rules for handling disagreements and conflict
 - Develop skills to enhance and maintain commitment

A key feature of PREP® is the “speaker-listener technique”—a structured way of communicating akin to active listening, taught to help couples avoid such negative behaviors as escalation and withdrawal. Skills are taught and demonstrated in a classroom format, and couples are expected to practice them in situational role-playing, with coaching by instructors or aides. More recently, some experiential activities have been added to enhance the curriculum and address different learning styles.

The research on which PREP® was based included empirical studies that identified the behaviors and skills associated with healthy and long-lasting marriage. The curriculum’s effectiveness has been tested in multiple studies, typically with engaged or married white, middle-class couples who participated in small groups with other couples (Markman et al. 1988; Markman et al. 1993). At the time the OMI was formed, no marriage education program had been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness with low-income, diverse populations, with youth, or with singles attending alone (including PREP®)—and few had been experimentally evaluated in controlled research designs even with white, middle-class couples.

PREP® was designed for delivery to couples, with both partners attending together. Attending together allows the two partners to learn and practice the skills with each other. In some sessions, communication “coaches” or co-leaders circulate around the workshop room to ensure that couples understand how to apply the skills during their practice exercises. PREP® has been delivered in a variety of formats, ranging from a single intensive weekend to classes that meet for two hours each week for six weeks.

Initial approach to curriculum deployment. To realize OMI’s goals, the initiative’s leaders recognized that they needed to continue building public support, develop capacity for providing services throughout the state, stimulate demand, and build awareness of available services. In 2001, they began doing so by arranging for the PREP® developers and others to present the curriculum to large groups of potential partners—members of organizations, agencies, and private individuals.

To build the state’s capacity to deliver services, the initiative began to offer free training to anyone who was interested in providing workshops in their community. This included local professionals such as therapists, pastors, marriage counselors, and social workers, as

well as less experienced individuals. These individuals were acting on their own in seeking OMI training, and they were expected to offer the workshops on a volunteer basis during their personal time.

Building on existing infrastructure. At this early stage of development, the OMI also established a guiding principle: it would build on existing infrastructure and systems to deliver marriage education services wherever possible. This approach seemed efficient, allowing the initiative to capitalize on the employees, facilities, and clients of various agencies. Building on existing infrastructure was also a strategic decision to increase the likelihood that the initiative would be sustained over the long term. By partnering with agencies and programs that had their own resources and funding streams, the delivery of relationship education workshops might take on a life of its own independent of the OMI's promotion efforts.

Between 2000 and 2001, in keeping with this principle, OMI leadership first approached three agencies that operated local programs to serve families throughout the state: the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Services, the Child Guidance Program within Oklahoma's Department of Health, and the TANF program within DHS. They explored the possibility of training agency staff either to provide the PREP® program to interested couples and individuals, or to refer clients to PREP® workshops. The OMI simultaneously began to develop a system for introducing the initiative to the leaders of these and other agencies, and for training agency staff.

A three-tiered training approach. The OMI developed and began to implement a three-tiered system to train agency managers and leaders, potential referral sources, and workshop leaders. This approach was designed to help develop the buy-in of organizations and agencies and train individuals to lead the curriculum workshops, including staff at the three agencies named above, as well as interested individuals from the community. In 2001, the OMI's Tier I training targeted community leaders and upper-level managers within public and private agencies, such as DHS, to introduce the initiative and build support. Instead of merely describing the initiative and its goals, as is often the case when organizations strive to develop partnerships, the curriculum developers presented select lessons from the material to management staff as they would to a group of couples, so they could experience it for themselves. Additionally, national experts were brought in to share information about the research foundations of the OMI's approach. While practical in the early days, the Tier I training method is no longer in use. OMI leadership have come to favor a more tailored and individualized approach to engaging the interest of high-level agency directors and managers—although if circumstances warrant it, the strategy could be revived.

Tier II training was intended to build a network of sources that could refer prospective participants to OMI workshops. These training sessions, which occurred mostly prior to 2002, targeted public agency frontline workers, such as TANF caseworkers, as well as representatives from potential referral sources, such as faith and community-based organizations. According to one report, 483 people representing 65 counties participated in five Tier II training sessions between August 2001 and June 2002 (Orth 2002).

A concern was identified in the Tier II training that ultimately led to the development of a revised approach. In contrast to frontline workers from other agencies, TANF workers were particularly reluctant to talk with their clients about marriage. These staff often had personal concerns about the topic; many were single parents themselves, and these concerns had to be addressed before they could become effective referral sources. As a result, the Tier II training was devoted in large part to building comfort among workers and addressing the role of frontline staff in discussing marriage. Because TANF workers had different needs and concerns than staff from other organizations, the OMI discontinued its large, diverse-group style of Tier II training in 2002 and began instead to respond to agencies' interests by meeting with them individually or in smaller groups where issues could be more effectively discussed and worked out.

Tier III training was designed for individuals who were interested in becoming PREP® workshop leaders. The three-day training was provided by the original curriculum developers and continues to be offered on a regular basis. This training covers both the research background of the curriculum and the curriculum material itself. Trainees are provided with detailed leaders' manuals and other teaching materials. Although the curriculum is highly structured, leaders are given considerable room for discretion in delivery. They are encouraged to personalize the curriculum, such as including their own stories to illustrate a problem or concept. PREP® workshop trainees have varying backgrounds and levels of education, from highly trained Ph.D-level clinicians to individuals with no more than a high school diploma.

While no longer referred to as Tier III, the OMI's curriculum training continues to evolve to meet the needs of participants and to find ways to encourage productivity. Most recently, a fourth day of training was added. This optional "Teachback Day," held approximately three weeks after the initial training, gives new leaders the opportunity to refine their presentation skills and workshop content through peer presentations and critiques.

B. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM: 2002-2007

Much has been learned about implementing a statewide system for supporting and strengthening marriage since the early days of the OMI. The initiative developed and refined its methods for working with volunteers and for working with agencies and institutions to deliver marriage education services. Adjustments and supplementary elements were added to address specific challenges that arose and to build on opportunities that presented themselves. To stimulate demand and awareness of marriage education services, the OMI began to sponsor large-scale community events that offer an abbreviated version of the curriculum. These efforts have amounted to a two-part strategy for building statewide capacity—partnering with agencies and institutions, and working with volunteers in communities. These efforts to build capacity have been pursued in parallel with broad-scale activities to develop the public's understanding of marriage education services and their potential for improving relationships. The two parts of this strategy are detailed in Chapters IV and V.

The role of research and curriculum adaptations became increasingly important as the OMI pursued this twin strategy and expanded to serve more diverse population groups. Below, we focus on the role that research has played in the ongoing expansion of the OMI into new areas, and provide a brief description of the curriculum adaptations that have developed and are being used in various sectors.

1. Research Activities to Support Implementation and Expansion

The RAG's role to date has largely been to contribute to the initiative's development, rather than evaluate its effectiveness. The RAG acts as a sounding board for new ideas and provides information on emerging research to inform the development and refinement of OMI strategies. During their annual meeting, RAG members report on research that may be relevant to OMI goals and implementation design. The RAG is not strictly reactive; it proposes new ideas and areas in which the initiative might expand or improve and contributes to research activities to guide the development of the initiative. The active participation of the DHS director and the secretary for Health and Human Services provides political and policy context for the researchers and fuels interest. The involvement of the RAG, and the guidance gleaned from the 2001 statewide survey, prompted the OMI to sponsor additional research to inform ongoing development, such as:

- **2003 help-seeking project.** The OMI sponsored the Help-Seeking Survey, initiated by a local researcher, to improve understanding of why couples choose to attend marriage education or other couples services (Fournier and Roberts 2003). The project explored barriers that limit attendance with the intention of informing the OMI on ways it could bolster attendance at workshops. The sample consisted of a cross-section of Oklahomans with an oversample of Medicaid recipients, a population with potential need for OMI services. The results suggested ways to increase participation in OMI services.
- **2004 study of PREP® workshops in the prison setting.** To begin exploring the potential effects of PREP® on incarcerated individuals, researchers analyzed self-report questionnaire data collected from participating inmates at their first PREP® class and again at their last class (Einhorn et al. in press). Data were collected from 448 inmates but were analyzed only for the 254 participants who completed both questionnaires and were in the same relationship at both time points. Reported results thus omit participants who might have experienced more problems. Nevertheless, the participants included in the findings reported positive changes on several dimensions associated with relationship quality, both among the population overall and for key racial and ethnic subgroups.
- **2005 survey of Medicaid recipients.** To inform the potential development of services for low-income expectant couples, the OMI sponsored a survey of pregnant Medicaid recipients. The goal of the survey was to describe the characteristics of the participants, such as their relationship quality, choices concerning marriage, and interest in attending marriage education services.

Approximately 500 women and 300 men participated in the survey. The results informed the development of OMI's Family Expectations program for low-income married and unmarried expectant couples.

- **2005 survey of TANF recipients.** In 2005, the OMI conducted a survey with a small number of TANF recipients to inform the development of services for low-income individuals and PREP®'s developing adaptation, called "Within My Reach." The survey asked respondents about their attitudes and beliefs about romantic relationships, their current relationship status, and the quality of and aspirations for their current relationship. While this effort did not result in a formal report or set of findings, survey responses assisted the OMI and curriculum developers in understanding the target population.

2. Creating Curriculum Adaptations to Enhance "Fit"

As OMI leaders planned, the various organizations and individuals working with the OMI have all used PREP® in their workshops. As the OMI expanded to serve an increasingly diverse population, however, it became apparent that modifications were needed to make the material relevant and accessible. Some of these modifications were already made informally by workshop leaders themselves. For example, workshop leaders working with people of color sometimes felt that changes in language or emphasis were important for cultural sensitivity and specificity. Leaders working with African American families, for instance, wanted to focus on keeping the father connected to the family, since many such men have not grown up with involved fathers and may lack appropriate role models. Another type of informal modification was abbreviating the material to fit within a short sequence of workshop sessions. To increase the visibility of the OMI and pique interest in the material, the initiative offered large one- to two-day workshops to the community. Rather than using a standard modified curriculum for these events, leaders would highlight what they viewed as the most important points of PREP®.

Over time, however, the OMI also identified a need for more extensive, formal adaptations to the curriculum. PREP® is a flexible program that can be readily adjusted for language and other minor changes, but more substantial adaptations appeared to be necessary for implementation in certain populations. In the OMI, these populations included single mothers, incarcerated individuals, new parents, youth, and adoptive or foster parents and parents of special needs children. For some populations, certain elements of PREP®—such as exercises that required individuals to work with their partners—were infeasible because they were either not in relationships or not participating with their partners. In addition, these populations often face specific issues not covered in the standard PREP® curriculum. The PREP® curriculum developers thus worked with the OMI to create three formal adaptations for these populations:

- ***Within My Reach (WMR).*** Within My Reach is a formal adaptation of PREP®, created by the original curriculum developers in consultation with PSI staff and experts on domestic violence and low-income women. The curriculum was designed to address the needs of single, economically

disadvantaged individuals who may have a history of unhealthy or abusive relationships. In Oklahoma, it is currently offered to single mothers receiving TANF and incarcerated women, including those in a substance abuse treatment center at a women's prison, but could potentially be used with other groups. The focus is on helping participants recognize and develop healthy relationships. Those in relationships are encouraged to strengthen and sustain existing relationships, or if the relationship is unhealthy or dangerous, safely leave. The curriculum also helps participants prepare for future relationships, by examining past relationships, practicing relationship skills, and creating a vision of the relationship they would like to have.

- ***Connections+PREP⁷***. To offer youth-appropriate marriage education services, the OMI partnered with the developers of Connections—a relationship curriculum for high school students—and PREP®. The result was Connections-PREP®, which had two versions: Dating and Emotions, a 17-hour curriculum for grades 8-10, and Relationships and Marriage, an 18-hour curriculum for high school grades 11 and 12. The Dating and Emotions Curriculum is designed to help teens recognize and understand healthy dating practices and learn to regulate the intense emotions that often accompany adolescent dating. Youth examine why they are interested in dating, learn how to identify abusive or unhealthy behaviors, and determine whether a relationship is working. The Relationships and Marriage curriculum is intended to help older teens learn what it means to form and sustain a healthy relationship, marriage, and family life. Teens are encouraged to explore the effect of family experiences on expectations for marriage and relationships and to improve relationship skills, such as communication and conflict resolution.
- ***ENRICH and PREP®***. Recognizing that adoptive families are faced with distinct challenges, OMI workshop leaders created an adaptation of PREP® tailored to their needs. It includes an inventory of couples' relationship issues, known as ENRICH. The inventory assesses personality factors and identifies significant areas for relationship improvement. Administered by a trained counselor, the results are discussed in a facilitated conversation with each couple. To address the special issues of adoptive families, the PREP® material was modified to include examples specific to adoptive families and address issues peculiar to their circumstances, such as meeting the special needs of the adoptive child, integrating the child into the family, and how adoption may affect the couple's relationship.

⁷ The addition of +PREP® was later dropped from the title of this curriculum, although the material and format remain the same.

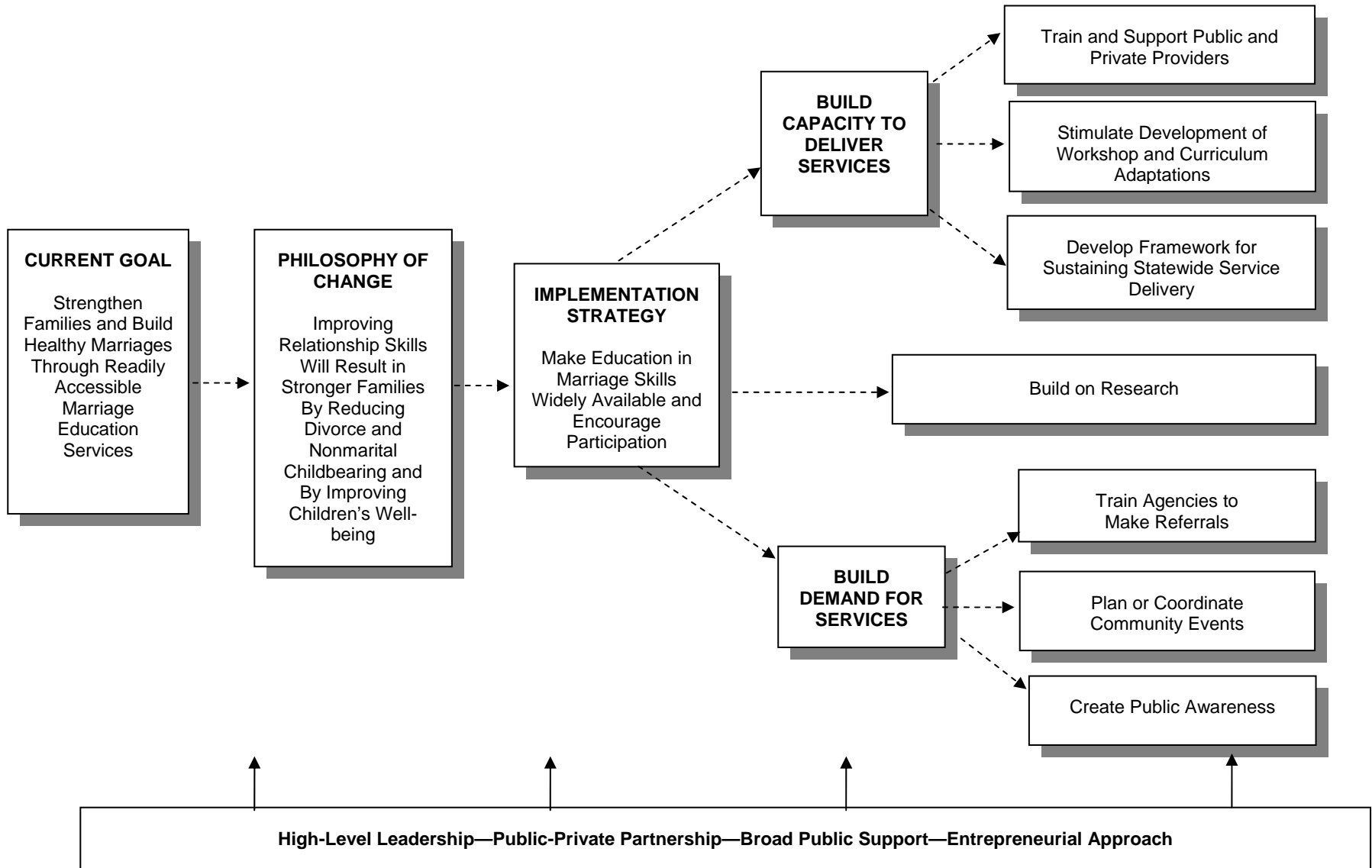
C. THE INITIATIVE'S CURRENT FRAMEWORK: 2007

The OMI's current approach reflects both its initial mission and what has been learned during development and implementation. The overarching goal of the initiative is to strengthen families by reducing divorce and nonmarital childbearing, thereby enhancing the well-being of children. The OMI is based on the belief that improving relationship skills by providing free, accessible marriage services is the most effective way of achieving pervasive change. By providing people an opportunity to learn concrete relationship skills, OMI leadership believe that individual-level behaviors will be affected, eventually culminating in large-scale change across the state. The assumption of the initiative is that individuals, families, children, and the state will benefit from stronger relationships and families.

To achieve these goals, the initiative followed a framework (Figure 1) that unites its philosophy of change with a primary implementation strategy of building the supply of services. Capacity-building is the cornerstone of its overall approach and the activity to which it devotes the most effort. Building on its origins described above, the OMI continues to take a multi-modal strategy to building the state's capacity for delivering marriage education. First, it identifies interested institutions and agencies and trains their staff to provide workshops to their clientele. These staff usually offer OMI services as part of their regular duties. In this sense, such agencies "volunteer" their staff's time. Second, the OMI recruits and trains individuals not necessarily affiliated with an institution or agency; and these individual volunteers typically offer workshops on their own time to members of their communities (in this report they are referred to as community volunteers). In Chapters III and IV we describe the OMI experience in building capacity within the general community, and within institutions and agencies.

The OMI currently focuses on both building capacity and building demand. Efforts to create greater public awareness of the OMI, its services, and the importance of healthy relationships and marriage have taken a secondary priority in the OMI approach. Initially, it was thought that stimulating too much demand before the capacity for services was available would only create frustration on the part of the public. As the OMI has developed, its leadership has observed that many service-delivery activities have the built-in effect of creating public awareness about and interest in relationship skills education. For example, recruitment activities for specific workshops involve distribution of flyers, newsletters, and sometimes media advertising. Nevertheless, the OMI plans to increase its efforts to enhance demand for services in the coming years, now that the supply of services has reached a substantial level.

Figure II.1. Current Implementation of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative



1. Building Statewide Capacity to Deliver Marriage and Relationship Skills Education

- ***Training and supporting public and private providers.*** To build and sustain the state's capacity to deliver services and reach people from all walks of life, the OMI continues to focus on training staff at institutions and agencies, both public and private, as well as individual volunteers who wish to serve their local communities. Engaging institutions and agencies is seen as an effective way to gain support for the initiative, increases the likelihood of sustainable implementation, and provides access to low-income clients, who otherwise may be difficult to reach. Engaging individuals from local communities in service delivery may broaden the OMI's reach to include people without affiliations to specific institutions or agencies. These individuals may learn about the OMI through their friends, neighbors, clergy, or other informal means.
- ***Supporting development of workshop adaptation.*** Since the OMI has a diverse audience, it has adapted its materials to suit their needs. As discussed earlier, many of these adaptations are made by workshop leaders, but some are more formal, such as the Within My Reach curriculum.
- ***Developing a framework for sustained statewide service delivery.*** The OMI has learned that simply training volunteers does not translate into year-round sustained capacity. There may be gaps of service coverage in certain areas, for certain groups, or at certain times. To address this issue, the OMI puts special effort into building up, supporting, and sustaining the ongoing delivery of workshops in specific geographic areas and among certain groups, such as Latinos, Native Americans, and African Americans.

2. Building Demand for Relationship Skills Education

- ***Training agency staff to make referrals.*** Because marriage and relationship skills education are not widely known among the general population, the OMI has worked to promote demand for its services by training staff at institutions and agencies to make referrals, particularly during its early years. The training is intended to help staff, such as TANF caseworkers, understand OMI workshops as well as the initiative's goals and purpose. The OMI tailors its training to the culture of the individual agencies to address their specific needs and concerns.
- ***Stimulating and coordinating community events.*** The OMI coordinates large community-level events that both provide a shortened version of PREP® and increase the visibility of the initiative. These free events are often accompanied by media attention and other publicity. The low-risk opportunity to try out relationship education may also stimulate interest in attending full-length PREP® workshops in the community.

- ***Creating public awareness.*** To create further awareness of the value of marriage education and the availability of services, OMI staff frequently make in-person presentations at local community organizations and at public agencies. Staff also develop and distribute flyers and other materials to promote workshops, enlist the assistance of media, generate publicity, and operate a website where individuals can learn information about marriage and access information about OMI services.

The OMI has built this framework over time, learning from its successes and challenges. It continues to evolve, as OMI personnel seek ways to respond to the needs of Oklahomans.

CHAPTER III

IMPLEMENTING A MARRIAGE INITIATIVE AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

A cornerstone of the OMI approach has been its utilization of community volunteers to deliver marriage education services. This grassroots approach emphasizes the role of ordinary people in promoting change. In this chapter, we describe how the OMI works to stimulate both supply and demand for marriage education services in communities throughout the state. First, we focus on the successes and challenges the OMI encountered in identifying, recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers to lead workshops in their communities. Then we describe the role and use of large-scale community events that provide introductory instruction in relationship skills and may fuel interest in more extensive community workshops. We conclude with a summary of lessons learned in the development of a community volunteer network. The implementation of OMI services in publicly-funded institutions and agencies is discussed in Chapter IV.

A. BUILDING SUPPLY: CREATING A NETWORK OF COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

Community workshop leaders are individual volunteers who typically provide OMI workshops on their own time, rather than as part of their paid employment. By the end of 2007, the OMI had sponsored the training of 1,194 such individuals in PREP® or one of its adaptations. The people were from across the population spectrum: college students, social workers, business people, pastors, community activists, educators, therapists, retired citizens, professional counselors, even law enforcement officers. However, the majority—more than three-quarters—identified themselves as either connected with the faith or counseling communities. About 41 percent indicated that their primary occupation was in the clergy or other faith-based setting; another 35 percent identified themselves as counselors, mental health workers, clinicians, or social workers. According to OMI staff, volunteers typically hear about the initiative through the media, word of mouth, their religious institutions, place of employment, or through other means. Some are recruited directly by OMI staff.

The OMI asks each trained workshop leader to deliver at least four workshops within a year of their training. The workshops are to be offered for free to interested individuals and couples. The request to provide free workshops in exchange for curriculum training is not unreasonable. There is a real value to training beyond its usefulness in the OMI, especially for some individuals. The market rate for PREP® training is about \$555⁸, and in addition to the training, the OMI provides each leader with materials worth about \$350. Counselors, marriage therapists, social workers, and other professionals may receive continuing education credit, build their skill set for working with families, and even charge for services that involve the curriculum once they have met their obligation to the OMI to provide four free workshops to the public. The training is also valuable to clergy or others in the faith community who often seek training to work directly with premarital couples or couples in distressed marriages.

Motivation and enthusiasm. Most community workshop leaders are true volunteers in the sense that they are not usually paid for their time through an employer, unlike most staff at public or private institutions who have been asked to lead workshops as part of their job duties. Although many community workshop leaders first learn about the OMI through an organization, such as their church or a counseling center, and may even provide workshops to members of these organizations, the organizations themselves do not typically manage or organize workshops, as is usually the case in the institutional sector. Community volunteers are also distinguished from agency workshop leaders in that they must usually identify and recruit their participants themselves and find a location to deliver the classes. These factors all suggest that community volunteers must be highly motivated to be successful in operating OMI workshops.

Many volunteer workshop leaders bring great enthusiasm and are passionate about the OMI mission. Focus groups with workshop leaders indicated that many were concerned about broad social changes in family functioning and felt that supporting the OMI was one way to help their communities. Some felt that offering workshops could provide not only skills but hope to individuals and couples—hope that healthy and stable relationships and marriage are possible. By the end of 2007, volunteers had led 1,500 workshops, serving 25,404 participants.

Challenges to workshop delivery. Despite the enthusiasm and energy brought by some leaders, the OMI learned early on that it would not be sufficient simply to train volunteers, because many did not go on to offer workshops as expected. As described in Chapter V, about 16 percent of volunteers led at least three workshops. To understand why this was the case, OMI staff began, in 2003, to contact all workshop leaders in an annual survey of their experiences. Through this feedback loop, they have learned that volunteers face several obstacles in preparing for, delivering, and reporting on workshops. Sometimes community volunteers are not used to public speaking, need help marketing or publicizing their events, or—working on their own—lack a physical location for holding workshops. Many want to receive credit from the OMI for co-leading workshops. Failure to understand

⁸ Fee for three-day training in PREP at 2008 Smart Marriages Conference.

how to complete OMI's paperwork or enter information on its web-based information system may result in a lack of documentation, making it appear that fewer workshops were conducted than was actually the case. However, the most significant challenge for volunteer workshop leaders has been finding prospective participants.

Participant recruitment. Finding and enlisting workshop participants was also the chief barrier cited in two focus groups with workshop leaders from the faith and counseling sectors. Recruitment was relatively easy for some leaders, particularly those who had a single recruitment source, such as their church or clients from their job. These connections provided access to a steady pool of potential participants. Other leaders, however, reported that recruiting was a substantial impediment. They did not feel prepared to find participants and struggled to cobble together recruitment sources throughout the community. Relying on flyers and posters to bring in participants was not usually productive as the sole or major recruitment method. Some felt their inability to find productive recruitment sources severely restricted the number of workshops they could offer.

Refining the strategy. To address these issues, the OMI has implemented several strategies over the years. First, it has become more selective about the individuals it agrees to train. The OMI now requires volunteers to apply for training; the application requires that the volunteers identify their plans for finding prospective participants, and specify where they will hold workshops. Second, tips on how to schedule classes and recruit participants are included in the initial three-day curriculum training. The training was also revised to include a clear definition of expectations for trained leaders, information on how to use the OMI website to enter data about the workshops they conduct, and information on the process for obtaining curriculum materials and other resources.

Supporting the efforts of community volunteers. In addition to greater selectivity and improved training, the OMI also began to strategically provide ongoing technical assistance to promote workshop activity. To do this, PSI designates staff to monitor the activities of workshop leaders in each region and provide encouragement and assistance as needed. PSI especially targets those who have been recently trained and have the potential to become actively involved, because the excitement generated by the training can quickly wane if a leader does not begin providing workshops soon thereafter. Staff therefore encourage leaders to plan their first workshop shortly after training. To assuage nervousness about delivering the first workshop, staff remind leaders that they are allowed to count one workshop in which they are a co-leader or coach toward their four-workshop commitment.

PSI technical assistance staff work to build relationships with trained leaders and serve as a sounding board for leaders' ideas. Staff and leaders often work together to refine plans for locating facilities and supports, scheduling classes, recruiting, and delivering workshops. PSI staff may share community profiles to help inform leaders of available referral sources within their communities, help identify supports such as food and child care, assist with advertising and promotion, or talk with potential participants who want to learn more about the OMI.

Filling gaps in service availability. Despite broad coverage in both the private and public sectors, capacity is still needed in specific areas and within specific population groups. To overcome this unevenness in coverage, the OMI began to identify and target underserved areas and groups for capacity building. These groups included the Latino community, Native Americans, African Americans, and rural populations. PSI staff were designated to build capacity in these areas by building networks and connections with key organizations or individuals and engaging them in leading workshops. OMI leadership learned that this work requires time, patience, and persistence, and that timing is important. They learned that just because timing is not right when an individual or organization is first approached does not mean the timing will never be right.

Part of the initiative's strategy for filling gaps is to develop standing capacity through an entity prepared to offer ongoing delivery of PREP® workshops at a regular location in the community. The aim is to establish a predictable schedule for workshops. One example is the Family and Children's Services agency, a social services organization with local sites throughout Tulsa. This agency designated specific staff at its sites for delivering PREP® on a regular basis and continuously has an ongoing and typically well-attended class.

New strategies for working with the faith sector. While the OMI focused its initial efforts on the faith sector, anticipating a natural fit with its goals, it soon found challenges to widespread implementation. As a result, it has been developing new approaches to its work in the faith sector. It offers small-group retreats with religious leaders and their spouses to build interest in delivering services. This experience exposes leaders to the curriculum and offers them an opportunity to network with other clergy. After the retreats, OMI staff work directly with the leaders to explore how PREP® can be offered in their organizations. OMI staff also provide mentor and small group workshop leader training to facilitate workshops for neighborhood-based congregational groups.

Despite the challenges faced by individual volunteers, OMI leadership believe there are other benefits to cultivating a diverse and widely distributed group of trained individuals. Being trained in the curriculum may result in personal benefits to the individual and may also have beneficial implications at the broader societal level. Trained leaders, even if not providing workshops, may spread OMI's message through word of mouth, and they may refer others to available workshops.

B. BUILDING DEMAND AND AWARENESS: COMMUNITY EVENTS

The OMI's first implementation priority was building capacity, but stimulating demand has remained a stated priority. As capacity has increased, the initiative has thus begun to focus on strategies for building demand and improving the public's awareness of the availability of services. The recruitment challenges experienced by some volunteer leaders make it clear that there is room for building demand. In the past few years, the OMI has worked on refining and expanding a method for reaching the general public in a way that educates people about the nature of marriage and relationship education, provides brief instruction in relationship skills, normalizes participation in such services, and promotes awareness of full-scale workshops available in the community.

“Sweethearts’ Weekends.” In 2004 the OMI began to coordinate, publicize, and sponsor “Sweethearts’ Weekends” – one- or two-day weekend events that presented a condensed version of PREP® for the general community. This free event, held around Valentine’s Day in Oklahoma City or Tulsa, often attracted large numbers of participants. The OMI had a recruitment target of 1,000 individuals for the event; typically 1,000 would register, and about 500 to 600 would attend. The event usually included about seven to eight hours of PREP® instruction, condensed from the standard length of 12 hours.

The large-scale format of the Sweethearts’ Weekend events increased the visibility of the OMI and promoted awareness of the availability of marriage education services not only during Sweethearts’ Weekend but throughout the year. To meet the recruitment target, the OMI promoted the events through some targeted advertising involving newspaper, paid radio commercials, and distribution of informational material. The Sweethearts’ Weekend events are no longer in operation, having been replaced by an adaptation called “All About Us.”

“All About Us.” Building on the success of these events, the OMI adapted Sweethearts’ Weekend so that something similar could be offered more widely. To broaden its geographic reach beyond the state’s two major metropolitan areas, the OMI created “All About Us” events. Like the Sweethearts Weekend, All About Us (AAU) events focus on several hours of PREP® curriculum, but are held in communities of various sizes, including rural areas that might present limited opportunities for full-length PREP® workshops. Consequently, AAU is characterized and publicized as a statewide marriage education “tour.” By the end of 2007, 53 large-scale communitywide events were held in various parts of the state; 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 OMI staff, who are assigned specific regions of the state and are expected to identify communities or organizations interested in an AAU “tour stop” in their area. Staff then locate and recruit partnership organizations, sponsors, venues, and participants. Interested participants register with the OMI online or by telephone. The OMI also identifies workshop leaders, often selecting from among local workshop leaders considered to be especially active or effective. 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 events.

Although the OMI provides promotional materials for the events, including flyers and media announcements, both the local organizations and OMI staff are involved in recruiting participants. To encourage attendance, door prizes (for example, a free wedding portrait package) and other incentives are offered. Those who attend can obtain a marriage license at the discounted price of five dollars, and this opportunity is widely advertised (for example, on marketing materials and recruitment at bridal shows and county courthouses). 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. Others

came after hearing about the event from a relative who had attended a previous event. Usually more people register than attend, even counting the attendance of people who show up without having pre-registered. On average, OMI staff estimate that about 60 percent of those registered show up at the event. Staff report that they are developing a strategy to identify and address the reasons why people register but do not attend.

Motivation for attending community events. Focus groups with past event participants suggested that while couples with varying levels of relationship issues attend, 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. Post-event evaluations completed by participants indicate that about 20 percent of couples have attended the event because of existing problems in their relationship or marriage.

Participants' reviews of the events. Past event participants in our focus group typically rated the experience highly and perceived some benefit to their relationships, though some were not sure they had absorbed all the information. Participants suggested that they liked learning the PREP® skills and were able to recall some of the basic concepts, including the importance of communicating and listening, validation, and filters. Some indicated that after attending, they made some changes in their relationships, such as spending more time with their spouse or putting more effort into the relationship.

The Sweethearts' Weekend was later shortened from two days to one day because of a pattern of attrition on the second day, a format that was carried over into the All About Us event, and that change may have some effect on participants' experience. Given the size of the event and the necessary compression of material, retention of skills and techniques may in fact be more difficult under the one-day format. The abbreviated experience does not permit reinforcement of the material through repeated exposure, and there is less time to process and practice the information. Consequently, the OMI encourages participation in a full-length workshop after the event.

Potential advantages of community events. Although they are not a substitute for more intensive workshops, OMI personnel see several advantages in these events. First, the events increase the initiative's visibility and are an effective way to reach large numbers of people in a short time. Second, they offer an alternative for individuals who, because of time or distance constraints, cannot attend a standard community workshop. Third, the sheer size of the event may help normalize the experience of receiving marriage education. Participants can see numerous people receiving the same services and know they are not alone in seeking to improve their relationships. Fourth, the events give the OMI the opportunity to encourage participants to attend 12-hour workshops to gain greater depth. OMI staff report, anecdotally, that workshops are often better attended following an All About Us event, although data are not available to evaluate this.

A further potential advantage of the communitywide events is their potential for demystifying marriage and relationship skills education, thereby opening the door to more complete versions of the program. Familiarity with marriage education is not yet commonplace, and some may confuse it with counseling or lecture. Some people may fear being embarrassed or feeling stigmatized for seeking help. Many are not even familiar with the concept that relationships might be improved by strengthening skills. These concerns and others may prevent some couples from enrolling in a standard workshop even if they are aware of their availability. Community events might help defuse some of these concerns because they allow couples to experience a taste of the program for themselves without much investment of time or effort.

C. A SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

The OMI's experience in building the supply and demand for relationship skills workshops at the community level provides potentially valuable information for other practitioners taking a similar approach. Although there are benefits to a community sector approach, practitioners should be prepared to address issues of productivity, coverage, and reporting. Although it is too early to assess even informally whether the OMI's model of reaching out to large numbers of individuals in community-wide events will stimulate greater interest in workshops, it seems to be a promising approach that simultaneously provides some level of intervention.

1. Productivity of Volunteer Workshop Leaders

Building and maintaining a network of volunteers requires an investment of resources and time, both in upfront training but also in the ongoing effort needed to motivate, monitor, and assist trained volunteers. Although training individuals to conduct workshops can itself have benefits, the primary payoff is in the workshops conducted by volunteers. To maximize the efficiency of such a system, the OMI developed three strategies:

- ***Screen applicants.*** To improve its rate of return on investment in training volunteers, the OMI screens applicants, requiring them to identify how they plan to recruit and deliver workshops, prior to training. The aim is to develop a network that is more prepared to engage the community in workshops.
- ***Provide ongoing assistance, especially for recruitment.*** The greatest challenge faced by community volunteers is recruitment for workshops. Unlike staff at most agencies, the typical community volunteer lacks direct access to a steady stream of potential recruits, unless they are closely connected to a church, counseling center, or other organization that is willing to work with them to identify, recruit, or refer participants. In addition, the volunteer leader may lack the information, skills, or resources for identifying and recruiting participants. The OMI found that it must provide followup and ongoing assistance to trained leaders to encourage workshop activity, such as the recent addition of a “teachback day” that occurs several weeks after the initial training.

- ***Train a greater number of volunteers than are needed to provide services.*** The OMI has come to recognize that for many unavoidable reasons, not all volunteers will go on to offer services. For example, turnover should be expected, with people moving on to other things, just as in a paid workforce. Training new workshop leaders is therefore likely to be an ongoing effort, with more volunteers being trained than is expected to be necessary.

2. Coverage of Underserved Groups and Areas

There are likely to be gaps in coverage—populations not targeted effectively—if a volunteer workforce is the primary service delivery agent. The OMI found that to ensure appropriate services for underserved populations and areas, volunteer staff needed to be strategically recruited and trained. Special efforts can address these gaps, by developing capacity for underserved groups and areas. The OMI made special efforts to build this capacity for such groups as Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans. It also strove to develop “standing capacity” sites where workshops would be delivered on a year-round basis within communities.

3. Reporting Workshops

It can be difficult to obtain reliable data about workshops from volunteers, who are already donating their time to recruitment and workshop delivery. The absence of such information can make it difficult to monitor the productivity of trained leaders, and thus to manage the overall network. Although OMI volunteer workshop leaders are asked to provide information about workshops completed, and many do, the absence of any leverage for requiring compliance makes reliable acquisition of such data difficult. To address this reality, the OMI instituted an annual telephone survey of all workshop leaders to confirm and update information about workshops conducted.

4. Community Events as a Way to Build Both Supply and Demand

Coordinating communitywide events is a relatively recent addition to the OMI’s menu of strategies. The extent to which this strategy will contribute to the OMI’s goals is not yet known, however, it is expected to both build interest in relationship skills education and increase their supply.

- ***Building interest by normalizing marriage education.*** Educating the public about what marriage education is may be as important as building awareness of specific available services. Relationship and marriage education is unfamiliar to many and may be confused with counseling. Large-scale community events that provide some limited marriage education may create greater interest in full-length workshops in the community. These events also attract publicity for the initiative, helping to disseminate the message that free help is available for relationships not only through the events themselves but through locally based community workshops.

- ***Building supply by providing an alternative for those who cannot attend full workshops.*** Large-scale events providing an abbreviated form of the marriage education curriculum can provide an alternative for those who cannot attend a full length workshop due to scheduling issues or unavailability in their area, or are initially hesitant to invest the time. By taking a statewide tour approach, the events can be considered another means of delivering services, particularly for those in remote or rural areas who otherwise would not have access or would not choose to attend a longer event.

CHAPTER IV

IMPLEMENTATION IN AGENCIES WITH A STATEWIDE REACH

The principle of building on the infrastructure and interest of agencies to deliver services throughout the state still guides the OMI. In addition to cultivating a network of volunteer providers, the initiative sought out and worked with a wide range of government institutions and private organizations, particularly those with a statewide reach. OMI leadership reasoned that engaging such agencies would build on existing infrastructure, help develop credibility and support for the initiative's efforts, increase the likelihood of long-term implementation and sustainability, and in many cases provide access to low-income clients who otherwise might be difficult to reach.

Working with agencies and public institutions has presented challenges distinct from those encountered in the community volunteer sector, and has required different strategies and skills for addressing them. Issues related to organizational culture, deeply held beliefs by staff about how best to serve families, bureaucracy, contractual tensions, and departures of key supporters have all been encountered. However, the OMI has used, and continues to use, these experiences to understand the issues and refine its methods, and has achieved sustained success at several institutions.

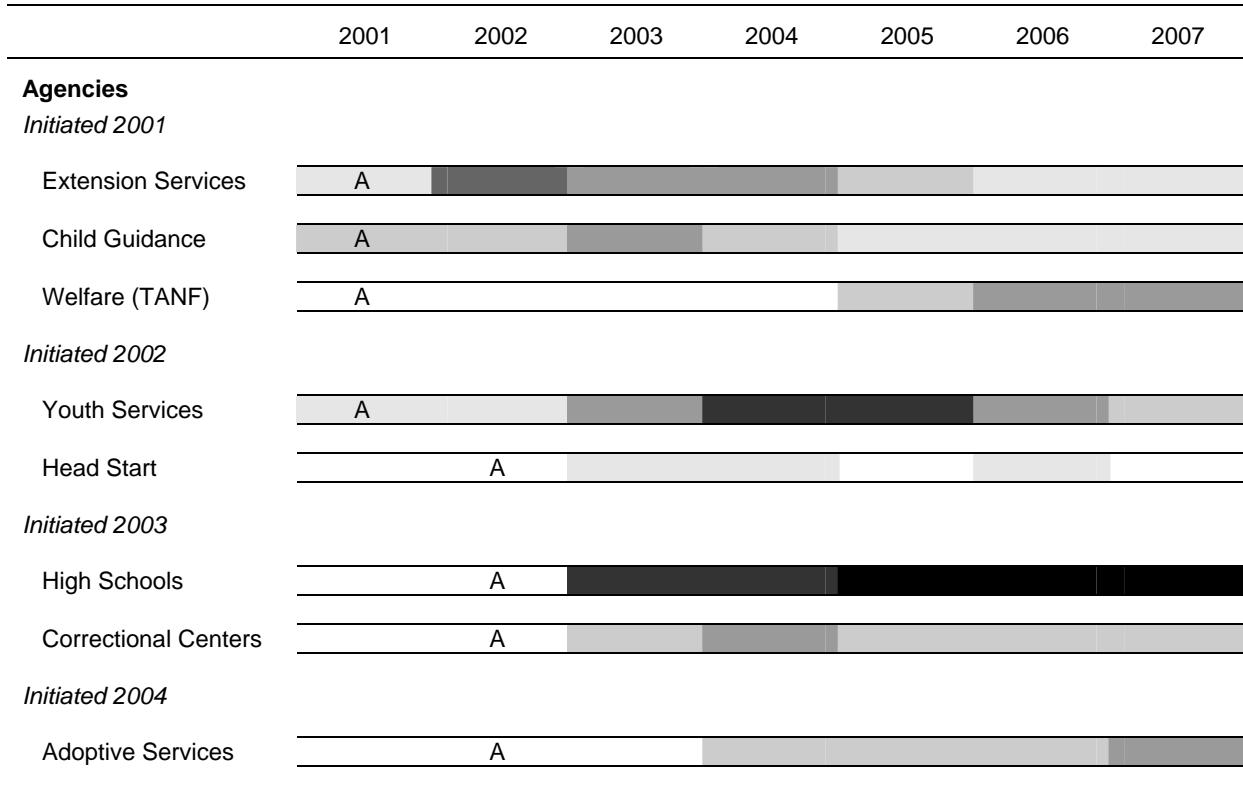
This chapter describes the OMI's successes and challenges in working with eight service-delivery systems in public agencies and nonprofit organizations, and concludes with a summary of the lessons learned.

A. TIMELINE OF INSTITUTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Each of the organizations profiled in this chapter first became involved with the OMI between 2001 and 2004. In some cases they were directly approached by OMI leaders, while in other cases representatives of the agency learned of the initiative and approached the OMI. Agencies took different paths to implementation after first learning what the initiative could offer (Figure IV.1). Some began sending their staff to be trained and began offering workshops in short order. Others presented various issues that first needed to be addressed to create a workable partnership or to identify an implementation strategy. For example, in

some cases a curriculum adaptation had to be created before workshop activity could begin. Still other agencies started out strong but encountered challenges along the way, impeding their progress. As a result, there was substantial variation across agencies in the timing and extent of workshop activity. Within each agency, the extent of implementation has also tended to vary across time. The implementation issues that emerged often varied from one agency to the next, so although the OMI could sometimes apply lessons learned early in implementation to later efforts, in other instances new agency partnerships brought their own learning experiences.

Figure IV.1 Sequence, History, and Intensity of OMI Workshop Activity By Agency



Source: OMI Management Information System.

A=indicates the year that the agency was first approached about supporting the OMI through referrals or workshop delivery.

^aData for the number of students taking Connections-PREP® in the high schools is estimated, based on the number of curriculum workbooks ordered by teachers.

Legend	Number of participants
	0
	1-99
	100-499
	500-999
	1,000-4,999
	5,000-9,999
	10,000 or more

B. EXTENSION SERVICES, CHILD GUIDANCE, AND TANF: 2001

The OMI began its efforts to engage institutional partners by explicitly targeting three institutions: the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service, the Child Guidance program at the Department of Health, and the state's welfare system operated by DHS. These agencies were selected because they were known to provide services to low-income families through local agencies statewide, and thus were thought to provide an efficient vehicle for delivering OMI workshops.

1. Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service

The Cooperative Extension Service is the outreach arm of the Department of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University. It has offices in 76 of the state's 77 counties, with two to three full-time educators in each office (about 200 educators total). These educators are responsible for providing not-for-credit classes and information to all interested residents. The courses are designed to address local concerns and issues and typically fall into one of four program areas: (1) agriculture, (2) family and consumer sciences (FCS), (3) 4-H and youth development, and (4) community and rural development. Topics in the FCS area include family economic well-being, financial management, nutrition and health, and parenting.

After being approached by the OMI in 2001, the Family and Consumer Sciences Department of the Cooperative Extension Service entered into a contract with OMI to offer PREP® workshops. The contract included funding for a small portion of the salaries of Cooperative Extension educators and an administrator, in addition to funding for training, materials, and travel. Under the contract, educators were not required to provide workshops, but support was provided for those who did choose to become trained and offer the curriculum.

Workshop activity. During the first several years there was a moderately high level of OMI activity, with educators receiving PREP® training and providing workshops. Educators liked the PREP® curriculum and felt that workshop participants reacted positively to the material. A total of 41 educators were trained, and 54 percent of them led five or more workshops. Cooperative Extension educators conducted a total of 270 workshops from 2002 to 2004, reaching 3,062 participants across all regions of the state.

After this period of substantial workshop activity, the number of workshops led by Cooperative Extension educators began to wane in 2005, and just two workshops were led in 2007. Two factors led to this decline, according to program management staff: difficulty recruiting participants for workshops and administrative issues.

Recruitment challenges. Workshop leaders found it difficult to identify and recruit couples for the OMI workshops, even though they had many local contacts and used a variety of recruitment sources. They sought to recruit from within their existing clientele as well as from other agencies and sources, including TANF, alternative schools, GED classes, women's shelters, and county courthouses. Many educators had relationships with local newspapers and other media, and placed notices in papers and radio. Some circulated

brochures throughout the county and advertised in local agency newsletters. According to management at Cooperative Extension Services, these educators put a lot of “leg-work” into recruitment. Their sources, however, did not easily produce enough participants for all of them to meet their workshop requirements.

Recruitment therefore became a source of contention for the Cooperative Extension Service. The main problem, according to their management staff, was that the trained workshop leaders felt they were competing with one another for participants. They felt that the approach to training as many workshop leaders as possible led to a large number of people, both within and outside of Cooperative Extension Services, appealing to the same audience. Recruitment was particularly problematic in rural and small counties. Some educators crossed county lines in search of participants, which may have increased competition between educators.

With these recruitment problems, many educators were unable to meet OMI’s four-workshop requirement. Furthermore, some had envisioned a team-teaching approach, which would allow them to rely on a co-leader for help with recruitment, but later learned that only one individual could count the workshop toward the required four, adding to the frustration.

Administrative and management issues. Integrating a newly developing initiative whose goals, approaches, and procedures were in the very early stages of development into a well-established system with its own administrative and management structure presented challenges. For example, Cooperative Extension educators were expected to complete work plans at least eight months ahead of time, and the OMI’s evolving requirements for workshop activity created difficulties for them in developing class schedules. Other issues involved misunderstandings about funding for an administrator, the use of equipment provided by the OMI for unrelated Cooperative Extension activities, and the definition of the population to be targeted.

Re-engaging the agency. Despite these early challenges, recent meetings between OMI staff and Cooperative Extension administrators have revealed that most of the educators remain interested in providing OMI workshops. The strict nature of the contract was apparently a barrier for the system, and the contract with the agency ended in 2007. The OMI subsequently arranged meetings to update and potentially re-engage educators in providing workshops in the absence of a formal contract.

2. Child Guidance Services, Oklahoma State Department of Health

Child Guidance Services, operated by the Oklahoma State Department of Health, is a county-based program designed to promote the health and well-being of families and children in Oklahoma. The program is staffed by trained psychologists, social workers, speech-language pathologists, and child development specialists, most with graduate degrees. Taking both preventive and treatment approaches, the program offers a variety of services for families with emotional or behavioral problems or in need of guidance services. It emphasizes family-focused parent education and support. Staff offices are organizationally

located at county health departments throughout the state. Clients frequently self-refer to the program, but offices also receive referrals from schools, Head Start, Even Start, and other health departments. Services are typically provided in the office; home visiting is rare.

With its broad infrastructure and family focus, OMI and State Department of Health leaders hoped that the Child Guidance program could add PREP® workshops to its menu of services. To that end, a contract was formed in 2000 between the OMI and Child Guidance, which covered free training and materials and part of an administrator's position. Behavioral health staff received PREP® training and materials, and were encouraged to organize and lead workshops as a complement to their other supports and services, by recruiting participants from their existing client base or through their connections with other community based services.

Engagement of high-level staff. The management at Child Guidance had become interested in focusing on relationships and marriage even before the official marriage initiative began. The deputy commissioner at that time was involved in planning meetings with PSI and state leaders as the OMI was being developed. Management at Child Guidance saw the OMI as an opportunity to expand services to families and as a potential new funding source.

Staff and participant reactions. Most Child Guidance staff were favorably impressed with PREP®. According to management staff who reviewed evaluations submitted by workshop participants, most people had positive experiences. Participants said they “learned to listen,” liked the communication techniques, learned to appreciate their partner more, and “felt hopeful about doing something different for [their] relationship.” Staff reported that participants did not complain about the length of the program, but were more likely to say they wanted the workshops to last longer.

Nevertheless, workshop activity led by Child Guidance staff peaked and then dwindled. Staff led a total of 213 workshops from 2001 to 2004, reaching 2,344 participants. As with the Cooperative Extension Services, the level of implementation declined over time, and the contract between OMI and Child Guidance ended in 2004. In 2007, the number of workshops led by Child Guidance staff had dropped to 16.⁹

Buy-in of local offices. County administrators, who supervised local Child Guidance staff, were generally not as supportive of the effort to integrate OMI services as was state-level management, and the interest of local staff varied. One of the obstacles was that staff and county administrators were accustomed to designing their own programs rather than following state-level requirements. Furthermore, the counties had no financial incentives to participate because although program materials and training were free, the workshops had to be provided without charge to the participants. The decentralized structure of the Child Guidance program thus made widespread implementation of OMI services challenging.

⁹ The number of workshops and participants cited in this paragraph do not include Adoptive Couples' retreats, which were also conducted by Child Guidance staff in later years.

Fit of the curriculum for single parents. Child Guidance staff liked the PREP® curriculum and were aware of the research supporting its effectiveness. In particular, they knew that PREP®'s effectiveness was based on research involving couples in committed engaged or married relationships. However, in order to meet workshop activity targets suggested, they felt that they needed to offer the program to others, such as single mothers. Most staff were uncomfortable trying the program with a population for whom effectiveness had not been scientifically established.

Recruitment issues and changing expectations. As with the Cooperative Extension Services' experience, the implementation of OMI services at Child Guidance suffered from a lack of guidance and resources for recruiting participant couples. Recruitment was described by management as very stressful for staff, and not an area in which they had much experience. Despite much advertising, including flyers, church newsletters, and newspapers, some staff ended up giving the workshops to only one or two couples at a time. Child Guidance also thought that their highly trained experts should have been spending their time as clinicians, not arranging the logistics of a workshop, such as searching for locations to hold workshops and arranging for food, child care, and other workshop supports. However, they did not have the budget to hire support staff. Institution of the four-workshop commitment after many staff had already been trained exacerbated these recruitment issues, partly because of different standards for those trained before and after the rule was issued.

Change in agency leadership. Over time, with natural changes in leadership and priorities, the impetus for the program was lost and implementation challenges could not be overcome. The deputy commissioner who had been the initial advocate for OMI involvement retired. Shifting priorities and funding limitations at the state level, which resulted from factors unrelated to the OMI, also interfered with the agency's ability to address implementation barriers and sustain workshop delivery efforts. With these uncertainties, staff got the message, whether accurate or not, that the agency was no longer committed to providing marriage education services, and thus that they did not need to focus on providing workshops.

Current status. Since the three-year contract between the OMI and Child Guidance ended, several program staff have continued to support the OMI's goal of helping couples improve their relationships. Some have continued to participate in the OMI in other venues—for example, as OMI workshop presenters for adoptive couples, a program of DHS. One staff member working in Oklahoma City has been conducting Within My Reach workshops for women at a community corrections facility.

3. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Department of Human Services

In 1996, federal legislation was enacted that transformed the nation's welfare system to a program that requires needy parents to work in exchange for time-limited cash assistance--TANF. This new law also established two additional purposes of the block grant now provided to states: to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families and to reduce the number of nonmarital pregnancies. In Oklahoma, the TANF program is operated through the state's DHS, the agency that also administers and funds the OMI.

OMI leadership gave high priority to engaging local TANF offices in the initiative, although implementation in this agency has involved substantial trial and error. The emphasis on the TANF population is consistent with the OMI goal of reducing rates of divorce and unwed childbearing. Many TANF recipients are unmarried parents who may be at risk of having further children out of wedlock. The majority are single parents, some of whom are involved in intimate relationships. The OMI thus reasoned that information about relationships and marriage could be beneficial for these and future relationships.

Initial skepticism. In 2003, when county offices were first approached about implementing workshops, the OMI encountered some resistance. County administrators and staff felt discomfort with what some perceived as an effort to promote marriage in an agency in which the majority of clients are unwed parents. Despite this initial skepticism, several offices felt aspects of the PREP® curriculum, such as its focus on communication skills, could be useful to TANF clients in employment settings and within their families. Thus, early priorities were focused on worker referrals to existing workshops rather than direct services within TANF offices. Although some offices agreed to try the workshops, staff were not fully satisfied with the fit, and it was not until late 2005, when the OMI began to offer Within My Reach, a formal adaptation of PREP®, that any substantial implementation of workshops actually began.

Curriculum adaptation. DHS staff who initially offered workshops felt that the PREP® curriculum was not entirely appropriate for their audience, largely single mothers (and a few single fathers). Some said they felt offended by references to marriage, whether overt or implied. Others noted that the curriculum was designed to be presented to couples, rather than individuals; hence numerous exercises intended for couples were awkward. Local DHS staff and administrators thought ending abusive or unhealthy relationships and choosing more stable partners should be given greater attention in the curriculum than sustaining existing relationships.

To respond to these concerns, the OMI engaged the PREP® curriculum developers and experts in low-income families and domestic violence in a two-year process to develop a formal adaptation specifically for disadvantaged single parents. Because past and current domestic violence is thought to be prevalent in this population, a major emphasis of the Within My Reach curriculum is to help parents recognize healthy relationships, and for those not in relationships, to learn to choose healthier partners in the future. The OMI sees this strategy as one step toward preparation for healthy marriage. Training of DHS staff on the new curriculum began in October 2005. It has been received favorably by DHS staff and their clients. TANF agencies that offer OMI workshops now use Within My Reach in place of the standard PREP® curriculum.

Decentralization. The TANF system is decentralized in Oklahoma, so although state leaders were supportive of the initiative, they were reluctant to direct or mandate that local sites implement OMI services. Oklahoma DHS operates the TANF program through county-based offices with their own directors, grouped into six geographic areas each led by a regional office. Therefore, the OMI has had to build support and interest in each area and county.

Implementation. Because workshops for TANF participants were not mandated by DHS, to date they have been established in some regions but more sporadic in others. In DHS Area 3 (which includes Oklahoma City) and Area 4, county offices include Within My Reach as part of the mandatory orientation for all new TANF recipients. According to OMI sources, a total of 4,660 TANF recipients across the state have now received PREP® or Within My Reach material.

Initially, finding the appropriate fit—staffing, setting, timing—for delivery of OMI material in the TANF context involved addressing challenges that became clear in working with the Area 3 offices. Caseworkers did not usually have time to teach PREP® or Within My Reach in addition to their other job responsibilities. Initial attempts at implementation focused on the staff at workforce centers, who provide instruction in job readiness and other employment skills. Yet there were concerns about duplication of services already offered at some TANF offices and in the end, the centers’ management ended delivery of OMI workshops. (Some workforce centers, however, continue to make referrals to OMI workshops conducted in other venues.)

Ultimately, the OMI material began to be provided by career development specialists as part of the initial mandatory orientation for all new TANF recipients. In Area 3, the orientation in which Within My Reach is embedded lasts a week, includes 12 hours of Within My Reach, and typically involves four to eight participants, depending on the number of applicants in the previous week. Other agencies or local offices may use other formats in providing the material.

Finding a regular “slot” for PREP® has made it a more comfortable fit in Area 3. Including the material during orientation meant that neither staff nor clients had to look for ways to fit it into the program flow or into their work schedules. The strategy may present one challenge, however. It is possible that the impact of the Within My Reach material is diminished during the information-packed mandatory orientation and may not stand out from the other activities and information presented during the week. Some of the past participants interviewed for this study had more difficulty remembering basic Within My Reach concepts than did those people who received the material in other settings. These TANF clients indicated that many of the orientation activities had blurred together in their minds. The participants we spoke with may or may not be typical of the broader population of TANF recipients who take Within My Reach as part of their orientations.

Achieving sustained implementation. DHS workshop leaders in Area 3 who were interviewed for this study indicated that the Within My Reach workshops fit well with the mission of their agencies. They thought the communication and conflict resolution tools and strategies were valuable soft skills that would be useful in employment settings, not just within intimate relationships. Although their clients are unmarried, many have dating partners, and local TANF staff realized that these partners can affect the decisions and well-being of their clients—so workshop leaders also see additional potential benefits to presenting Within My Reach.

C. YOUTH SERVICES AND HEAD START: 2002

In 2002, the OMI sought to engage the partnership of two nonprofit agencies that provide local community-based services throughout the state: the state's collaboration of Head Start programs, and the Oklahoma Association of Youth Services.

1. Oklahoma Association of Youth Services

In Oklahoma, the First Time Offender Program (FTOP) is a pre-adjudicatory program for juvenile first-time offenders. Adolescents and pre-adolescents ages 12 to 16, who are usually referred to the program by criminal or truancy courts, attend the six-week program (12-16 hours of class time), with a parent or guardian. Once the referral is made, attendance is mandatory to avoid adjudication of the offense. The programs receive funding, oversight, and assistance from the Oklahoma Association of Youth Services (OAYS), but are relatively autonomous, each with its own board of directors.

Looking for ways to focus on youth, and concerned about the parents of troubled youth, OMI staff sought to involve FTOP. FTOP leaders agreed that the curriculum currently in use might be improved by integrating key concepts from PREP®. Staff at PSI worked with OAYS to add this material, focusing especially on the communication modules. The hope was that the adapted curriculum could benefit both parent-child and couple communication. The OMI first contracted with OAYS to deliver the program in 2002, with OMI providing leader training, materials, and a flat fee for each completed workshop. The contractual arrangement shifted in 2007, with OMI providing a general level of funding to OAYS for its work.

High level of implementation. OAYS became involved with the OMI during its early years, and its involvement was very active, particularly from 2003 to 2006. As of 2007, the agency had conducted the second largest number of OMI workshops among agencies, a total of 1,122. These workshops were provided to 20,438 parents and juveniles over the years, taking place in every DHS region of the state. A total of 260 youth services staff were trained to conduct the workshop. At least part of this high level of workshop activity is undoubtedly related to the fact that FTOP has access to a steady stream of participants, who are mandated to attend to avoid adjudication.

Curriculum adaptation. According to management staff, the topics to be covered in the FTOP curriculum are legally mandated and include adolescent development and the juvenile justice system, communication, problem solving, anger management, and values. Much of the PREP® material added to the preexisting curriculum was focused on communication and problem solving. In some ways, the additions were natural because there was some commonality between the communication skills in PREP® and FTOP. For instance, “reflective listening” in the original FTOP curriculum became the “Speaker-Listener” technique taught in PREP®.

Participant reactions. In a focus group with parents who had participated in the FTOP program with their adolescents, parents were able to recall many of the topics, including values (e.g., asking kids what was important to them), finances (cost of living on

your own), anger management, communication (such as eye contact, speaker-listener), and adolescent development.

Parents indicated that the focus was on the parent-child relationship and occasionally relationships with peers or other family members. In about half of the classes, parents and children were split up so that parents could receive information about adolescent development. The topics of marriage, the parents' relationship, or other romantic relationships were not discussed during the classes, according to these parents. Participants also indicated that couples rarely attended together, even if married. Instead, they would switch off or tag-team, with one parent attending each week. Although they were not discouraged from attending the group together, it was clear the requirement was only for one parent to attend at a time.

Although most parents were initially resentful about attending the class, discussion in our focus group indicated that they came to appreciate the information and skills, as well as the interactions with other parents. The class served to normalize their experiences and made many feel better about their children and their abilities as parents. Several parents said they did not use the skills taught in the class, but noted positive differences in their behaviors. One mother said that after the class she made more of an effort to control her anger and communicate with her daughter. Another mother said that she now gave more thought to letting her son "speak his mind" during discussions or disagreements with her. One woman thought the group generated a dialogue between her and her son, facilitating a conversation she had been wanting to have with him. She said the group "built a bridge" between her and her son.

The parents seemed less certain the group had made an impact on their children. Several of the parents continued to have problems with their adolescents (e.g., running away, dropping out of high school). One mother said she thought her daughter had learned something, but seemed even more defiant after the group. Another mother thought the group may have had short-term benefits for her son. A couple participating in the focus group was more positive, saying they thought the group helped their son learn something from his situation and avoid repeating his mistakes.

Refinements. In interviews with workshop leaders, many felt that both the basic approach and the curriculum used with FTOP participants needed to be revisited. They generally thought that the curriculum adaptation was inadequate, and that the basic principles of PREP® did not match the most pressing needs of their population. They viewed PREP® as oriented to spousal relationships, and thus needed to be adapted for parent-child relationships. They were also reluctant to emphasize the importance of two-parent families or discuss marriage, because they did not want to risk alienating the many attending parents who were single. Although the OMI urged the agency to encourage both parents to attend whenever possible, FTOP reported finding it difficult to achieve this.

Staff apparently felt some pressure to address couple relationship issues and marriage, and expressed concerns about the appropriateness of doing so in a program for youth offenders. Parents are compelled to attend the program because of their child's misbehavior, so they often come in feeling defensive or inadequate. Staff believed that these

feelings could make it difficult for parents to receive any useful information about couple relationships or marriage positively. They felt that intervening at the level of the parents' relationship with each other could send the message that the child's offense is being blamed on the parents, potentially exacerbating parental defensiveness and disengagement.

An additional concern about the curriculum adaptation involved the increased focus on communication skills, which they felt was "cumbersome" and difficult to teach in large groups of parents and children. Some program staff thought that it may be unrealistic or even inappropriate to expect young adolescents to use some of the PREP® communication practices, such as the speaker-listener technique, with either their peers or their parents. They felt that it would be better to teach parents to provide clear boundaries and direction for their children, rather than teach parents and children to communicate as if they were partners in an equal status relationship.

Thus, over time, it has become clear that the needs and circumstances of FTOP families have called into question the utility of the program's current approach and raised concerns about the curriculum's suitability. FTOP staff's first priority is to reduce the likelihood of further offenses by the adolescents in their program. Although staff agree that focusing on relationships could be an important element in addressing this problem, they question the applicability of techniques for improving intimate couple relationships to parent-child relationships.

Current status. The OMI has recently initiated an effort to discuss future work and address these concerns with OAYS. In particular, its leadership plans to work with PREP® developers and OAYS agency directors to revise the curriculum and make it more appropriate and relevant for FTOP families.

2. Oklahoma Head Start Collaboration

Many in Oklahoma who were initially skeptical of the appropriateness or workability of providing marriage education services subsequently become involved in the OMI. Nevertheless, deep concerns about addressing marriage and heartfelt disagreements over allocating resources for low-income families to marriage and relationship education in some cases prevented partnerships sought by OMI's leaders from forming for long periods.

Leaders and supporters of OMI hoped they would find a natural fit between OMI services and Head Start programs. Head Start is a federally funded early childhood education program for low-income families with children ages 3 to 5. Since Head Start involves mothers in its program and within the past decade has also begun involving fathers, some federal and state leaders saw working with couples as a next logical step, believing that integrating marriage education into the existing Head Start agenda would be a way to strengthen vulnerable low-income families. Outreach to Head Start was therefore part of the early efforts to embed OMI services in publicly funded programs.

In 2001 and 2002, the federal agency overseeing national Head Start programs began to encourage all Head Start agencies to integrate marriage education programming into their services. This effort was accompanied by some controversy and debate about the role of

government-funded programs in promoting marriage. According to staff interviewed for this study, this controversy reached Oklahoma's community action agencies, many of whom sponsor Head Start programs. Suggestions for integrating marriage programming into Head Start created wariness and concerns about "pushing marriage" among some local Head Start programs—particularly those operated by anti-poverty and advocacy organizations. In addition, some programs were concerned about whether domestic violence risks were being properly addressed before or while couples were served by the OMI.

To address these concerns, OMI staff made several presentations at state Head Start conferences and other venues in the state, bringing in national leaders in fatherhood programming, domestic violence experts, and others to address issues that were raised. Some Head Start directors perceived these efforts as unwanted pressure, while others were open to developing service strategies. Although directors were invited to participate in PREP® training in order to learn more about the content and goals of the curriculum (and some did so), few workshops were conducted. The state's allocation of surplus TANF funds to OMI services was also opposed by some Head Start leaders, who felt the money should have been put towards other needs of low-income families.

The OMI did not gain traction with Head Start until recently. Head Start directors gradually came to more fully understand and support the OMI's goals, according to Head Start leadership, and new efforts are now underway to implement healthy marriage programming in several local Head Start agencies. In October 2007, the Office of Head Start at the federal Administration for Children and Families awarded a healthy marriage initiative grant to Little Dixie Community Action Agency, Inc., a Head Start program located in Hugo, Oklahoma. The OMI consulted on the grant application and will partner with Head Start on program implementation.

D. HIGH SCHOOLS AND CORRECTIONAL CENTERS: 2003

In 2003, the OMI engaged the partnership of two core government institutions with the potential to reach large numbers of the state's residents: the state's high school system and its correctional system.

1. Oklahoma Department of Education, Family and Consumer Sciences Division

From the beginning, OMI leadership anticipated that youth would be a central focus of its efforts to strengthen families and reduce divorce rates. The 2001 statewide OMI survey found that Oklahomans marry for the first time earlier than other Americans—on average 2.5 years younger. For these youth and young adults, and even for those who delay marriage, it was felt that relationship and marriage education could help establish a firmer foundation for successful marriages. The same survey found that respondents ages 18 to 24 were more likely than older respondents to say they would "consider relationship education such as workshops or classes to strengthen their relationship." This finding opened the door for offering services to youth.

General approach. The question was how best to deliver healthy relationship education to youth. One opportunity that stood out was high schools. In Oklahoma high schools, as in other states, students were already being offered elective courses that included components on marriage and relationships. These topics were covered in Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) classes. In Oklahoma, each FACS course must meet state-approved standards, but teachers have the flexibility to design their own materials and choose supplementary curriculum material.

There was no comprehensive relationship education curriculum consistently utilized in FACS courses, however, and this created a good opportunity for collaboration with the OMI. The relationship education curriculum that FACS teachers had been using focused mainly on the legal aspects of relationships and marriage rather than on their emotional and interpersonal aspects. By making a comprehensive marriage and relationship curriculum available to those who taught FACS courses on marriage and family life, OMI leaders hoped teachers would offer this more comprehensive instruction to their students.

The curriculum adaptation. To improve the curriculum for high school students, the OMI had to look beyond its statewide marriage education curriculum, PREP®, because PREP® was not designed for adolescents. A search for curricula that would meet the FACS standards and focus on skills-based education and information about relationships and marriage led to the Connections curriculum, developed by Charlene Kamper, a California-based high school teacher and certified family life educator. To ensure consistency with PREP®, the OMI asked the authors of Connections and PREP® to work together to create an adaptation that would increase the focus on communication and conflict management skills and be consistent with key PREP® concepts.

Two years of development resulted in “Connections+PREP®,” with versions for younger and older adolescents. “Dating and Emotions” is a 17-hour curriculum to be offered in classes open to students in grades 8-12. “Relationships and Marriage” is an 18-hour curriculum for students in high school grades 11 and 12 and first and second year college students.¹⁰ The two versions reflect the differing needs and relationship trajectories of the two age groups. Dating and Emotions is designed to help teens recognize and understand healthy dating practices and regulate the intense emotions that often accompany dating in adolescence. Relationships and Marriage is intended to help older adolescents and young adults learn what it means to form and sustain a healthy relationship, marriage, and family life. It is designed to increase teens’ self-understanding by helping them explore personality, the effect of family experiences on expectations for marriage and relationships, and life goals. Just under half of the Relationships and Marriage curriculum lessons focus on marriage, with the remaining focusing on personality, relationships, and communication.

¹⁰ For more information about the Connections curriculum, see www.BuildingRelationshipSkills.org. Note that the +PREP® extension in the title of the curriculum has been dropped, though the curriculum retains the PREP® material.

Implementation. Implementation of the Connections+PREP® curriculum began with a pilot in 2002. The curriculum developers trained 24 teachers, who then tried out the new curriculum in their classrooms. The teachers were enthusiastic about the material and reported that it was highly engaging for their students. Following the pilot, the OMI made the curriculum available free of charge to any interested FACS teacher, through the annual statewide teachers' conference. Because the curriculum was designed to be used “out of the box,” a simple two-hour overview was provided at the conference to introduce teachers to the material. At the request of FACS teachers, however, the OMI began in 2006 to sponsor a more in-depth training lasting from one to two days. The expanded training has been well received, because it gives teachers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the material. They receive instructional and course materials free of charge at the training.

The FACS teachers are free to incorporate all or only part of the Connections+PREP® curricula in their course offerings. In a focus group with nine teachers from across the state, most reported using the entire Relationships and Marriage curriculum, not only for the Marriage and Family Life course offered to juniors and seniors, but in other FACS courses as well. The Dating and Emotions curriculum, developed more recently, is also gaining in popularity. By 2007, more than 362 teachers—nearly every FACS teacher in the state—had been trained on one or both versions of the curriculum. Teachers have offered Connections+PREP® at 116 high schools across the state. By the end of 2007, more than 55,000 students had taken a course that included Connections+PREP® material.

Achieving sustained implementation. Three factors contributed to the acceptance of Connections+PREP® and its ongoing use in Oklahoma classrooms. First, FACS teachers and other leaders in the education system were open to presenting materials on relationships and marriage. Second, curriculum training was convenient and the professional materials, such as workbooks, were free. Third, extensive recruiting efforts were not needed to enroll students in the classes, because the curriculum was incorporated in a class that already had ongoing enrollments.

Teachers and staff did not need to be convinced of the value of marriage and relationship skills education. Leaders in the educational system in Oklahoma were already providing some instruction in marriage and family life, so the FACS system already had a “track” on which the OMI could build. Although the relationships and marriage curriculum was not well defined prior to the OMI, there was already a state-supported effort to provide information on the topic, and the new curriculum was seen as an enrichment of existing resources that aligned well with the state's educational objectives.

Making it easy to participate in training and obtain curriculum materials also eased implementation in the high school system. The OMI's role in shaping the curriculum to align with both OMI and state educational standards and in providing convenient and accessible training minimized the burden on busy teachers. In Oklahoma, FACS teachers must use their own classroom budget to purchase curriculum materials and supplies. Providing free, professionally-developed curricula removed any financial barrier teachers might have otherwise encountered in adopting the curriculum.

Working through the public educational system eliminated the need for resources and extensive efforts to recruit youth and sustain their participation. Students typically sign up for the elective FACS classes because they have heard about them through word of mouth, because they need to fill up their schedule with some kind of elective, or, in the case of some special needs students, because it is written into their Individual Education Plans. Thus, the OMI did not need to expend resources or energy on helping the teachers attract students.

2. Oklahoma Department of Corrections

High rates of incarceration and reincarceration have fueled interest in services to reduce recidivism. In 2001, Oklahoma's incarceration rate was the third highest in the nation. Concerned about both the social and fiscal costs associated with incarceration, Oklahoma's Department of Corrections (DOC) began to focus on reentry programs to prepare inmates better for release and to reduce recidivism.

Research suggests that marriage is associated with lower rates of recidivism. Compared to unmarried men, married men on average experience more successful transitions out of prison and are less likely to commit further crimes (Hairston 1988; Hairston and Lockette 1987; Fishman 1986). Less research has been conducted into the predictors and consequences of female incarceration, but existing data generally show that factors associated with family relationships are the strongest predictors of successful reentry into society (Dowden and Andrews 1999).

Encouraged by such research findings, the DOC wanted to explore whether relationship and marriage education might improve inmates' ability to return to and maintain viable marriages and relationships upon release. DOC staff approached the OMI in the summer of 2002 to learn more about how they could address these issues.

General approach. Implementation of marriage education in Oklahoma's prison system began on a small scale, with pilot programs in one men's and two women's facilities in 2002 and 2003. Prison chaplains were chosen to lead the PREP® workshops because they frequently provide or oversee other rehabilitative programming. In response to favorable reactions from the chaplains and inmates at pilot facilities, which included minimum, medium, and multiple-level security correctional settings, the DOC decided to make the program official, meaning that it was permitted to be implemented throughout the state.

After the pilot, DOC needed to decide on the target group for marriage education. Since pilot participants were positive about their experience, regardless of their own marital status, release date, or mandatory/volunteer status, DOC ruled that all inmates would be eligible, with some exceptions. It would not be open to sex offenders, those with no possibility of parole, and inmates in mental units. Chaplains were permitted, twice each year, to perform marriages of inmates at their discretion. For these marriages, DOC established a policy that requires inmates and their partners to undergo premarital counseling, a

requirement that can be met by taking the PREP® program. DOC ruled that for all other inmates, participating in PREP® workshops would be entirely voluntary.¹¹

While DOC recognized that people entering prison, like others, face a wide range of circumstances in their relationships and marriages, the chaplains interviewed for this study indicated that they preferred to focus on inmates who were already married or in committed relationships upon prison entry, because married inmates are at high risk of divorce during incarceration. Thus, although many unmarried or unpartnered inmates have participated in PREP® or Within My Reach, the chaplains generally have not encouraged single inmates to marry during their incarceration (because such marriages fail at a high rate).

Implementation. After the pilot program, expansion proceeded quickly. By the end of 2007, all current DOC chaplains had been trained in PREP®, and 2,013 male and female inmates had participated in the 6-12 week curriculum. At some of the male facilities, a few inmates have also been trained as workshop leaders or co-leaders. All prisons with a full-time chaplain (usually the larger prisons) are encouraged to offer the workshops, but Oklahoma prisons have considerable autonomy and not all chaplains do workshops. In some of these cases, and when prisons lack a full-time chaplain but have inmates who want to marry, the OMI sends in a workshop leader from the outside to provide the workshop. Thus, even though PREP® is an official DOC program, it does not currently operate in all or even a majority of Oklahoma's correctional centers.

Recruitment. Participant recruitment is generally not difficult at the correctional centers that provide workshops for prisoners. Inmates' desire to improve relationships or relationship choices, as well as to increase their chances for parole or to obtain privileges on the compound (by receiving a certificate of program completion in their files) motivates them to participate. However, prisons implementing the program have discovered that male and female inmates face different circumstances and relationship dynamics, a fact that has implications for the content and emphasis of the workshops.

Workshop leaders. Both chaplains and inmates can be powerful workshop leaders. At the three highly active prisons visited by research staff, the chaplains were greatly respected by inmates. They have built strong rapport with the prison population through humor and a firm but compassionate approach, establishing a trusting environment in which inmates feel comfortable and safe. At the two male facilities where several inmates have been trained as workshop leaders, their status as prisoners gives them extraordinary credibility with other inmates.

Couples' workshops in prison. Although most prison workshops involve only inmates, who may or may not have a partner or spouse, at least one male facility operates workshops for couples—workshops in which inmates participate together with their visiting spouse or partner. Conducting couples' workshops presents special practical challenges.

¹¹ An exception to this policy is that inmates in one facility that houses female inmates has a regimented substance abuse treatment center whose residents are required to attend the program.

Arrangements for couples' workshops must address barriers related to the distances spouses or partners must travel to attend, child care, and security issues. If facilities are in rural areas or far from population centers where inmates originate, it can be difficult for their partners to attend, because of travel time and transportation problems. If they work, it is often difficult or impossible to be available for an evening session at a prison far from home. The cost of transportation and child care can present problems. The inconvenience and sometimes humiliation of cooperating with security requirements and dealing with the general environment of a men's prison impose additional burdens on visiting partners. To reduce the impacts of these burdens, the facility offers couples' workshops on Sundays, when partners are less likely to be working and more likely to be coming to the facility for visiting hours. This means that the chaplain essentially must "donate" his personal time to conduct the workshops.

Although including spouses or partners in workshops is not always feasible, inmates have strong interest in this approach. Workshops for inmates attending without spouses or partners were also well received, but some male participants expressed concern about their immediate utility. Many female inmates, for whom couples' workshops were not an option, said they would like to have the opportunity to invite their current partners to attend some of the PREP® sessions.

The curriculum. Some adjustments, formal and informal, of the basic PREP® curriculum have been made for use in prisons. Although the pilot phase and subsequent statewide implementation in correctional facilities have used PREP® as the primary curriculum of instruction, chaplains often make informal adaptations. In some women's prisons, the Within My Reach curriculum was added to address the needs and special circumstances of female inmates, many of whom have been in past abusive relationships.

In facilities for male prisoners, the program must confront the unusual relationship dynamics of incarcerated men. According to interviews with prison chaplains and inmates acting as workshop leaders, even if inmates talk by telephone daily or several times a week with their spouses or partners, they often fear their spouses or families will eventually abandon them. Male inmates often react to this fear in negative ways that can sabotage their relationships. For example, they may respond with anger and hostility if their partner misses a visit or phone call, which may only serve to push the partner further away. These fears and their effects have implications for what inmates need from the workshop. Workshop leaders felt that it was important to focus on those aspects of the curriculum that help inmates understand how to appreciate and respect the sacrifices their partners are making to keep the relationship together during incarceration.

Traditional PREP® is designed to be used with the spouse or significant other present during the session, which is not always feasible in correctional settings. Moreover, many inmates are not currently married or involved in an ongoing relationship. As a result, prison chaplains adapt the curriculum to make it more relevant for participants. This includes modifying or changing the examples, techniques, topics of instruction, or points of emphasis of the curriculum. Workshop leaders strive to address the unusual relationship dynamics experienced by inmates, such as the fear of abandonment discussed above, and how to

manage anger and conflict. For male prisoners not currently in relationships, chaplains often emphasize that the skills being taught have utility for other relationships, such as with other inmates, prison guards, or future employers. In teaching skills for effective communication, chaplains may extend the original emphasis on communication between intimate partners to cover what goes on within the prison context.

Women's prisons. Working with female prisoners has posed different challenges for the OMI. In a survey conducted by DOC, nearly three-quarters of Oklahoma's female inmates reported having been in an abusive couple relationship; as children, 35 percent had been sexually abused and 29 percent physically abused (Special Task Force for Women Incarcerated in Oklahoma 2004). Experience led DOC to focus on the needs of women who were mostly single and had histories of abuse, rather than emphasizing participation for married women and focusing on sustaining current relationships.

In addition to the informal adaptations described above, chaplains serving participants in prisons housing female inmates sought a more formal adaptation. They found PREP®'s focus on sustaining marriage off-target for female inmates, many of whom needed instead to address unhealthy or abusive relationships. As described above, leaders of the OMI received the same message from local welfare offices that began offering PREP® to TANF recipients, the vast majority of whom were single and many of whom had experienced abusive relationships.

In response, the OMI sponsored a formal curriculum adaptation. OMI leadership asked the authors of PREP® to adapt it to meet the needs of these and similar groups. The result was *Within My Reach*. While traditional PREP® assumes that couples are in viable relationships, *Within My Reach* aims to teach individuals how to identify, stabilize, and sustain good relationships; identify and safely exit from dangerous relationships; and make good relationship choices in the future. *Within My Reach* shares many topics with PREP®, but also deals with topics such as understanding whether relationships are safe, making decisions about beginning or ending relationships, and tips for parents who are not together. At least one female correctional facility expects inmates to complete both *Within My Reach* and PREP®, a total of 12 weeks of instruction.

Achieving sustained implementation. Although the use of PREP® workshops in state correctional facilities has not so far been widespread in the Oklahoma prison system, it is strongly supported at the locations that do offer it regularly. Program "champions" within the institution and workshop leaders whom inmates trust and relate well to are important factors in sustained implementation. The workshops are seen by staff and inmates as a good fit with other rehabilitation services offered in the facilities, such as substance abuse treatment, education, and employment preparation. The program offers personal and practical benefits to inmates, so filling workshops is not difficult. The OMI is now looking into alternatives to enhance the applicability of the curriculum offered in male prisons.

E. ADOPTION SERVICES, OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES: 2004

Couples who adopt children can face special challenges. While private adoption agencies may choose to be somewhat selective about the ages and background of the children they agree to place, public adoption agencies serve many children from difficult circumstances. Children may be older, have special and sometimes severe physical, health, behavioral or emotional problems and needs, or have siblings from whom agencies are reluctant to separate them. Couples who adopt such children may experience many personal rewards, but are also subject to stresses and strains, especially when first bringing the new child or children into the family.

The Adoption Assistance Program of DHS is a component of Oklahoma's child welfare services. Public agencies such as this typically provide a variety of financial and other supports to adoptive parents. A few years prior to the OMI's involvement, the Adoption Assistance Program offered additional support in the form of weekend retreats for adoptive parents. The retreats, funded by a private foundation, gave parents a weekend away together, information about available support services, and an opportunity to meet other adoptive parents.

In 2002 OMI approached the Adoption Assistance Program with the idea of providing marriage skills education to adoptive parents. DHS agreed that giving married adoptive parents tools to enhance and maintain their relationships might help increase the chances that these parents would remain together, thus keeping these families intact. With its previous foundation funding coming to an end, DHS applied for and received a three-year grant in 2004 from the federal government to continue operating retreats and to add PREP® workshops and other activities focused on the couples' relationship as central components of the program. Another grant was received in 2007 to continue operating the workshops.

General Approach. The OMI coordinates retreats for married parents who have adopted children, through the state's child welfare agency. At first the program was open only to couples who had recently adopted, but over time this criterion was relaxed until anyone receiving adoption assistance could attend. If circumstances warrant it, couples may attend more than once, though priority is given to new attendees. So far, a few couples have done so. To add to the appeal of the retreats, they have been held for several years in Guthrie, Oklahoma, a charming historical community. Under the new grant, some will also be held in Tulsa to reduce transportation barriers. Between 30 and 50 couples are enrolled in a typical retreat.

Although logistics, format, and target population have all evolved, retreats follow a consistent structure. They are held over a weekend. Initially this included a two-night stay, but later this was changed to a single night in response to participant feedback and to reduce costs. After a welcome and introduction, couples complete a written inventory known as ENRICH that assesses their relationship on multiple dimensions. After lunch a PREP® session is presented. On Saturday evening, couples spend time together having fun and networking with each other. PREP® instruction continues Sunday morning, then couples receive feedback on results of their ENRICH inventory. The final session is a review of

resources available to adoptive families through DHS and other sources. In addition to these formal activities, couples typically network with one another throughout the weekend.

Implementation. Retreats began in 2003, as a joint effort of several partners. DHS provides lists of adoptive parents to PSI, which mails invitations, enrolls couples, and makes logistical arrangements for the retreats. Child Guidance counselors employed by the state's Department of Health present the PREP® material. Dr. David Fournier of Oklahoma State University administers the ENRICH inventory, and he and several graduate students debrief and counsel couples on their results during the retreat. Graduate students also coach couples on PREP®-related skills during the workshop sessions. DHS staff present the informational session on adoption supports.

Participant reactions. According to a focus group with participants, attendees find the retreat format appealing and enjoyable, although they often arrive expecting a relaxing, romantic weekend and find that they have a busy agenda instead. The group felt that the ENRICH inventory, information they received on supports and resources, networking with other similar couples, and PREP® were very useful, although they were positive about all aspects of the retreat and stressed that each element was essential to the overall experience and success.

PREP® presenters and couples had different ideas about what makes an effective presenter for these retreats. Child Guidance workers stressed the need for professionally trained counselors as presenters, so they could deal with any issues or personal crises that might arise. However, participants wished that more presenters were themselves adoptive parents who could share experiences similar to those of the participants.

Both workshop leaders and participants agreed, however, about the value of PREP®. Although some modifications were needed for the retreat, the Child Guidance counselors were enthusiastic about the curriculum. They stressed the importance of providing adequate time during the weekend sessions for the couples to practice communication techniques they were learning. Presenters and couples who had attended more than one retreat expressed concern that serving larger groups was cutting back somewhat on the time available to practice communication skills during the retreat sessions. Both groups also felt that a follow-up or short booster session for couples who had participated in a retreat would help reinforce and maintain their learning and skills. As part of the second federal grant, the OMI plans to pilot test such a session.

Curriculum adaptation. Professionally credentialed counselors employed by the state's Department of Health Child Guidance Services created the adoptive couples' curriculum adaptation, in consultation with the PREP® authors. Since the standard PREP® curriculum is 12 hours in length, some material had to be removed to shorten it to 7 or 8 hours. Child Guidance staff worked together to modify examples used in the lectures and to add material that directly addressed core adoption issues, such as integrating the new child into the family or using PREP® tools to enhance communication between the couples and their children. They also reorganized the material and workshop leader manuals to be used for the retreat.

Achieving Sustained Implementation. All organizational partners have been enthusiastic about the retreats, so much so that they have offered them to other groups. In addition to adoptive couples, retreats have been held for adoptive singles, foster parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, parents of autistic children, and several other high-risk groups. Trained workshop leaders from the community sector have presented at retreats for some of these other groups, and the session on supports has been tailored to the participants.

F. CONCLUSIONS

Looking across the OMI's experiences implementing marriage initiative services in public institutions and private agencies, several factors emerge as important determinants of implementation success: the alignment of mission and approach; appropriateness of the curriculum for the agency's clientele; buy-in of frontline staff; decentralized agency structure; and recruitment of participants.

Success hinges on alignment of mission and approach. The OMI experience suggests that integrating marriage education services into the delivery systems of public agencies and private institutions requires formulating an approach and message that correspond to the organization's mission, goals, and service delivery methods in meaningful ways. The very organizational features that are attractive for the initiative's implementation—infrastructure and existing service delivery staff—can be disadvantages if the fit is not good.

The fit between the OMI's mission, goals, and approach and those of the state's high school system helped make implementation successful in Oklahoma high schools. The mission of high schools is to educate youth, and the existence of classes about marriage and family meant that there was already a good fit with the OMI mission. The OMI's group-based service delivery method and focus on skills were aligned with the way high schools educate youth. Despite these advantages, however, implementation might not have succeeded if the OMI had not recognized that its curriculum needed to be adapted for young people who are typically at an earlier developmental stage than those who are engaged, cohabiting, or married. Adapting the curriculum to fit the needs of the agency's "clients"—students—was undoubtedly a central element in the widespread acceptance by teachers and students alike.

In contrast, misalignment with the mission of FTOP (the First Time Offender's Program) persists. Although FTOP staff conducted many workshops that included OMI material, they remained uncomfortable with the curriculum and resisted the focus on marriage and the emphasis on including both parents. Although FTOP's mission of deterring juveniles from committing future offenses and the OMI's goal of strengthening families were not inconsistent, there was little alignment in the approach. With most FTOP families headed by single parents, and no legal requirement for both parents to attend when there were two parents, FTOP found it difficult to address couple relationships.

FTOP also questioned whether this was the most pressing need for families with a child showing behavioral problems. The parent-child relationship seemed a more appropriate concern to FTOP staff; they reported that applying a curriculum meant for intimate partners to the parent child relationship was awkward. To address this misalignment issue, OMI staff are currently working with FTOP to modify the curriculum.

The OMI's experience with the state's TANF agency illustrates how a focused effort to align the OMI's goals and approach with those of the agency can work. In the OMI's early years, administrators and frontline staff at TANF agencies expressed resistance to delivering PREP® workshops. Many felt discomfort with what they perceived as an effort to promote marriage in an agency whose clients are mostly single parents. They felt that the exercises intended for couples were inappropriate for single parents, and were concerned that the focus on sustaining healthy relationships or marriage did little to help individuals choose healthier partners and avoid abusive situations. Staff at workforce centers felt that focusing on relationships was not consistent with their mission to prepare individuals for employment. In response to these concerns, the OMI asked the curriculum developers and experts in the areas of low-income women and domestic violence to develop an adaptation that would be more relevant to the needs of TANF recipients, focusing on both avoiding abusive situations and skills for building healthy relationships and marriage. This adaptation has been well received and resulted in a substantial increase in the number of workshops provided to TANF recipients.

The curriculum must respond to the needs and interests of agency clients.

Unlike targeted marriage strengthening programs that serve a single specific population, a statewide initiative that strives to change the culture of marriage and divorce on a broad level must be capable of speaking to the needs and interests of individuals in many different types of relationships and circumstances. Given the wide variety of existing marriage education curricula, one solution is to use different curricula matched to each population of interest. The OMI preferred instead to rely on a single curriculum, to provide a sense of unity and common language regarding relationship and marriage skills, both to ease statewide implementation and because many other curricula are not necessarily grounded in empirical research. This choice meant that the OMI had to find ways for a single curriculum to be relevant for people who vary along the spectrum of relationship development.

The OMI met this challenge for several groups. Three examples stand out: the curriculum adaptation for high school students, the redesigned curriculum for single at-risk parents, and the less formal adaptation for adoptive parents. The OMI felt that premarital education in its usual form was not suited to youth who are in casual dating relationships, or not actively in relationships, but also believed that learning about healthy relationships and marriage could increase their odds of eventually building and maintaining healthy marriages. Similarly, the OMI came to believe that one of the greatest needs of single mothers, many with a history of unhealthy or abusive relationships, is to learn how to recognize healthy relationship partners and to “choose better” in their next relationship, rather than focusing exclusively on marriage preparation. These experiences led the OMI to supplement, adapt, or revise its selected statewide curriculum, PREP®, to foster development and

implementation of Connections-PREP®, Within My Reach, and ENRICH and PREP® used together.

The OMI experience raises, but cannot answer, issues about the relative success of such formal adaptations compared to more informal adjustments. In the above examples, the curriculum developers or other experts created the adaptations. In other situations in the OMI experience to date, adaptations have been left up to individual workshop leaders who know their audience but may have little experience or training in developing or tailoring curriculum. The extent to which these alterations occur, and their appropriateness, are largely unknown because the modifications are undocumented and workshop leaders are not monitored by the curriculum developers, other clinicians, or the OMI.

Implementation often depends on buy-in among frontline staff. The OMI's experiences working with several agencies indicate that even though a program may have the right "tracks" on which to run the OMI program, a lack of buy-in or resistance among staff can mean low productivity or the end of services when high-level agency support changes. Like other public agencies with access to potential participants through locally-based programs and existing service-delivery staff, Child Guidance and Head Start appeared to be ideal candidates for implementing OMI workshops. Yet the highly trained clinical staff at Child Guidance were more accustomed to providing behavioral health services to individuals one-on-one, rather than in group settings of the sort that OMI offers. Some were frustrated that they were required to deliver marriage education when they felt this intervention was not what their families needed most. The presence of a highly placed "champion" for the OMI at the Child Guidance program resulted in the production of many workshops in the OMI's early years. Once this leader left the agency, frontline staff did not carry on. Head Start directors and staff remained concerned about that surplus funding being dedicated to strengthening families through a focus on marriage and relationships, rather than for early childhood intervention, and led few OMI workshops over the years.

Decentralization can be a challenge to obtaining the full benefit of implementation within an agency that has statewide infrastructure. Facilitating the delivery of OMI services through staff at public institutions has proved fruitful in many ways. The data bear out that large numbers of staff have been trained as workshop leaders, and large numbers of agency clients have participated in OMI services in various regions of the state. The services are provided in many sectors of society, involving people in various types of relationships and circumstances.

Nevertheless, decentralization means that attention must be paid to interacting directly with local agencies and staff if wide implementation is to be achieved. In Oklahoma, it has not been possible for any agency or institution with a statewide infrastructure to implement OMI services at every local program. Although state leadership may be enthusiastic about the OMI mission, they are reluctant to impose requirements on local offices. For example, Oklahoma's TANF agencies are county-run, and like the correctional centers, they have considerable autonomy in deciding what services to offer. Even in high schools, the OMI-sponsored curriculum is an elective and not necessarily offered at every high school. The choice of whether to use the curriculum is left up to individual teachers. Thus, gaining the

support of high-level leadership and management is a necessary but insufficient requirement for widespread implementation.

Recruitment in the institutional sector works best when agencies are able to enroll sufficient numbers of participants from their existing clientele. When agencies could rely on their continuing source of clients—whether they are high school students, prison inmates, parents of juvenile offenders, or adoptive parents—recruitment was rarely an issue. In other cases, where the volume of agency clients was not adequate to support ongoing workshops, or where agency clients were perceived not to be highly interested, recruitment became a barrier to full implementation. For example, resources for supporting recruitment efforts became an issue when it turned out that staff at Cooperative Extension Services and Child Guidance needed to go beyond their existing clientele to find participants.

Piloting services may pave the way for greater success in full implementation. To identify and learn how to address potential issues with recruitment, mission fit, curriculum appropriateness, and others, it may be useful to first pilot services in one or two counties or local areas, as the OMI did in later efforts with the high school and corrections sectors. Conducting pilots can allow an initiative to identify issues and find ways to address them prior to full implementation. Starting incrementally may also build the confidence of both state-level management and local providers. When services are eventually rolled out statewide, other areas then have a model to follow.

CHAPTER V

EXTENT OF SERVICE IMPLEMENTATION

As its main strategy in promoting social change, the OMI set out to build the capacity of service providers throughout the state to deliver workshops supporting marriage. The initiative has worked to achieve this objective largely through a system of volunteers—both institutional and individual—from different sectors of society. It was breaking new ground inasmuch as there was no prior experience to suggest how to recruit or use such volunteers. As described in Chapters III and IV, the effort to create this volunteer resource has been a massive undertaking.

In this chapter, we use administrative data to examine the extent to which OMI services have been implemented. The picture that emerges from these data is still changing; the initiative is an ongoing effort and its capacity is still being built. We assess here the amount, breadth, and intensity of services provided from the inception of the initiative through the end of 2007. By examining these data, we can gain insight into such questions as:

- How many individuals have been trained as workshop leaders; and how many workshops have they led?
- How often do volunteers fulfill their commitment to offer free services?
- Which institutional sectors have been most active and involved?
- What populations are community volunteers serving most?
- What proportion of the state's population has participated in an OMI workshop?
- To what extent has the number of workshops increased as the OMI gains experience?
- What has so far been the geographic reach of workshops within the state?

A. DATA SOURCES

The information reported in this chapter was drawn from administrative data collected by the OMI. PSI uses a web-based management information system for recording information about workshop leaders, participants, and the number of workshops. Workshop records are designed to include:

- ***Workshop leader information.*** Basic information about workshop leaders, such as name, address, and occupation, is collected by PSI staff at the time leaders apply for training. Updates are made by PSI staff or by workshop leaders either when they use the system to record information on workshops, or when they contact PSI for technical assistance. In addition to ongoing technical assistance provided by PSI, an annual telephone survey serves to confirm and update information about leaders and their productivity.
- ***Data on completed workshops.*** During their initial training, workshop leaders are instructed in the use of the web-based system, and asked to later enter information about workshops they plan to conduct or have completed. Some leaders prefer to mail this information in to PSI, whose staff enter the data. Information entered includes the leader's role (as coach, co-leader, or leader) and the number of participants who have completed the workshop. Participants are considered to have completed a workshop when they have attended at least 70 percent of the time.
- ***Participant characteristics.*** In 2003, the OMI created a short form to ask participants for basic demographic information, such as age, race/ethnicity, education, and marital status. Trained workshop leaders are asked to have each participant complete a form for submission to the OMI. Completion of the form is not mandatory for participation, but the OMI strongly encourages workshop leaders to use and submit these forms.

The use of a voluntary network for providing and reporting on services presents special challenges in recording data. Since many workshop leaders donate their personal time to deliver workshops, and institutional settings may lack administrative staff for this task, the OMI has little leverage to require consistent reporting. To correct the potential errors or omissions in the data, the OMI conducts an annual telephone survey of workshop leaders. Interviewers strive to confirm the accuracy of information on the number of workshops completed and the number of participants. Therefore, these data are considered to be relatively complete and reliable.

Information that participants provide about themselves, however, is collected on a far less consistent basis, and cannot be confirmed through follow-up surveys. Due to concerns about privacy, respondents do not provide their full names or contact information. A comparison of the number of participants reported by workshop leaders with the number of forms completed by participants indicates that very large numbers of participants do not respond to the form. Among those forms that are turned in, significant amounts of missing data are apparent. As a result, there is substantial inconsistency in the rate at which these

data are collected and recorded, limiting the extent to which they are representative of the people who participate in OMI workshops. For this reason, and because of recent data loss issues, we do not report on these characteristics.

A limitation of several tables in this chapter is the lack of detailed information about workshops delivered through high school classes. Although an estimated 62,500 students have taken an OMI-sponsored workshop at their high schools, the OMI does not collect information about the number of workshops/classes the teachers have conducted or about which parts of the state these classes have been offered in. “Workshop leaders”—the teachers—are not required to report information directly to the OMI about the workshops they have completed or the number of students enrolled in their classes. Instead, the OMI estimates the number of students participating from the number of Connections-PREP® workbooks that teachers order each year. Consequently, tables in this chapter show OMI’s reported totals for participating students and teachers, but without breakouts for the number of workshops by leaders, by year, or by region.

The OMI participation reported in this chapter focuses on activities conducted by the OMI’s volunteer leaders within the community and public sectors. It therefore excludes the OMI’s Family Expectations program for expectant parents, begun in 2006. Family Expectations, part of two national evaluations of programs for married and unmarried couples having a child together, is centered on a structured series of workshops for formally enrolled participants, led by paid PSI staff, and open only to a particular target population. Thus, Family Expectations represents a different service delivery model, and participation in it, although recorded in a separate MIS, is not discussed in this report (for more information on the implementation of Family Expectations, see Dion et al. 2008).

B. WORKSHOP LEADERS: NUMBER TRAINED AND ACTIVITY LEVELS

According to the OMI database, 2,277 individuals had been trained to deliver PREP® workshops by the end of 2007 (Table V.1). Community volunteers were trained in slightly greater numbers than leaders at public institutions. Across all institutional and community volunteers, the three groups with the largest numbers of trained leaders were individuals who identified themselves as associated with the faith sector (493), high school teachers (364), and counselors or mental health professionals (277).

Most people trained as workshop leaders have not gone on to deliver workshops. Thirty-six percent of those trained had led at least one workshop by late 2007, and a smaller proportion, 18 percent, had conducted at least three workshops. This suggests that a small fraction of those trained are meeting their commitment to deliver four workshops. The proportion of trained individuals who held at least one workshop was about the same in the institutional sectors (35 percent) and the community sectors (38 percent).

Several factors may explain why most workshops were led by a relatively small cadre of workshop leaders. First, not all individuals who were trained in the curriculum were necessarily expected to go on to become workshop leaders. For example, some training participants, especially in the early years, were management staff at agencies who were

considering whether to engage in supporting the OMI but did not plan to offer workshops themselves; others sometimes participated so that they would be better prepared to refer agency clients to workshops. Second, some agencies have elected to front-load the training of all available staff in order to make for easier rollout on a gradual basis. Some of these trainees are not expected to offer workshops until it is organizationally appropriate. Third, the data do not capture those trainees who may be co-leading OMI workshops because the OMI appropriately counts each workshop only once, when it is reported by the leader (i.e., two leaders conducting a workshop would be counted as one workshop, even though two trainees are involved).

Table V.1. Activity Levels of Workshop Leaders, by Occupation or Population of Interest

Sector	Total Number of Workshop Leaders	Percentage of Workshop Leaders Who Conducted ...			
		0 Workshops	1-2 Workshops	3-4 Workshops	5+ Workshops
Institutions					
High School Teachers ^a	364	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Youth Services Staff	260	47	17	10	27
College Instructors	83	63	24	10	4
Business Persons	9	44	56	0	0
OSDH Staff	46	9	20	35	37
Prison Chaplains	46	41	24	11	24
TANF Agency Staff	95	53	18	15	15
Extension Services Educators	41	15	12	20	54
Head Start Staff	17	76	12	12	0
Subtotal	961	65	12	8	14
Community Volunteers					
Clergy, Mentors, Faith	493	60	25	8	6
Counselors, Mental Health Workers, Clinicians	277	64	21	10	5
Military	30	60	10	7	23
Social Workers	139	55	24	9	12
Hispanic Services	80	69	20	6	5
Native American Services	38	66	18	11	5
General Community	137	65	18	11	7
Subtotal	1,194	62	22	9	7
Other	122	80	8	5	7
Total	2,277	64	17	8	10

Source: OMI Management Information System.

^aData for number of workshops/classes held by trained high school teachers is not available.

Although individuals from the faith, education, and counseling sectors were apparently the most eager to be trained, they were not the most active in delivering workshops. Instead, staff from Oklahoma's State Department of Health (OSDH) and Cooperative Extension Service workers were most likely to produce workshops following training, when we consider the full period of OMI operations. This may be partly due to the fact that, at

least for a period, these two agencies each had a formal contract with the OMI that supported workshop delivery.

C. EXTENT OF WORKSHOP IMPLEMENTATION WITHIN SECTORS

The scale of workshop delivery across the state is considerable. An estimated 7,078 OMI workshops were conducted by the end of 2007 (Table V.2). This includes 3,953 workshops reported by trained leaders, and an estimated 3,125 high school classes that have covered OMI material (the latter estimate is based on the number of curriculum supplies ordered and average class size). The annual number of workshops has dramatically increased, from 18 in 2001, the OMI's first year of service delivery operations, to 571 in 2007, and the total number of workshops per year has continued to exceed 500 since 2003.

Table V.2. Number of Workshops by Year

	2001	2002	2003 ^a	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Public Institutions								
Adoption Services	0	0	0	3	5	4	9	21
High Schools ^b	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3,125
Youth Services	1	5	156	378	331	194	57	1,122
Universities	1	5	20	9	11	4	5	55
Business	0	1	2	0	2	5	14	24
Correctional Centers	0	0	14	41	23	25	24	127
TANF Agencies	0	0	0	0	50	224	284	558
Extension Services	2	89	91	65	15	6	2	270
Child Guidance	10	38	139	21	2	1	2	213
Head Start	0	0	7	1	0	2	0	10
Subtotal	14	138	429	515	434	461	388	5,525
Community Volunteers								
Faith	2	31	97	92	98	69	35	424
Counseling	2	22	74	45	28	15	12	198
Community Services	0	7	48	20	8	21	24	128
Spanish Workshops	0	5	10	18	10	19	8	70
Native American	0	2	13	6	2	7	4	34
General Community	0	60	272	81	116	46	71	646
Subtotal	4	127	514	262	262	177	154	1,500
Large-Scale Community Events								
All About Us or Sweethearts Weekends	0	0	1	10	10	12	20	53
Total	18	265	944	790	711	654	571	7,078

Source: OMI Management Information System.

^a200 of the total number of 2003 workshops that were verbally reported to interviewers during an initial calling effort to assess the needs of workshop leaders and improve technical assistance. These workshops could have been led anytime between 2001 and 2003.

^bData on the number of workshops/classes held by trained high school teachers by year is not available.

Sector variation in completed workshops. More workshops were produced by institutional staff than by volunteers working largely on their own in the community. The largest number of workshops (3,125) is estimated to have been delivered by high school

teachers. As part of its program for first-time juvenile offenders and their parents, Oklahoma's Association of Youth Services (OAYS) also delivered a large number of workshops (1,122). Two reasons may contribute to the OAYS leaders' productivity: parents and children in this program have a strong incentive to attend in order to avoid adjudication, and OAYS was subsidized by the OMI for delivery of its workshops. The next highest number of workshops produced in the public sector was TANF agencies, which embed the OMI curriculum in their mandatory orientations. Cooperative Extension and Child Guidance Services provided many workshops, most of them between 2002 and 2004, with activity tapering off to two workshops in each sector in 2007. Contracts for the OMI to subsidize these services were no longer in place in 2007.

In the community sector, the greatest number of workshops was provided by volunteers from the general community (646), and next by members of the faith sector (424). The pace in the community sector peaked in 2003, but otherwise has held relatively steady across the years.

Number of participants. As the OMI has built capacity, the number of workshop participants has also dramatically climbed, from 408 in year 2001 to 26,804 in 2007 (Table V.3)—with a total of 122,134 participants so far.¹² According to OMI guidelines, participation is reported only when the individual completes at least 70 percent of the curriculum offered, so this total number does not include participants who began workshops but did not meet the minimum participation threshold for reporting completion.¹³

Between five and 10 percent of Oklahoma's households have participated in an OMI workshop. According to data from the American Community Survey, there were about 1,385,300 households in Oklahoma in the year 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006b). If every participant attended a workshop with a spouse or partner, then the OMI would have reached around 5 percent of households; if participants always attended without a partner, and all were thus from different households, the estimate would be closer to 10 percent. Since it is unlikely that either assumption is true, the actual value is probably between 5 and 10 percent.

More than half of all OMI participants are youth. This includes large numbers of high school students and adolescents receiving youth services in the First Time Offender's Program (FTOP). Concern about the young age at first marriage in Oklahoma, and the associated risk for divorce, led the OMI to focus on the potentially preventive effects of working with youth.¹⁴

¹² Note that the total number of participants includes the OMI's estimate of high school participants.

¹³ There could be duplicates in the number of participants if some people attend more than one workshop or community event.

¹⁴ This includes high school participants plus half of the group of youth services participants. About half of the participants in the latter group were juveniles; the other half were their parents.

Table V.3. Number of Participants by Year

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007 ^b	Total
Institutions								
Adoption Services	0	0	0	172	268	297	726	1,463
High Schools ^a	0	0	5,000	5,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	55,000
Youth Services	2	39	1,518	7,343	6,751	4,251	534	20,438
Universities	20	128	187	101	144	45	125	750
Business	0	5	20	0	43	135	346	549
Correctional Centers	0	0	196	565	325	434	493	2,013
Welfare Offices	0	0	0	0	489	1,791	2,380	4,660
Extension Services	23	1,127	988	587	272	54	11	3,062
Child Guidance	279	420	1,393	216	16	4	16	2,344
Head Start	0	0	83	10	0	100	0	193
Subtotal	324	1,719	9,385	13,994	23,308	22,111	19,631	90,472
Community Volunteers								
Faith	14	802	1,419	1,215	1,714	1,468	573	7,205
Counseling	70	156	815	409	417	222	149	2,238
Community Services	0	124	574	200	58	376	456	1,788
Spanish Workshops	0	38	82	219	298	655	83	1,375
Native American	0	27	108	87	23	47	2,536	2,828
General Community	0	705	4,406	858	1,381	1,079	1,541	9,970
Subtotal	84	1,852	7,404	2,988	3,891	3,847	5,338	25,404
Large-Scale Events								
All About Us or SW	0	0	600	1,130	1,289	1,404	1,835	6,258
Total	408	3,571	17,389	18,112	28,488	27,362	26,804	122,134

Source: OMI Management Information System.

^aData for the number of students taking Connections-PREP® in the high schools is estimated, based on the number of curriculum workbooks ordered by teachers. Distribution across years 2003-2007 is unknown and therefore shown arbitrarily.

^b Although 2007 reporting was not complete at time of publication, the OMI does not anticipate a significant increase in these numbers.

Workshop intensity. Although the standard PREP® model covers about 12 hours of material, the actual number of hours provided by OMI workshop leaders has varied by type of service-delivery provider. A Native American adaptation, for example, includes three hours of PREP® material, and the large-scale community events typically cover about six hours, once breaks are factored in. However, a few providers have offered more than the usual 12 hours. At least one prison for women requires that interested inmates take the Within My Reach program in addition to the standard 12 hours of PREP®, and the curriculum adaptation used in high schools takes about 18 hours. Thus, OMI workshops range from about three to 24 hours in length.

D. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF WORKSHOPS

To ensure that capacity is developed across the state, the OMI organizes its work around the six regions defined by Oklahoma's DHS for administration of many of its programs for low-income families. Area 3 includes Oklahoma County and contains 277,811 households, according to the 2006 American Community Survey, while Area 6 includes Tulsa County with 235,425 households; these two areas include the two largest metropolitan areas in the state by population and contain 37 percent of Oklahoma's households.

The distribution of completed workshops and workshop participants generally reflects the population densities of the state's geographic areas. Even without taking into account the number of OMI-related classes for high school students (for which regional data are not available), workshops have taken place in every DHS-defined region of the state (Table V.4 and V.5). With their greater population, it makes sense that most workshops would be conducted in Areas 3 and 6, which is generally the case, although activity in Area 2 is nearly the same as in Area 6. Greater penetration can be expected in areas that are more densely populated, in part because it may be easier to form a group for workshops but also because the traveling distances for participants to reach their workshop locations are likely to be shorter in urban areas. The total number of workshops conducted in the remaining, mostly rural, areas of the state is fairly evenly distributed.

Table V.4. Number of Workshops by Geographic Region^a

	Unknown	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5	Area 6	Total
Public Institutions								
Adoptive Services	0	0	1	15	3	1	1	21
High Schools*	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Youth Services	8	194	243	386	122	66	103	1,122
Universities	0	7	2	17	12	6	11	55
Business	0	0	1	21	1	1	0	24
Correctional Centers	0	25	21	22	20	29	10	127
Welfare Offices	0	16	16	416	9	29	72	558
Extension Services	2	52	73	13	83	42	5	270
Child Guidance	0	30	34	54	28	26	41	213
Head Start	0	0	4	0	0	4	2	10
Subtotal	10	324	395	944	278	204	245	2,400
Community Volunteers								
Faith	1	22	39	222	38	21	81	424
Counseling	8	7	34	76	12	11	50	198
Community Services	0	1	7	52	17	24	27	128
Spanish Workshops	0	2	7	53	1	1	6	70
Native American	0	0	1	0	20	7	6	34
General Community	5	42	84	254	60	64	137	646
Subtotal	14	74	172	657	148	128	307	1,500
Large-Scale Events								
All About Us/ SW	0	3	3	24	5	1	17	53
Total	24	401	570	1,625	431	333	569	3,953

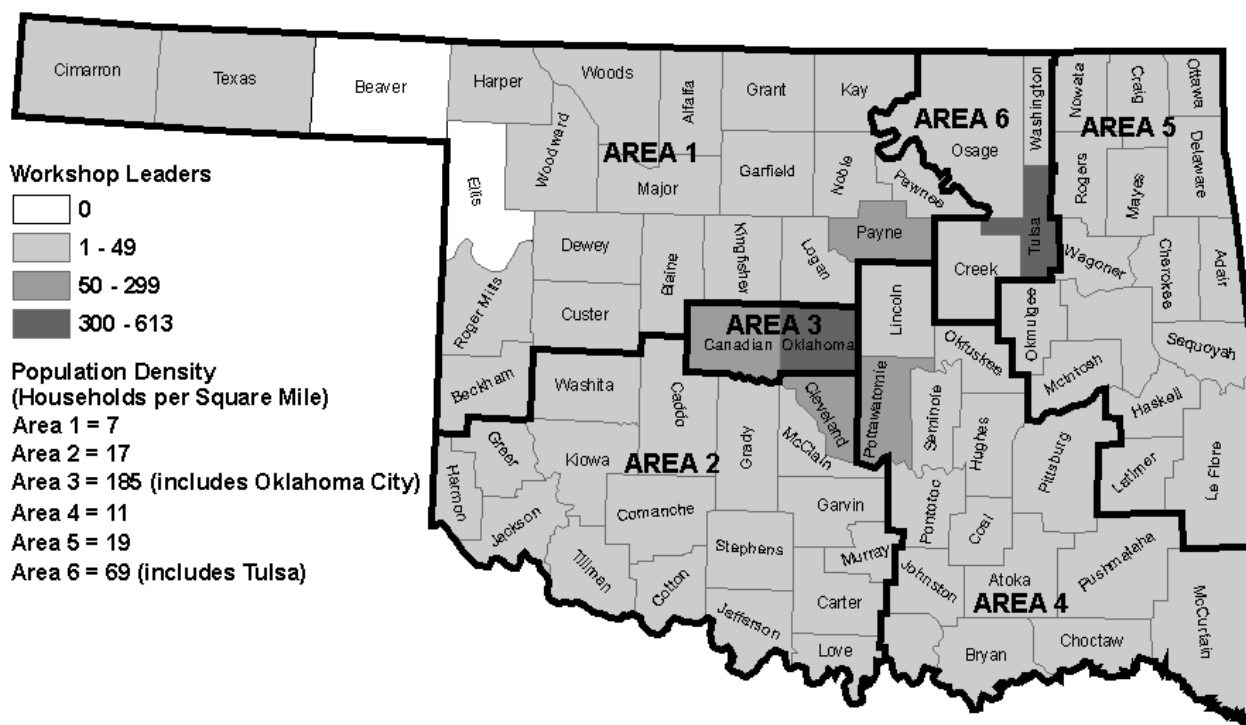
Source: OMI Management Information System.

^aGeographic region is represented by the six areas of the state defined by Oklahoma DHS.

^bData on the number of workshops/classes held by trained high school teachers is not available.

Trained OMI workshop leaders reside in all but two counties of the state (Figure V.1). The highest concentrations of leaders are in the two counties that include the major metropolitan areas and therefore the densest populations. A smaller but still substantial number of leaders is located in four counties surrounding Oklahoma County: Canadian, Cleveland, Pottawatomie, and Payne. Trained workshop leaders are represented in most remaining counties, albeit at lower concentrations.

Figure V.1. Oklahoma Marriage Initiative: Workshop Leaders by County

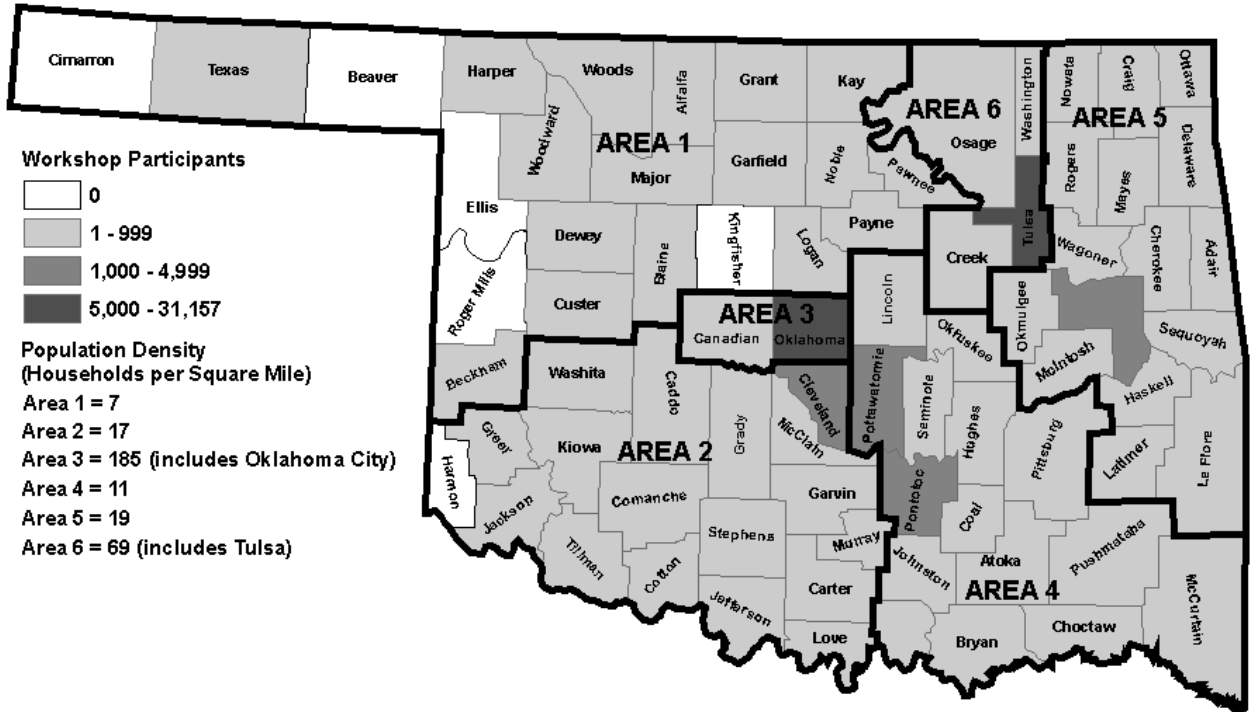


Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000), and OMI Management Information System.

Note: Data not included for 362 high school teachers whose county of residence was unavailable.

The number of workshop participants by DHS-defined areas also appears generally to reflect the population density (Table V.5). If one result of participating in OMI services is that participants will “spread the word,” as the OMI hopes, then the evenness of this distribution is important. Figure V.2 suggests that there are six counties where workshops have not occurred, although the data do not include high school students.

Figure V.2. Oklahoma Marriage Initiative: Workshop Participants by County



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000), and OMI Management Information System.

Note: Data not included for 362 high school teachers whose county of residence was unavailable.

Table V.5. Number of Participants by Geographic Region^a

	Unknown	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5	Area 6	Total
		7	17	185	11	19	69	
Population Density (number of households per square mile)				(includes Oklahoma City)			(includes Tulsa)	
Public Institutions								
Adoptive Services	0	0	116	1,133	156	4	54	1,463
High Schools ^b	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Youth Services	97	1,908	2,719	12,356	1,118	736	1,504	20,438
Universities	0	115	14	236	141	20	224	750
Business	0	0	10	517	10	12	0	549
Correctional Centers	0	340	222	360	477	496	118	2,013
Welfare Offices	0	129	204	2,787	144	416	980	4,660
Extension Services	9	473	840	144	1,067	477	52	3,062
Child Guidance	0	113	318	841	241	321	510	2,344
Head Start	0	0	60	0	0	108	25	193
Subtotal	106	3,078	4,387	17,241	3,198	2,586	3,413	34,009
Community Sector								
Faith	20	259	612	3,899	693	350	1,372	7,205
Counseling	74	6	253	791	104	167	843	2,238
Community Services	0	30	122	608	184	308	536	1,788
Spanish Workshops	0	90	47	1,060	12	36	130	1,375
Native American General Community	0	0	16	0	2,602	148	62	2,828
	18	511	612	4,529	1,009	797	2,494	9,970
Subtotal	112	896	1,662	10,887	4,604	1,806	5,437	25,404
Large-Scale Events								
All About Us/ SW	0	111	175	4,174	280	25	1,493	6,258
Total	218	4,085	6,340	33,435	8,238	4,421	10,397	67,134

Source: OMI Management Information System.

^aGeographic region is represented by the six areas of the state defined by Oklahoma DHS.

^bData on the number of high school students participating by region is not available.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Much can be learned from the history and ongoing development of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. Documenting and assessing the OMI experience can yield lessons for other states attempting similar large initiatives to strengthen marriage and provide feedback to the OMI itself. This evaluation had two main objectives as it addressed the specific research questions listed in Chapter I. The first aim was to document what the OMI is: its origins, the process by which it built its vision and support, its overarching philosophy, its use of research for guidance, its choice of a service model as vehicle for change, and the goals it has enunciated for changing systems and culture. The second aim was to assess the OMI's accomplishments and their implications, focusing on the extent of agency, volunteer, and participant engagement, as well as the challenges encountered along the way. Beyond answers to those research questions, it is useful, in conclusion, to reflect on the lessons that can be gleaned from this assessment of the OMI experience, and to look ahead to other forms of evaluation that can sharpen our understanding of the effects of a broad initiative like the OMI.

Although our focus in this concluding chapter is on assessing OMI accomplishments and identifying lessons from them, we first briefly summarize the history documented in this study:

- **Origins:** In the late 1990s, a confluence of emerging public policy concerns and research gave rise to what is now the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. The 1996 welfare reform legislation that established TANF included objectives related to family structure, including an increase in two-parent families and a reduction in the number of nonmarital births. Around the same time, among social scientists, a research consensus was forming about the benefits to children of growing up in families with two married parents. And a state economic report in 1998 suggested that, among other steps, an increased attention on family and social conditions might indirectly improve the state's prospects for economic growth. These social conditions included a divorce rate that was the second highest in the nation.

- ***Building vision and support:*** Oklahoma recognized that the idea of a state sponsored effort to support marriage would be new and unfamiliar. To move forward, the OMI worked step by step to build support and credibility for the effort. High ranking political officials—including the governor, a key cabinet secretary, and the director of DHS—put marriage on the agenda by announcing ambitious goals and holding presentations and conferences with representatives of state institutional and organizational sectors to ask how they would like to participate. The OMI’s leaders also brought in research experts and supporters to stimulate interest, address skeptics, and build awareness.
- ***OMI philosophy:*** The OMI’s overarching goal is to strengthen families by reducing divorce and nonmarital childbearing, thereby enhancing the well-being of children. The OMI believes that the best way to achieve this goal is to improve the public’s relationship and marriage skills. Improving these skills is expected to increase the likelihood that marriages will succeed, so that more children grow up with their two married parents. Information about marriage and relationship skills is also expected to improve the chances that unmarried couples and singles will choose to raise their children in the context of a healthy and stable marriage. Change in these individual-level behaviors is expected to eventually culminate in large-scale social change across the state.
- ***The vehicle for change:*** To reach its goals for broad change, the OMI chose to implement a marriage education program. Like other healthy marriage initiatives, the OMI had to consider two objectives in choosing a curriculum: achieving consistency in method and message, and using a curriculum well suited to the particular local setting and circumstances of participants. The OMI addressed this issue by adopting PREP® as a standard and subsequently adapting it in various ways to different populations. To create broad accessibility to marriage education, the OMI decided to build the state’s capacity to deliver workshops by training staff at public and private institutions with statewide infrastructure, and by training individual volunteers to deliver workshops in their local communities.
- ***Goals for changing systems and culture:*** With one of the highest divorce rates in the nation, the OMI seeks to change the way its residents think about marriage and divorce. It hopes to help the public understand that skills can be learned and applied to develop, maintain, and improve committed relationships and marriage. Building awareness of this, and awareness that workshops are readily accessible for learning these skills, the OMI hopes to prepare unmarried individuals and couples for marriage and encourage distressed married couples to seek help before turning to divorce. The OMI also aspires to change the policies and practices of public and private agencies and institutions, the attitudes and behaviors of their staff in interaction with the populations they serve, and the ways in which the aspects of system and culture might affect behavioral outcomes of ultimate interest—relationships, marriage, and divorce. The OMI recognizes that these ambitious goals, at the level of institutions and

the public, are likely to take some time to be achieved even with the strongest implementation efforts.

- ***Use of research:*** Almost from its inception, the OMI has been guided by a panel of state and national experts on marriage, divorce, and low-income families. This interdisciplinary group has contributed to development of the initiative, by sharing cutting-edge research findings, acting as a sounding board for new ideas, and conducting research to explore the potential for new OMI programs. To establish a baseline against which future progress might be compared, the group led the development of the first statewide survey on attitudes and behavior related to marriage and divorce. Annual meetings with the DHS director keep the group focused on program and policy-relevant issues and provide a forum for discussing progress and future steps.

In the remainder of this final chapter we summarize the OMI's achievements to date in reaching the Oklahoma population and engaging institutions and communities. Next we identify major lessons from the OMI experience, particularly with respect to features of the initiative that seem to have affected its implementation success. We then reflect on implications that the OMI experience has for the sustainability of Oklahoma's efforts and for those elsewhere interested in replicating the initiative or implementing a similar effort. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how future evaluations might help us learn more about the impact of the OMI on Oklahoma's families and children.

A. OMI IMPLEMENTATION TO DATE

The OMI set out to accomplish several objectives in its quest to make marriage education services widely accessible and widely used. It aimed to reach out to specific population groups, engage the involvement of a broad range of societal sectors and institutions, and blanket the state with its messages and services. While the OMI is an ongoing initiative and continues to grow and develop, in this section we briefly take stock of its accomplishments so far.

1. Saturation

The OMI has aspired to “saturating” society—making services so widely available, and so well known, that throughout Oklahoma they will be accepted and sought by a substantial portion of the population. The degree of saturation achieved can be considered in terms of the location and availability of existing services, the operation of workshops, the number of participants per region, and the backgrounds of people who participate.

- ***Numbers reached.*** Based on data collected by the OMI, between 5 and 10 percent of Oklahoma households have participated in an OMI workshop. A total of about 122,134 individuals had been served by the end of 2007, through 7,078 workshops.

- ***Geographic spread.*** The OMI has succeeded in achieving a degree of geographic spread that roughly reflects the state’s urban and rural population densities. At least to some extent, it has reached nearly every county of the state, judging by the locations of trained workshop leaders and participants.

2. Reaching the General Oklahoma Population and Specific Groups

As a statewide initiative, the OMI intends to develop a broad supply of services that can be accessed by any resident, regardless of relationship status or circumstance. However, it also had good reason to make special efforts to reach some populations.

- ***Youth.*** More than half of all workshop participants have been youth, including 55,000 high school students residing in nearly every county of the state and more than 10,000 juvenile offenders. The OMI has focused on this population group because youth represent the next generation of families and thus have substantial potential for leading the kind of societal change sought by the initiative. Concern about the relatively young “age at first marriage” in Oklahoma has also fueled interest in serving youth.
- ***Low-income groups.*** Almost 15 percent of workshop participants have been low-income and at-risk individuals in a range of circumstances, from TANF recipients to prison inmates. The OMI has placed an emphasis on this group because of policy and economic concerns and because low-income populations have had little access to information about developing strong relationships and marriages.
- ***Couples.*** About 24 percent of OMI participants are estimated to have been couples over the period studied. Married and unmarried couples are obvious targets of any marriage initiative, and in the OMI they have generally been served within faith, counseling, or community service settings. Couples have also participated in workshops intended for adoptive parents, or in a large-scale community event focused on relationship skills education.

3. Multi-Sector Engagement

To reach a broad range of individuals, the OMI aimed to build the supply of services within organizations and institutions as well as within the general community.

- ***Institutions.*** The OMI has succeeded in implementing services—at least to some extent—in a wide range of nonprofit organizations, social institutions, and government agencies. These include high schools, correctional centers, welfare offices, juvenile offender programs, early childhood education programs, adoptive parent services, Cooperative Extension, and Child Guidance services. Other sectors have also been involved, including universities, businesses, and military bases, though they were not included as a focus of this study. Although both the institutional sector and the community

volunteer sector have been important, more workshops have been conducted, and more people have participated, in the institutional sector. From 2001 to 2007, workshop leaders at institutions had led 5,525 workshops, serving 90,472 participants.

- **Community.** One of the OMI's strategies has been to engage, train, and support volunteers throughout the state. Many of these volunteers were employed in the faith, counseling, or community services sector, and some have focused on special populations such as Native Americans or Spanish-speaking Hispanics. Activity in the community sector is increasing due to large-scale community events that provide an abbreviated form of the relationship skills curriculum. By the end of 2007, community volunteers had led 1,500 PREP® workshops, serving a total of 25,404 participants.

B. MAJOR LESSONS LEARNED

The OMI set out to develop a broad network of providers for delivering marriage and relationship skills education in large part by building on existing infrastructure. This approach inevitably encounters issues pertaining to “fit”—the alignment of the initiative's goals and approach with those of service delivery providers and the needs of the populations they serve. The OMI's experience suggests that full implementation within an institutional sector is most likely when the initiative's mission fits well with the agency's, when the agency is strongly motivated to succeed and closely monitors its own progress, when the curriculum corresponds to the needs and interest of agency clients, and when there is a steady source of participants. These advantages, however, are not sufficient if other issues are not addressed, such as buy-in by frontline staff or resistance to a focus on marriage.

Existing infrastructure and a steady source of prospective participants are associated with greater workshop activity. Workshop delivery has benefited from an established enrollment process, a pre-existing model for delivering classes, and reliable workshop venues. Organizations that had pre-existing classes or group-based instruction on related topics, such as high school classes on marriage and family life, have 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 has been particularly important for community volunteers.

Recruitment of couples or individuals has been easier when workshop leaders or sponsoring agencies have had access to a continuous source of prospective participants. Agencies and institutions that could recruit participants from their existing clientele have been more likely to succeed in implementing workshops and continuing them. Community volunteers unaffiliated with such an agency or organization often had difficulty recruiting participants, as did agency staff who were expected to go beyond their existing clientele to find participants.

A good fit between the initiative's goals and the priorities of its partner 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 enjoyment of a statewide infrastructure. However, strong agencies typically have an established culture and mission, usually reflected in 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. When instruction in relationship skills is well aligned with the mission of an agency, as it was with the Family and Consumer Sciences division in Oklahoma's high schools, widespread implementation is likely to result. In general, leadership and staff are most likely to embrace a marriage initiative's goals when they are supportive of and in line with the agency's pre-existing priorities.

Strong buy-in among agencies' frontline staff can promote implementation success; absence of buy-in can impede progress. 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 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 among frontline staff in some OMI partnerships was associated with a lower volume of workshops delivered. There were also instances when services withered after a change in high-level agency leadership. These experiences suggest that inviting the input and feedback of frontline staff and responding to their concerns is important to strong and sustained implementation.

To engage both service providers and participants, the curriculum should respond to the target population's needs. 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 has been more likely when the curriculum has been 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 have been more likely to use the OMI curriculum once it has been adapted to include an emphasis on how to recognize and choose healthy partners in the future.

Volunteers' desire to help must be bolstered by skills and resources. Although many individual volunteers have accepted the OMI's offer of curriculum training, relatively few have met the requirement to deliver four free workshops. A range of factors explain this result, including a lack of skill or resources for finding and recruiting likely participants, lack of a location to conduct classes, and difficulties arranging other workshop supports. OMI staff have found that individuals and agencies without a steady source of participants are especially likely to need additional training and follow-up assistance to help them identify such sources. The OMI experience suggests that marriage initiatives relying on volunteers to

deliver workshops should plan to recruit and train more volunteers than they might expect to need—but also should develop strategies to avoid training volunteers who might end up competing with each other for participants.

C. REPLICABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

A critical question for policymakers and practitioners outside of Oklahoma considering or already implementing a state- or community-wide marriage initiative involves the extent to which the OMI approach is replicable in other places and sustainable over time. By replicability we mean how well the approach could be transferred to another state or community; by sustainability we mean the extent to which the approach could maintain its mission and vitality over the long run, whether in Oklahoma or elsewhere. Some of the same features of implementation that seem related to short-term success are probably associated with both its replicability and its sustainability.

Persistence, flexibility, and creativity of initiative managers. Rolling out marriage education services statewide is no easy task, particularly when the services are primarily to be offered by volunteers. Oklahoma’s experience shows that developing a voluntary workforce at the public and private levels requires patience, determination, and the flexibility to come up with creative solutions to obstacles. Developing a keen eye for opportunities and moving quickly to take advantage of them are important; contracting out management of the initiative to a private firm that could respond more nimbly than most public agencies probably fostered these capacities. A focus on learning through experience was generally a higher priority than meeting time-fixed performance measures.

Leadership and fiscal support. The OMI was ultimately able to garner substantial and ongoing funding to carry out its activities. Although volunteers at the community level and staff at organizations provide the bulk of the marriage education workshops, funding is nevertheless necessary to sponsor training and supplies for workshop leaders, arrange and conduct large community-wide events, provide technical assistance and support for workshop leaders, maintain an electronic management information system and ensure its ongoing use by volunteer leaders, conduct research activities to inform the design, development, and expansion of OMI activities, and recruit and monitor the progress of public agencies, among other tasks. The OMI was fortunate to have begun at a moment in time when TANF surplus funds were readily available and could provide a strong push forward.

Maintaining continuity across political administrations. If a marriage initiative is seen as closely connected to a particular political administration, it may not survive when the administration changes hands and priorities shift. In Oklahoma, the private firm managing the initiative was successful in retaining support for the OMI when the Republican administration that initiated it transferred power upon inauguration of a Democratic governor. A key element in this success was that the new governor re-appointed the chief government supporter of the OMI (and the director of the DHS) to his post as Secretary of Health and Human Services. Being inclusive of a diversity of perspectives throughout most

of its development was probably also a contributing factor in the OMI's achievement of continued support.

Learning from trial and error. The complexity involved in designing and operating a statewide marriage initiative stems in large part from the diversity of populations to be served. Creating a standard intervention that can still respond to the needs of many different groups can be a careful balancing act. The OMI leadership learned through trial and error that the implementation and shape of relationship skills education must be tailored to the specific agency, sector, or population group being served. They also found that the implementation challenges that arise in each of these are often very different from one another, so as a result the learning process must occur on multiple fronts simultaneously. Because the challenges that arise in implementing marriage initiatives in other states and communities may differ somewhat from those encountered by the OMI, new initiatives are likely to benefit from establishing an effective learning process from the beginning.

Cultural context. Oklahoma is part of the so-called "Bible Belt," where indicators of religiosity are generally higher than in other states or communities (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007). It is possible that the state's relatively religious culture has contributed to greater receptiveness to messages about the value of marriage and the importance of taking action to protect and support the institution.

D. POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE EVALUATION

This evaluation has examined the implementation of the OMI, but not the extent to which its *ultimate* goals have been achieved: namely, reductions in divorce and nonmarital childbearing, and increases in the number of children growing up with their own parents in a healthy marriage. It also has not rigorously assessed the extent to which societal attitudes and norms have changed with respect to marriage and divorce, factors that could ultimately be associated with broad cultural shifts and behavior change.

A strong assessment of the OMI's impact on divorce and nonmarital childbearing requires a well-matched comparison group. There are numerous obstacles to rigorous evaluation of statewide impacts. Chief among these challenges is that there is no "counterfactual"—another state that is the same in every way except for presence of the OMI, and whose social outcomes could be compared to outcomes observed in Oklahoma. One approach is to compare Oklahoma's divorce and nonmarital childbearing rates to measures taken prior to, or at the beginning of, the initiative. While this approach would provide useful information, it would not conclusively determine the extent to which any observed changes have occurred due to the OMI or because of other factors, such as changes in the economy. By making certain assumptions, however, evaluation techniques can be developed and applied to reduce these concerns. The design of such an evaluation would require special attention and tailoring to the OMI's unique circumstances.

Assessing cultural change in attitudes and norms will similarly require careful thought about research design. It is possible to design and conduct a survey to assess change in knowledge and attitudes, such as whether more people think healthy marriage is

something that can be “learned,” and the OMI has begun to take steps in that direction. For the same reasons as described above, such an approach would not permit observed changes to be confidently attributed to the influence of the OMI. A carefully designed quasi-experimental approach, however, could potentially be brought to bear to reduce threats to the validity of findings.

If changes in marriage, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing occur, they are likely to emerge over the long term. An important issue to consider in any assessment of state-level outcomes is that broad societal change in the culture of marriage is likely to take time to emerge, regardless of the quality or depth of OMI program implementation. The pervasiveness of divorce and nonmarital childbearing suggests that changes in deep-seated values and attitudes are not likely to come quickly and easily. In addition, because nearly 70 percent of participants are youth or single parents, it will take time to observe any effects on divorce. These individuals are not married, and national statistics indicate that people are marrying later in life. Once people do marry, the average duration of first marriage today is about seven to eight years (Kreider and Fields 2001). In light of the unwed status of most OMI participants, it may be possible to detect impacts on marriage and nonmarital childbearing sooner than impacts on divorce. Still, it is unlikely that assessments of state-level outcomes on divorce and nonmarital childbearing will be able to capture any change until the OMI’s reach extends well beyond its current implementation.

Some elements may be rigorously evaluated through random-assignment experiments. Another, more rigorous approach to evaluating the OMI involves experiments in which people are randomly assigned to either the program or a control group that does not have access to the program. The OMI is already engaged in such experiments with particular OMI components. The OMI’s program for couples having a new baby together, Family Expectations, is being studied as part of the national evaluations of Building Strong Families and Supporting Healthy Marriages. These controlled evaluations, conducted by nationally recognized policy research firms, are assessing the impact of services on the quality and stability of couples’ marriages and relationships and the well-being of their children.

It would be possible to extend this evaluation method to other OMI programs. Some programs lend themselves well to experimental designs that test program effectiveness—particularly those that focus on a specific population. These include, for example, the program for adoptive and foster parents, the Within My Reach program for TANF recipients, and PREP® as it is deployed in correctional centers. Particularly in light of the high take-up rate of high school classes that contain OMI curricula, Connections-PREP® could be evaluated using a quasi-experimental design. None of these adaptations has yet been rigorously evaluated for their effects on relationships and marriage. Obtaining solid evidence of the impact of these programs would either provide the OMI with support to continue and expand its efforts, or would suggest that improvements are needed to achieve the desired outcomes.

Improving management information would foster better assessment of saturation and lay the foundation for future evaluations. Issues involved in gathering

information about workshops and workshop participants could be examined and addressed in order to improve assessment of the extent of statewide saturation and to reveal gaps in coverage. The lack of basic information about who is being served is a central issue. For example, although many high school students are being served, it is not known how many of these youths are boys or girls. While data collection in a system that relies heavily on volunteers has many challenges, the number of couples being served, their marital status, and income levels are important to gauge whom the OMI is reaching, and can inform directions for both future implementation and evaluation.

D. Closing

Oklahoma pioneered implementation of the first statewide marriage initiative in the nation, and continues to refine strategies and develop new ideas. As detailed in this report, their experience provides rich lessons that are instructive for a range of policy interventions. The OMI will continue to be of great interest to policy makers and program practitioners as the initiative continues to evolve and adapt and evaluation findings grow.

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APPENDIX A

**OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE
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