



WELFARE PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK
Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Workshop
Oklahoma City, OK
July 15-16, 2003

Short Report

Background

Oklahoma serves as one of the premiere pioneers in implementing State efforts to promote, enhance, and maintain the development of healthy marriages. What began as a need to reduce the Oklahoma divorce rate and number of out-of-wedlock births, has now evolved into a major initiative benefiting families, neighborhoods, and communities. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) is a public/private partnership dedicated to reducing the State's divorce rate, strengthening families, and reducing government support dependence. With the development of the OMI, Oklahoma has generated attention from several other States considering their own options around healthy marriage promotion. These states recognize the need for Federal and State guidance serving as assistance to their own program development process. With this in mind, The Welfare Peer Technical Assistance (TA) Network sponsored a multi-State TA event on July 15-16, 2003 in Oklahoma City, Ok. This event was co-coordinated with Public Strategies, the public relations firm that manages the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. The Administration for Children and Families' region VI, VII and IX offices provided additional supports, ensuring this event met State informational needs. The following State and organization representatives attended the Workshop:

- California;
- Kansas;
- Louisiana;
- Missouri,
- Nevada;
- Texas;
- Administration for Children and Families, Region VI; and
- Several Oklahoma State and community stakeholders.

During event planning and coordination, the Welfare Peer TA Network staff asked participants to complete a discussion a guide that was used to gauge their current State activity surrounding healthy marriage promotion. In addition, this tool was utilized to determine the informational and resource needs of the participating States. Based on the responses generated, an agenda was developed, which covered a broad range of topics and included presenters from several sectors within Oklahoma as well as Federal representatives.

This event began with an OMI overview, that was presented by Mary Myrick, President of Public Strategies. Discussion points included the historical context of the OMI and original design intent. Participants were also provided with a detailed outline of OMI progress since its inception in 1999. Although the OMI is specific to Oklahoma needs and resources, participants were able to utilize Oklahoma's learned lessons and challenges over the years as a guide in considering their own State strengths and limitations.

Below is a brief overview of a portion of the information highlighted throughout this 1 ½ day TA event:

Service Delivery System Overview and Implementation

OMI services were presented and linked to the intended Oklahoma goals (e.g., reducing risks of Domestic Violence, increased communication among couples, and maintaining stable family interaction). Such goals motivated Oklahoma to select the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) curriculum developed by Scott Stanley, Ph.D., and Howard Markman, Ph.D., at the University of Denver. With a focus to build relationships of all types, the PREP curriculum is used when facilitating workshops for couples and individuals throughout Oklahoma. There are currently 770 registered PREP workshop leaders in Oklahoma who represent various service systems, including corrections and public health. A small group of these individuals shared with participants their experiences and strategies to providing workshops for their specific population of customers. They identified needed staff training, and personal feelings and experiences among workers as factors that impact service delivery as well as the number of Oklahoma couples/individuals referred to OMI services such as PREP Workshops.

Implementing Marriage Services – A View From Partners

A large percentage of OMI's success is attributed to the broad support from several Oklahoma service providers, businesses, and systems. As co-partners, these various groups share in the facilitation of PREP workshops, OMI advocacy, and overall goal achievement. Representatives from the Oklahoma faith community, Oklahoma Department of Health, and the Oklahoma Association of Youth Services each depicted the benefits, initial apprehensions and reasons for partnering with OMI program staff. These diverse groups articulated a unique set of goals and professional philosophies that inspire their willingness to actively promote the OMI. Through this presentation, participants became increasingly aware of the critical need to ensure, encourage and facilitate community buy-in when designing a healthy marriage initiative within their State.

Beyond PREP: Involving and Accessing Additional Couple Supports and Services

OMI staff recognizes that many couples and individuals may possess serious needs that extend beyond the scope of the PREP curriculum. Presenters stressed to participants the importance of informing individuals, couples, and the community of the need to access additional supports. For example, Oklahoma, couples workshops are not aimed to minimize many of the serious individual issues such as substance abuse that impact a healthy marriage. As a partner in the OMI, a representative for the Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence (DV) and Sexual Assault honestly shared her initial concerns with the OMI. However, after ongoing

communication with OMI project staff, she then viewed the OMI as a vehicle for DV advocacy and an opportunity to educate individuals on the warning signals and risks for potential abuse within a relationship. As an OMI partner, she works to ensure that PREP workshop leaders understand the severity of DV and are able to properly provide couples/individuals with appropriate DV supports and emergency resources, if needed. Likewise, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services Substance Abuse Services Director expressed similar feelings. He defined the OMI as an additional resource and tool to help treat the substance abuse disease. Substance abuse can potentially destroy the relationships that frame families. Also, strong family ties and healthy relationships are needed to support and maintain the recovery process. Therefore, the OMI is viewed as a strong asset to the Oklahoma substance abuse community and partnering is vital to the quality and well-being of Oklahoma children and families.

Additional discussion topics and highlights include small group exercises facilitated by OMI project staff and stakeholders, a presentation of Federal funding available to develop a healthy marriage initiative, and a lecture from the PREP curriculum. Research and program evaluation practices and strategies for building community coalitions were other areas captured for TA participants. A more detailed summary of this workshop, including agenda and speaker contact information, will be available on the Welfare Peer TA Web site in the near future. For more information about this event, please contact Chandra Robinson at 301-270-0841 or e-mail crobinson@afyainc.com.