

# Managing a Statewide Healthy Marriage Initiative: Tips from My Experience as a State Policymaker

*Author: Howard Hendrick, Cabinet Secretary for Oklahoma Department of Human Services*

## Managing the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative

### Introduction

In 1999, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) was launched to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce in the State. The initial impetus was an economic study done by economists with the State's two comprehensive universities that linked various negative social indicators, including high divorce rates, to the State's poorly performing economy. As a leader in

It is increasingly clear that children generally do better when reared by married parents.

the development of this unique program, I participated in numerous discussions about the direction the OMI was to take. We made the decision to help strengthen marriages and reduce divorce because there was a consensus of social science research finding that children reared in single parent families are at higher risk of poverty, have greater difficulties in the labor market and become teen parents and high school dropouts at higher rates than children reared in two parent families. It is increasingly clear that children generally do better when reared by married parents. However, the quality of the parents' relationship matters. Therefore, helping more couples develop and maintain stable and healthy marriages is sound public policy.

The overarching goal of the OMI is to improve the wellbeing of children by *strengthening* both marriage and the ability for single individuals to make positive relationship choices. One strategy is to provide services that help couples that choose marriage learn the skills they need to form and sustain healthy marriages. Another strategy is to provide an array of educational and family support services to couples, both married and unmarried, at the point of expecting a baby or soon after the baby is born. Yet another is to provide appropriate curriculum content to single heads-of-household about both how their current relationship choices impact their children and how to make difficult decisions about future relationships, for the benefit of their children and themselves. A final strategy is to educate youth about the benefits of marriage, as well as the realities of married life and the skills needed to effectively manage them. In Oklahoma, we've chosen the lofty endeavor of trying them all. In pursuing this goal and these strategies, we have learned many lessons.



## Lessons Learned from the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative

Welfare reform has been a significant success from many perspectives. The governmental supports to families are being administered better today than ever. Participation in cash assistance is down significantly and participation in employment and employment skill development are up. Further, the barriers to employment are lower than ever. Access to

Unfortunately, the natural supports that come from healthy family relationships are in poor condition.

substance abuse services and quality childcare make getting to work a reality that did not exist fifteen years ago. Further, enforcing non-custodial parent financial responsibility through child support is improving child well-being by improving the access children get and need to their non-custodial parents, as well as the financial support needed by them. Unfortunately, the natural supports that come from healthy family relationships are in poor condition. Some scholars estimate that as many as two-thirds of all children in America will spend some portion of their childhood before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in a single parent household. Families are suffering, and I am deeply committed to finding solutions through our work in Oklahoma.

For the last eight years, we have spent TANF funds to study and develop a strategy to strengthen marriages and relationships and reduce divorce. I wish I could tell you that we have found the precise prescription with a statistically valid dose-response protocol to achieve our goals. We have not. However, we are making excellent progress and I believe that over time our strategy and the ideas we have initiated will strengthen the natural supports present in healthy families, extend marital life, contribute to marital satisfaction, and ultimately improve child wellbeing.

We have now served over 150,000 Oklahomans through a variety of interventions. To the best of our knowledge, this is a number unmatched elsewhere in the country. We continue to look for new partnerships and service avenues to achieve economy of scale and ultimately make significant impacts in the State.

The following includes a handful of lessons learned from my experience overseeing the OMI:

### 1. Deliver evidence-based or research informed services.

Marriage policy is still a new focus for public action. Therefore, services should be designed based on the best available theory and research. A lot is known about what works. However, taking these evidence-based or research informed services to a statewide scale in a cost-effective way is new. In Oklahoma, we are committed to trying new things, but also consulting with the best minds in the field about their potential efficacy.

### 2. Be prepared to change based on emerging research.

The OMI created a Research Advisory Group consisting of seven to twelve national scholars who share their respective research niches and review the level of service delivery completed by the OMI during the preceding year. The Research Advisory Group conducted a baseline study and have periodically supplemented that study with other survey processes to understand the climate in Oklahoma as compared to other national studies. We are committed to ongoing research and evaluation to improve operations and target new service populations. Despite our best strategic planning efforts at the onset of this initiative we continue to self-assess and make changes and corrections as we move forward.

### **3. Include potential constructive skeptics from the beginning.**

I would like to think the good work of many trailblazers to strengthen marriage has reduced the amount of skepticism found across the nation. However, any effort to strengthen marriage, however modest, is likely to evoke some resistance, at least initially. There are many understandable reasons for these concerns and they deserve careful response. It is generally best to get as many people—especially those who are constructively skeptical or critical—around the table right from the start before serious planning gets underway. Be prepared to spend a good deal of time and effort in explaining the main research rationale for the mission. Assurance needs to be given that no one is going to be forced into a hasty or bad marriage or prevented from leaving a bad marriage.

### **4. Temper your zeal for high productivity by acknowledging the realities of today's complex family.**

Men and women often have children by more than one partner and, for many, marriage may not be possible or desirable. However, it is generally appropriate to help the parents learn how to cooperate in raising their child. Further, while possessing good relationships skills is clearly important, a person's capacity to have a healthy marriage is affected by many factors, like economic stress and unemployment, serious illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Even high functioning married couples, from our experience, are many times reluctant or don't follow through with their commitment to attend marriage education services, despite initial interest or expressed need.

### **5. Make a realistic assessment about the resources, opportunities and expertise available in your state or community and build on your strengths.**

It can be difficult to replicate a program that has been tried successfully elsewhere if there were other factors that contributed to their success such as financial resources, access to key leaders, strong management or staff with existing community relationships. At the same time there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Find out what has already been learned. Call on expertise from

Find out what has already been learned.

other programs. Seek federal or state technical assistance. Each program is somewhat unique and success requires an understanding of your target population and the needs of your state or community.

### **6. Programs that promote marital stability and child-wellbeing avoid political imbalance.**

With an initiative begun by a Republican Governor, some of the OMI's core group of stakeholders expressed worry over the 2002 change in State administration. However, the political climate around issues of marital stability, child wellbeing and programs that increase self-sufficiency need not be partisan issues. Programs like the OMI attempt to address the needs of low-income families. We engaged leaders from many sectors to include their ideas on how we could best meet the needs of Oklahomans desiring to rear their children in healthy married households. Additionally, the current Administration shared

the enthusiasm for the services offered through the OMI. Consequently, other State projects and initiatives were initiated to complement this work with married couples.

## **7. If possible, engage an outside party to provide daily management of programs and services.**

The need to improve the relationship between a young working mom and dad happens after regular business hours. We realized early on that daily management of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative would best be handled outside of the Department of Human Services because we needed a vendor who could hire staff who worked during hours when couples could get the help they needed which was often different than most of our office hours. We needed a vendor who could deliver services when couples were available—nights and weekends. We also looked for a vendor who enjoyed innovation and flexibility while staying focused on the desired outcome—healthy married couples. Thus, we engaged a project management firm through a competitive bid process. The successful bidder, Public Strategies, has diligently created a system of statewide partners in both the public and private sectors. The benefit of this design is that all parties have a sense of ownership of the project and a stake in its success or failure, and Public Strategies is daily managing the relationships that go along with a statewide network. The challenge, however, is that the OMI itself is not an entity, which is something the average citizen does not understand. The OMI is a project funded by OKDHS, managed by Public Strategies, and delivered by thousands of volunteers from across the state who represent many sectors and organizations within the community and the government. The network allows each

stakeholder to build into the OMI their strengths, credibility and access to populations, making the public/private partnership a way to provide the best of the best to the couples we are trying to serve, but delivered in the unique environment that is each community.

## **8. Set realistic expectations and be modest about claiming success.**

Too many new initiatives lose credibility by over-promising results and claiming success prematurely. We realized from the outset that changing attitudes and behaviors related to couples and marriage is a very complex and ambitious task. The results may not be evident for many years. Therefore, we are identifying measurable results: how many people were trained?; how many persons attended 80% or more of a 12 hour workshop?; etc. Collecting data from participants, agencies and workshop leaders documents the inputs of the intervention. The outcomes are likely long-term and should become the subject of future research and evaluation efforts. Develop some proposed outcome measures and plan to evaluate and re-evaluate your operations as you progress.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, I believe we have made sound decisions to build on the best research available, to invest in research to learn about marriage and divorce in Oklahoma, and to assess, to the extent possible, the effects of our activities and programs. In the coming years, as this initiative continues to evolve, I am confident that a great deal will be learned and we will have greatly served the couples, families and children of our State. I hope you find the lessons we have learned helpful as you continue with your important work.