DECEMBER 2006

ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION

OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

An Overview of the Longest-Running Statewide Marriage Initiative in the U.S.

In the late 1990s, Oklahoma undertook an innovative strategy to strengthen families by reducing its divorce and nonmarital childbearing rates. With leadership and commitment from the highest levels, the state set out to build public support and develop a sustainable multisector initiative through a public-private collaboration. Since then, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) has focused on building statewide capacity to deliver instruction in marriage and relationship skills—an approach that has stimulated public awareness and dialogue about the effects of marriage and divorce.

Recognizing the consequences of its high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing, the State of Oklahoma, through its highest policy level—the Office of the Governor—made a major commitment in 1999 to create what is now known as the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI). This pioneering effort came before the current national and local activities to support healthy marriage that were stimulated by the federal administration's 2001 announcement of a Healthy Marriage Initiative—making the OMI the longest operating marriage initiative in the U.S.

Besides having the longest history, the OMI is also the country's only statewide initiative. It aims to provide access to marriage support services in every county of the state and to Oklahomans from all walks of life. Oklahoma reports that an estimated 100,000 people have completed at least 12 hours of marriage education since October 2001. As this brief describes, the OMI expects that its strategy will lead to specific behavior change at the individual level—for example, by helping distressed married couples address their issues and avoid divorce, and by preparing engaged couples for marriage. Just as importantly, the OMI expects that as these services become more and more widely available, known, and used, changes in norms and attitudes about marriage will come about at the broad community level, restoring support for the institution of marriage as a valued social good.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This ASPE Research Brief provides an overview of the origins and development of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, drawing on findings from an in-depth process evaluation being conducted by researchers at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. under contract to ASPE. This brief was prepared by M. Robin Dion. Future briefs will focus on specific aspects of the initiative's implementation, including the successes and challenges encountered by the OMI, and strategies that were used to address those challenges.

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

US Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, DC 20201

Jerry Regier, ***Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation***

Leadership, Vision, and Commitment in Support of a Clear Goal

High-level leadership, a bold public goal, designated funding, and an institutional home base were essential factors in the founding of the OMI. Nearly eight years ago, Oklahoma's then-Cabinet Secretary for Health and Human Services, Jerry Regier, encouraged then-Governor Frank Keating to take action to strengthen Oklahoma's families, in response to emerging research and the increased emphasis on two-parent families in the 1996 federal welfare reform legislation. Further influenced by an Oklahoma-specific economic report suggesting a link between the state's economy and its family structure, Governor Keating gave public recognition to the issue, brought together leaders in Oklahoma society to discuss and pledge support, encouraged a public-private collaborative approach, and boldly announced a goal of reducing the divorce rate by one-third by the year 2010. Oklahoma's Department of Human Services (DHS) committed $10 million to the effort from surplus funds in its federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant and contracted with Public Strategies, Inc. (PSI—a private, for-profit firm) to develop and manage the initiative. After the first couple of foundational years, Howard Hendrick succeeded Regier as Cabinet Secretary and used his agency to continue leadership and support for the initiative, guiding its evolution and full-scale implementation.

Since Oklahoma was a pioneer in this area, DHS and PSI began the OMI with little guidance from others' experiences, and so they weighed opportunities, options, and progress as they went. PSI began with no background in marriage programming and there were no results from other large marriage initiatives to suggest fruitful directions or pitfalls to be avoided. Under general supervision from DHS, PSI tried out various approaches to advance overall initiative goals, using an entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and learning from successes and challenges along the way. The OMI has grown to be a true initiative rather than a narrowly defined program; it is a major public-private collaboration with component parts that are continually being developed, refined, and fine-tuned.

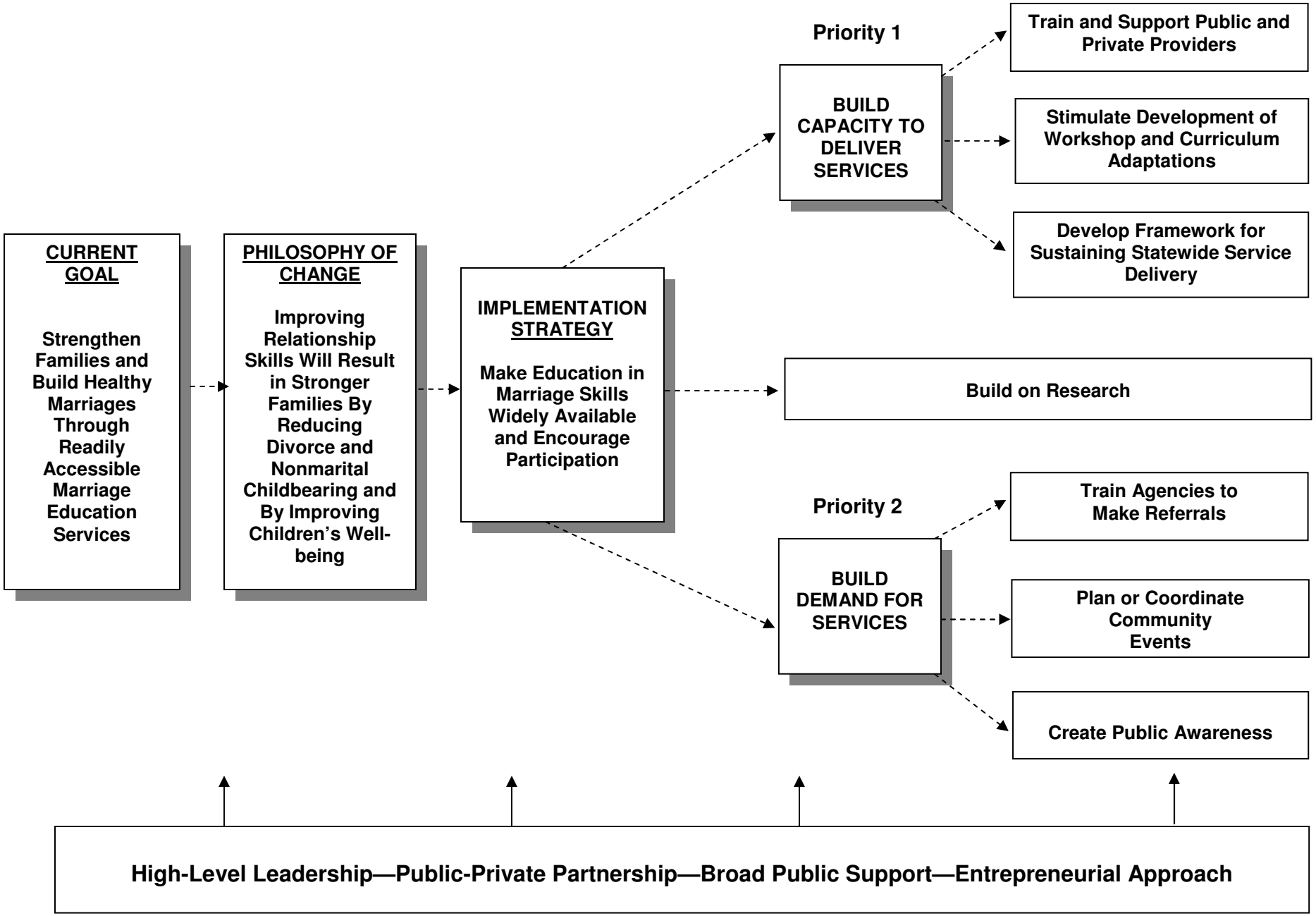
Although the OMI is constantly evolving, Figure 1 depicts the context, development, and logic of the initiative as it stands today. The remainder of this brief describes the main elements in this figure: the OMI's philosophy of change, its implementation strategy for facilitating change, its process for building on research, and how it has gone about building capacity as well as building demand for marriage education services throughout the state.

Developing a Philosophy of Change

Once consensus was reached on the need for action, the OMI had to identify a mechanism for creating change. Around that time, other states were considering ways to strengthen marriage through legislative reforms, incentives for marriage in public policies, or appointed commissions to study the problem. Oklahoma considered two main approaches. First, it discussed using media campaigns to promote the value of marriage and educate the public on its benefits for society, adults, and children. Second, the OMI considered services that could be provided to couples and individuals to provide them with the information, knowledge, and skills needed to develop and maintain healthy relationships and marriage.

The OMI chose to put the highest priority on building capacity to deliver services aimed at improving relationship and marital quality before building demand, for two reasons. First, the OMI expected that focused services would be necessary in order to create not just attitude change, but behavior change. Second, OMI leaders were concerned that media campaigns stressing the importance of healthy marriage could stimulate demand for services that could not be met until capacity was developed. Over time, the OMI has begun to stimulate demand as well. For example, the OMI offers abbreviated versions of services to large numbers of individuals drawn to widely marketed public events, thus stimulating demand, and, at the same time, providing at least some services in response.

Figure 1. Current Implementation of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative



Selecting an Implementation Strategy for Facilitating Change

After considering a variety of strategies, the OMI selected a structured relationship skills program as its primary vehicle for facilitating behavior change—the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). PREP is a research-based 10-12 hour educational curriculum that teaches skills and principles associated with healthy relationships and marriage, including effective communication skills, conflict management, and problem-solving. It also covers such topics as handling expectations, understanding commitment, identifying core beliefs, and focusing on friendship and fun. The curriculum material can be delivered in a variety of formats by trained workshop leaders.

The OMI envisioned a strategy that would make PREP widely available and accessible to all populations and areas within the state. It planned to involve as many sectors of society as possible—both public and private—to build support and provide broad coverage in service delivery. To unify the effort and provide a common language regardless of the service delivery setting, the OMI chose to implement only a single relationship skills program (although adaptations of PREP are sometimes made for specific groups).

The OMI was faced with selecting a relationship skills curriculum out of more than a hundred such programs that are on the market today. Ultimately, its choice of curriculum was guided by the OMI's desire to implement a program that had some basis in research and had been evaluated. These attributes were thought to lead to a greater likelihood of success in achieving the OMI's goals. An additional benefit was that using a program with a foundation in research could make it more defensible to possible critics.

Building on Research

Early in its development, the OMI convened a group of experts on marriage and relationship skills education and family formation policy to serve on a research advisory group. The purpose of the group, which meets annually, is to provide research-based input into the development of the initiative. The group includes sociologists, psychologists, social workers, and others from outside Oklahoma, as well as representatives from the research division of Oklahoma's Department of Human Services and Oklahoma State University's Bureau of Social Research (OSU-BSR), which often collects data for the OMI.

One of the earliest steps taken by the advisory group was to develop and field a statewide survey in 2001 of Oklahomans' attitudes toward and experiences with marriage and divorce. Advisory group members contributed to the survey's development and analysis. The data helped the state understand the issues it is facing with respect to marriage and divorce (such as its low average age at first marriage), and guided it toward the development of certain service delivery features (such as marriage education for high school students). It also provided a "baseline" snapshot of marriage and divorce as the OMI began. With guidance from the research advisory group, the OMI has commissioned other data collection from time to time to help refine implementation and understand operational barriers, such as surveys of workshop leaders to learn about barriers to providing marriage education. Another example of the OMI's research efforts was a survey designed to obtain better information about the relationship issues faced by lower-income populations in Oklahoma. This survey was intended to inform the development of a program specifically for low-income expectant parents, Family Expectations.

Building Statewide Capacity to Deliver Relationship Skills Education

Training and Supporting Public and Private Providers. To build the state's capacity to deliver relationship skills workshops, the OMI focused on two broad approaches: training the staff of public

agencies to provide workshops for their clients, and training private individuals who wish to serve their own local communities.

The OMI focused on training public agency staff for several reasons. First, engaging government and other agencies in delivering services could be an effective way to gain public support for the initiative's goals. Second, public agencies tend to serve low-income clients, who otherwise may be difficult to reach. And third, such agencies tend to have a statewide infrastructure or network of staff that might be enlisted to efficiently support workshop delivery throughout the state. As shown in Table 1, the OMI has worked with institutions and agencies in several sectors, including Education, Health, Corrections, Social Services, and the Military, whose employees, when providing PREP workshops, do so as a part of their regular jobs.

There is broad variation in the origins and underlying motivation for implementing OMI services in these particular agencies. In some cases, implementation occurred in response to a policy priority, such as policies to support adoptive/foster parents or to increase accessibility of services to low-income families. In other cases, the implementation was motivated by research, such as the finding that Oklahomans tend to marry young (which contributed to the focus on educating high school students). Other populations, like prisoners, are a focus of the OMI because the relevant agency recognized a need for relationship services for its clientele and requested the OMI's help. Future briefs will provide more detailed information on the motivation, evolution, and development of OMI services for the specific populations served by these public agencies and will discuss why some institutions have been more involved in the OMI than others.

Table 1. Selected Public Agencies Involved in Providing OMI Services

Sector	Oklahoma Agency Sponsor	Target Population	Workshop Leaders
Education	Department of Career Technology	High school students	Family and Consumer Sciences teachers
	Oklahoma State University (OSU) Cooperative Extension Services	Adult students; GED class participants	OSU educators
Corrections	Department of Corrections	Prison inmates and their partners/spouses	Prison chaplains
	Association of Youth Services (OAYS)	Adolescent first offenders and their parents	OAYS staff
Health	Department of Health (OSDH), Child Guidance	Parents	Child Guidance counselors
Social Services	Department of Human Services (DHS)	TANF recipients	DHS and PSI staff
	Department of Human Services (DHS)	Adoptive and foster parents	DHS and PSI staff
	Community Action or Head Start agencies	Low-income parents	Head Start workers
Military	Army, Air Force, and National Guard	Members of the military and their partners/spouses; base and post employees	Family Advocacy and Family Support staff; chaplains; Employee Assistance Counselors

To help make relationship skills education more widely available at the community level, the OMI also emphasized building capacity for service delivery in local communities. In exchange for receiving free workshop training from the PREP curriculum developers, volunteers agree to provide at least four free workshops in their communities. These volunteer workshop leaders generally function independently of public agencies or programs and decide for themselves where, when and to whom they will offer workshops. Although the majority of the independent workshop leaders are not paid through their jobs or the OMI for their time when delivering OMI services, some have incorporated PREP as one of the services offered in their private professional practices, such as mental health counseling, or marriage and

family therapy. Many volunteers are members of the faith community, such as pastors or counselors, but a wide range of individuals from other areas have also been trained, including individuals representing law enforcement, business, and family services.

Stimulating Development of Workshop Adaptations. As the OMI expanded services, it became clear that adaptations were sometimes needed, both to the core curriculum itself and in the delivery of the curriculum. The most common type of adaptation—a presentation adaptation—is made by local workshop leaders or OMI staff and involves changes to illustrations or examples used in the curriculum, but not to overall content. For example, chaplains teaching PREP in Oklahoma prisons may refer to the unique challenges of communicating with a partner on the "outside." Such modifications are not intended to alter the general principles or assumptions of the curriculum, but to tailor the "look and feel" of the service so that it adequately matches the needs of a particular population group. The second kind of more formal adaptation—a curriculum adaptation—involves changes by the original PREP curriculum developers, which results in a new product containing additional or revised content for specific target populations. For example, the developers created a new curriculum based on PREP called "Within My Reach" (WMR), specifically for use with TANF recipients, who are often not in a couple relationship. WMR is designed for use with individuals, rather than couples, and departs from the core assumption in the traditional PREP curriculum that there is a viable couple relationship that can be sustained. Desired outcomes for WMR participants include a better understanding of the difference between a healthy and a dangerous relationship, and skills for making positive relationship choices in the future.

Developing a Framework for Sustained Statewide Service Delivery. The OMI found that using volunteers as workshop leaders was challenging because of "turnover" after being trained, and because of a lack of infrastructure to support service delivery. They found that just training volunteers does not, by itself, 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 put special efforts into building up, supporting, and sustaining the ongoing delivery of workshops in specific geographic areas and among certain groups, such as Latinos and Native Americans. PSI staff provide technical assistance to foster long-term delivery capabilities in several ways: by helping communities or organizations schedule and coordinate classes for year-round coverage; by identifying ongoing referral sources; by locating facilities for workshops; or by finding program supports such as child care or refreshments for workshop participants and their families.

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 OMI workshops by training staff at public agencies to make referrals. The training helps staff, such as TANF caseworkers, understand PREP workshops as well as the goals and purpose of the OMI. In its early years, the OMI conducted large training sessions involving individuals from a wide variety of agencies, however they noted that staff sometimes had different concerns and needs, depending on the culture of their individual agencies. The OMI addressed this issue by tailoring the training to the needs and concerns of specific agency staff and by shifting to agency-specific presentations.

Stimulating and Coordinating Community Events. Many OMI activities that support service delivery tend to create interest among the public in relationship skills education. To further stimulate this demand, the OMI also coordinates various types of community-level events such as Sweetheart's Weekends. These events often provide a shortened version of PREP at one sitting, and are designed to increase the visibility of the OMI, increase awareness of the availability of relationship skills education, and stimulate interest in attending full PREP workshops.

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 enlist the assistance of media, generate publicity for community events, and operate a website where individuals can learn information about marriage and access information about OMI services.

Summary and Future Briefs

The OMI is a blend of two models for supporting healthy marriage. One model, commonly called community saturation, seeks to blanket a community with messages about marriage and foster widespread interest in seeking ways to strengthen marriage. A second model focuses on targeting services to specific populations. The OMI is pursuing aspects of both. It aims to make tangible services accessible to people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, across the range of relationship statuses, throughout the state. The OMI expects that as more and more people gain the skills needed to identify healthy potential partners and enter and sustain healthy marriages, the state will see fewer divorces and less unmarried childbearing. It expects to change Oklahoma's culture, which is now marked by early marriage and high rates of divorce. The OMI aims to encourage people to prepare consciously for marriage through relationship skills education and, for those already married, to seek help before marital problems or thoughts of divorce become deep-seated. The effect of the OMI on these outcomes is not yet known, but much is being learned about designing and implementing large-scale statewide initiatives.

Since its inception in the late '90s, the OMI has enjoyed the support of two different gubernatorial administrations and agency leaders. While this brief provides an overview of the current structure of the OMI, future briefs will seek to answer such questions as: What has led to the OMI's success in sustaining itself so far? Which design and implementation strategies have been successful? Which did not work and why? Why were some choices made over others? To what extent has the OMI reached the public with its messages and services? What lessons has Oklahoma learned that initiatives in other states might benefit from? Future briefs will also address the obstacles the OMI faced in developing each component, the strategies used to address those obstacles, and the apparent success of those strategies.

The next research brief in this series will focus on the early years of the OMI. It will explain how and why supporting marriage became part of the state's policy agenda, the principles that the OMI's early leadership established to guide its development, and how the OMI ultimately developed a foundation. Suggesting lessons for others interested in building statewide or community-wide initiatives, it will discuss the pragmatic approach the OMI took, how and why marriage education was selected as the primary intervention strategy, and the public-private partnership between PSI and DHS.

Evaluation Methodology for the OMI Process Study

Information reported in the OMI research brief series is based on an analysis of data gathered during an ongoing multiyear study of the initiative's design, development, and implementation. Study tasks include semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups, direct observation of program operations, focus groups with staff and participants, and secondary analysis of data from existing reports and surveys. The research team will meet directly with a total of approximately 280 individuals involved with the OMI in various ways, focusing on implementation in the Education, Social Services, Health, Military, and Community Volunteer sectors, and including a special emphasis on OMI services within the state's Correctional System. Mathematica's research team includes: Robin Dion, Alan Hershey, Debra Strong, Heather Zaveri, Nikki Aikens, Shawn Marsh, and Tim Silman.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
& HUMAN SERVICES

Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use $300