



Champions for Inclusive Communities

# Star Community

## Major County, OK

Picture a quiet community located in the northwest area of Oklahoma with a population of about 7000, the residents distributed sparsely across 957 square miles. The nearest metropolitan areas of Oklahoma City and Tulsa are located hundreds of miles away. A community such as this can only be described as very rural, which is exactly how the citizens of Major County, Oklahoma see themselves.

### How it All Began: Mental Health Needs

Five years ago Denice Haworth, County Coordinator for the statewide Sooner SUCCESS program, surveyed families about what their most pressing needs were. Results showed that families had an overwhelming need for mental health services for their children. For good reason, too: At the time, only one part-time mental health counselor was employed in the entire county.

At the same time, Denice also learned of a single mother with four children, all of whom needed mental health services. In order for the mother to attend appointments for all of her children, she had to leave work regularly and pull the child out of school – a serious burden on a working mother. Upon learning of this situation, Denice arranged for school-based counseling to be held once a week for all students in need of mental health services.

This idea only blossomed from there. Today, three mental health professionals are providing services in schools throughout the county. Mental health services are easy to find and accessible throughout the community. In fact, requests about finding counseling services have dropped to being the least-requested service on the key informant survey and in everyday requests received by Denice.

### Brainstorming Solutions

Mental health is not the only issue children and families in Major County deal with. Denice, as a County Coordinator, ensures that *any* family with a need is served, even if they don't necessarily have a confirmed diagnosis. This includes families and children of any culture, socioeconomic status, or age.

The most effective way the community meets these needs is through the use of a county coalition, which is organized by Denice. This coalition, which meets monthly, is made up of family partners and service providers, including a school nurse, Family Services, Oklahoma DHS, the Division of Rehabilitation Services, Mental Health, Education, Major County Health

Department, and the Office of Juvenile Affairs. The group regularly uses all their combined expertise and backgrounds to brainstorm ideas that will help a specific family's situation. Because the core family member is a strong influence in the coalition, other families can rest assured that there will be decision-makers on the coalition who can empathize best with the struggles they may be facing.

The coalition has a reputation for banding together to help families across many different situations. In one case, the coalition organized a community group (through the Make a Difference Day Committee) to help remodel a family's bathroom to be wheelchair accessible for their 9-year old son with spina bifida and hydrocephalous. Help arrived in the form of funding from many organizations such as Oklahoma DHS, Make a Difference Community Committee, Penner Community Fund, the Donna Nigh foundation, and a number of

### What makes a Star Community?

ChampionsInC has created the **Star Communities** program to recognize exceptional communities.

Star Communities will show excellence in **6 Performance Measures:**

- Families are partners
- A "Medical Home" provides coordinated care
- Children receive early and continuous screening
- Families have adequate funding/insurance to pay for services
- Services are organized so families can use them easily and are satisfied
- Youth receive necessary services to make the transition to adult life

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willing and eager community volunteers such as plumbers, electricians, and carpenters. Even Lowe's home improvement store gave the organizers a discount on an handicap accessible toilet and pedestal sink. The project was time-consuming, but incredibly rewarding. Today, the boy is learning to take care of his own needs, both at home and in school.

The community not only helps young children with special needs, they also assist youth who are transitioning to adult life. One of the many diverse members of the coalition is also a member of the Department of Rehabilitative Services. She travels to schools throughout Major County and works with youth with special needs to make sure they are ready to transition out of high school. In some cases, youth may qualify to continue school for a "13th year" if they are not quite ready to be finished with school.

There have been many cases of youth successfully transitioning to adult life in the community. In one case, a 16-year old with cerebral palsy had a real passion for photography. However, she needed an adaptation for her walker to hold the camera still and enable her to take quality pictures. Denice, along with the girl and her mother, went to a local photographer to get advice. The photographer was happy to become involved and ended up providing photography lessons and making an adaptation for the youth's walker. His influence helped the girl to graduate and continue on to work on her passion in the field of photography at the technology center.

### **Spreading Awareness to Schools**

Oftentimes, when Denice identifies a need in the community through her work, a subcommittee of the coalition is formed from the professionals that are best suited to provide brainpower. Frequently those professionals come from the school system, as is the case with Vicky Neufeld, a school nurse on the coalition. Vicky is instrumental in spreading awareness of disabilities throughout schools in the community. This is done in a variety of ways, including puppet shows about children with disabilities and volunteers from the coalition who read to classes and discuss disability awareness.

### **Developmental Screening: A Variety of Options**

One program that has had an impact on the community of Major County is Sooner Start, Oklahoma's early intervention

program designed to meet the needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays. The program is a joint effort of the Oklahoma Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, Mental Health Services, the Commission on Children and Youth, and the Oklahoma Health Care Authority. When a family comes to the county health department, they are referred to Sooner Start for developmental screening. Families find Sooner Start especially convenient because screening assessments are often provided right in the family's home where the child is most comfortable. Sooner Start screens children for vision, hearing, developmental, and mental delays. Most special needs are identified by the time the child is three or four. Denice, as the County Coordinator, then works with the families to ensure children are directed to the right resources.

Families who live in the city of Fairview, which is located in Major County, also have the option of working with Oklahoma Parents and Teachers, or OPAT. An OPAT representative works at a Fairview school, and when a referral is made, that representative visits the family at home just like Sooner Start. The families participate in activities and projects with the main purpose being to promote parent/child bonding. After carefully assessing these activities, the OPAT representative will sometimes make a referral for further care and screening to be done. The best part is that *any* parent can request OPAT services – even if no previous diagnosis has been made on their child.

### **Fueled by Brainpower**

Perhaps one of the most impressive parts of the Major County community is that they function successfully with little to no local funding. It is the responsibility of the members of the coalition to seek out grants or other private sources. Best of all, much of their support comes from private donations in the community. They are lucky to be surrounded by a community that is renowned for working together to identify and meet the needs of families. And the community coalition is the perfect personification of this cohesiveness. As Denice says, "We have a lot of brain power support [in the coalition]; we don't have very much financial support."

So far, brainpower seems to be working nicely to help the citizens of Major County.

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