



MEMBERS OF OKLAHOMA'S FAITH COMMUNITY ARE DEMONSTRATING THEIR HEART FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AND TAKING PRACTICAL STEPS TO TURN COMPASSION INTO ACTION.

By Timothy Tardibono M.A., J.D., President of the Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines "pinnacle" as the point of greatest success or achievement. Pinnacle is the word used to describe the aspirations of Oklahoma's child welfare system as published in the "Pinnacle Plan" by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS). The Pinnacle Plan is the response to a federal lawsuit against the State of Oklahoma alleging chronic maltreatment of the more than 10,000 children in state custody in the child welfare system. The settlement agreement to end the lawsuit required the state to undertake extensive reforms to improve the child welfare system.

The Pinnacle Plan purposely sets the bar high; but with serious planning and great effort, OKDHS is making positive strides towards meeting its ambitious goals. That progress would not have been possible without an expanding network of partnerships between OKDHS and the faith-based community

This article highlights three of the most important and successful programs that have been driven by people of faith who want to serve and share their lives with vulnerable families and children. Safe Families, the CarePortal, and Oklahoma Fosters provide tangible, heart-warming examples of how Oklahomans of faith can succeed where government alone would have fallen short.

SAFE FAMILIES

Safe Families was brought to Oklahoma in 2014 by Count Me In 4 Kids, a community-led collaborative with the goal of engaging central Oklahoma in meeting the needs of children at risk for and in foster care. Safe Families Oklahoma (SFOK) is modeled after the Chicago-based Safe Families program that partnered with the local faith community to grow a network of 11,000 volunteers, including 2,100 host families over the last 14 years. Safe Families is in 25 other states and even has international sites in Canada and the UK.

Safe Families aims to help a parent or parents that are experiencing crisis situations, including financial problems, unemployment, homelessness, physical or emotional treatment, or drug or alcohol addiction. These situations put them at risk of losing their children into an already stressed and overcrowded state foster care system. The hope is that these parents can first get the help and support of a Safe Family before abuse or neglect takes place and hopefully avoid the need for state custody. The goal is for these at-risk children to be placed into a safe, positive environment that also keeps the children connected to and in contact with their current family while the family gets help for their crisis. SFOK can provide host families for ages from newborn to 18, but currently the concentration is for Oklahoma's vulnerable children ages 0-6.

Once a referral is made for a biological parent in need of a temporary placement for a child or sibling group, SFOK turns to its trained host families to get involved and accept the child or sibling group into their home. The host families are recruited mainly through a "safe families church" that has caught the vision of returning the faith community "to the forefront of caring for the most vulnerable people group in society, at-risk children and their struggling parents." During the placement, the safe families church continues to support their host family by recruiting others in the church to support the host family as family coaches, family friends, and resource friends. The collaborative effort gives a church the opportunity to grow together through shared service and carrying others' burdens.

Once the host family is caring for the child or sibling group, the host family is encouraged to develop a relationship with the parents and become a kind of "extended family" for the parents in crisis. The new relationship between the family in crisis and the host family can continue to grow even after the children have returned to their biological family.

One couple that recently completed hosting a child and successfully reuniting that child with his family said the experience was spiritually fulfilling but also eye-opening, as they learned how great the need was for more Oklahomans to get involved in Safe Families as well as traditional foster care. They explain, "Gaining Josh (not his real name), his mom, and big brother in our lives certainly has blessed our family but also our hearts have grown for the plight of Oklahoma kids stuck in the foster care system." Someday they hope to host another Safe Families child, but currently they are still heavily involved with Josh and his family and want to keep their attention focused on continuing that relationship.

CARE PORTAL

The CarePortal is a technology platform which connects churches with the needs of at-risk children and families. This connection occurs through a geographically based email communication system that addresses child welfare needs, including foster care, adoption, teens aging out of the foster care system, and helping prevent families from entering state care. When an OKDHS caseworker becomes aware of a need, the caseworker sends an email to active CarePortal churches within the closest ZIP codes to the need. Churches will then forward the email to their congregations, small groups, or other ministries. The members interested in helping will contact the caseworker and arrange to fill the need.

The CarePortal was piloted in Stephens County in late 2015 and launched for Tulsa and Oklahoma counties in 2016. The response has been rapid and robust, with more than 135 active churches and another 144 churches going through the activation process. As of May 2016, the active churches have already impacted more than 375 children with all types of needs.

One CarePortal example was a foster mom that needed a weighted blanket to help her 3-year-old foster daughter better cope with her autism. The OKDHS caseworker knew how important weighted blankets can be as a sensory soothing tool in helping autistic children regulate themselves, but had no idea where to find one. After doing some research she discovered that funding had been cut to provide the blanket, and the blankets were expensive beyond the means of the foster mother. But the CarePortal request was filled within one week and the caseworker expressed relief: "Thank you's, tears, and hugs were shared and a much more peaceful home for the foster family."

Another caseworker wanted to surprise a 15-year-old boy with new clothes for his birthday. She discovered he had not had new clothes since he was eight. When he found out the new clothes would be from an actual store through a CarePortal gift from a church and not used clothes from a charity, as he expected, "he was like 'Wow, really?'" the caseworker said. "He was so appreciative and was all smiles today! Pretty amazing what one awesome person can do to help restore a human. Thank you! And they all want to go to church next Sunday. The mom said they have never gone to church as a family."

These stories have served to forge new partnerships between the faith community and OKDHS, creating an unexpected narrative for successful public-private partnerships. One supervisor put it this way: "My team is so very passionate about the CarePortal and the collaboration between church and state to assist the children and families in need. We are excited to put each request on [the CarePortal] to see the responses that we get back. The CarePortal collaboration has been one of the most exciting collaborations that I've been involved in in my nine-year career with OKDHS." Because the response has been so positive in Stephens, Oklahoma, and Tulsa counties, the CarePortal will continue to expand statewide.

OKLAHOMA FOSTERS

One of the significant criticisms of the Oklahoma child welfare system has been that too many young children are placed in shelters because options for placement in family settings are not adequate. To address this major concern, Governor Mary Fallin, in conjunction with OKDHS leaders, crafted an aggressive initiative—Oklahoma Fosters—to create significantly more family setting options. The Governor's ultimate goal for Oklahoma Fosters is to "usher in a new day in our state: one where no child is ever waiting on a family, but rather a long line of families is waiting to take care of our children."

In order to make that goal a reality, in November 2015 Governor Fallin and OKDHS officially launched Oklahoma Fosters with the measurable benchmark to recruit 1,000 new, safe, loving foster families statewide by June 2016. Even supporters were surprised by the bold goal, but the response from caring Oklahomans has been amazing and the goal is on track for

successful completion and beyond. A key component of Oklahoma Fosters' rapid success has been the way the faith community has eagerly answered the call.

In the first few months after the Oklahoma Fosters launch, Oklahoma's major religious leaders, representing more than 2,500 churches, activated various efforts to engage families to learn how to become a new foster family or help support new foster families. One such effort came through Life.Church on Mother's Day. As part of their "How to Neighbor" series, Life.Church encouraged families to embrace fostering either directly as foster families or indirectly as support families. The week following Mother's Day, many of the 18 Life.Church statewide network locations hosted orientation meetings where many interested families expressed their desire to get started. The church's push is delivering results: more than 330 people contacted DHS to begin the process of becoming a foster parent in the two-week period surrounding the Mother's Day initiative.

But reaching and surpassing 1,000 new families is not the ultimate goal. Ashley Hahn, executive director of Oklahoma Fosters, makes it clear that the truly groundbreaking accomplishment would be to have so many trained and ready foster families so that a placement can be made after considering all the needs of the child or sibling group: ethnic background, cultural heritage, personal disabilities, developmental needs, familiar settings, and more.

In sum, through Safe Families Oklahoma, the CarePortal, and Oklahoma Fosters, members of Oklahoma's faith community are demonstrating their heart for children and families and taking practical steps to turn compassion into action. Because of that action, Oklahoma is well on its way to reaching the "pinnacle" for child welfare.

Timothy Tardibono (M.A., J.D., Regent University) is president of the Family Policy Institute of Oklahoma (**okfamily.org**), a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and education organization focused on protecting families and strengthening communities to improve the well-being of Oklahoma's children and families.

This research article first appeared in "The Perspective" in July 2016.