



Stillwater Cares: How a Church & Community Collaboration Led to Sustainable Solutions

Featuring:

Quinn Schipper, Stillwater Cares; Getting Ahead, Aha! Process

Overview

Stillwater, OK is a community with a population of approximately 80,000. Within the community exists a network of 58 churches and organizations partnering together to prevent and alleviate poverty. Learn how this network: started with faith and community leaders built trusting relationships; did research cooperatively; created a common language; supported the creation of a backbone organization; implemented a community-wide plan with Getting Ahead/Bridges Out of Poverty constructs; and administrate a shared system of case management giving them the ability to report their collective impact.

Stillwater CARES: Together for Community Transformation

By Krista Petty, Community Connector

Through communication and coordination, faith communities are taking proactive approaches to fighting poverty. They are moving away from individual congregations providing temporary relief to coalitions and cooperative ministries that create sustainable, restorative solutions for families.

This report looks at one specific collaborative effort, Stillwater CARES, initiated by church leaders, in Stillwater, OK. Stillwater is a community with a population of approximately 80,000. Within the community exists a network of 58 churches and organizations partnering together to prevent and alleviate.

The key learnings in this report include:

1. Relationships are the key to preventing & alleviating poverty. This network started with faith leaders praying and building trusting relationships with one another.
2. To tackle poverty, the faith leaders went beyond themselves to include community leaders in solutions
3. The community learned together, collaboratively implementing language & practices of resources such as When Helping Hurts & Bridges Out of Poverty
4. Having a shared case management system provides better communication across churches and agencies, reduces duplication of services, measures collective impact, and informs of service gaps.



Quinn Schipper

Director of Integrated Systems,
Trident United Way

“Stillwater CARES actually started from a prayer network—getting pastors together to pray for one another, for each other’s churches and for the community. The first few weeks everyone was wondering if we wanted to be there; but very quickly, trust was established as relationships were formed,” says Quinn Schipper, founder of Stillwater CARES.

The faith leaders in the room realized that they had several things in common. One of those things was what they wanted to do in the community. After years of praying with and for one another, deeper conversations emerged in 2008. Schipper explained, “One pastor was insistent that we talk about people who go from church to church and agency to agency for handouts but never get the proverbial ‘hand up’ that brings transformation into their lives.”

While the goal of their meeting was always prayer first, time was added to the agenda for this discussion about benevolence. Those discussions went on for several weeks and a series of values emerged with the pastors asking one another: How can we do benevolence differently? How do we assist people in ways that are more relational, responsible, respectful, and redemptive?

Expanding to a Community Conversation

To find answers to some of their questions, the faith leaders widened the conversation to include community-based solutions. “We invited social services and others into the discussion and from that sprang an ad hoc benevolence initiative with a dozen of us including pastors, businessmen, social service agency representatives and the Salvation Army,” recalled Schipper. Among other things, the team leading the benevolence initiative did a survey of how local churches administer benevolence assistance.

This eventuated in a feasibility study in 2010 to understand the broader community view of benevolence. Interviews included the United Way director, civic leaders, educators, and other sector representatives. Community leaders reported seeing duplication of services, abuses of the system by clients, and issues that remained unresolved. “As we were driving towards the completion of the study, we discovered that literally every single person—100% of those interviewed—said there was a need for coordination of the services. The number two thing that came out of the study was that there was a need for some kind of system—a technology piece—that would help manage the coordination,” said Schipper. In short, it was time for the churches and the community to work together more effectively.

Forming a Different Kind of 501(c)(3) to Coordinate & Communicate

With a strong base of nonprofits, congregations and agencies already serving the community, the last thing anyone on the team wanted to do was form yet another organization, at least not the typical service-providing agency or ministry. Schipper explained, “Long story short, the outcome of the feasibility study was that a new 501(c)(3) would be formed with a goal to help coordinate service providers and second, find a system to help do that. We all agreed that this new organization would NOT do direct services—that was fundamental.” Schipper was chosen to spearhead the efforts as Executive Director, recruiting and orienting the new board. While Stillwater CARES, Inc. formally opened its door in January 2011, informally, the network had been building relationships, growing trust, and developing a vision since that first pastors’ prayer gathering years prior.

In 2013, Stillwater CARES formalized an association among 30 churches and 28 organizations and service agencies via a Memorandum of Understanding. The association members (called associates) made agreements to work together to:

- Practice goodwill and mutual support of one another
- Promote best practices to prevent and alleviate poverty
- Provide a mechanism for collaborative case management

“Our emerging network became an association to shape true collaboration to achieve collective impact!” said Schipper.

Implementing a Shared Case Management System

Stillwater CARES leadership initially thought that they would have to create their ideal shared technology system from scratch, but Schipper believes that providential circumstances introduced their association to CharityTracker as well as funded it. “Our director of public safety was a driving force for a data system. He came onto the board adamant that it needed to be a priority. Honestly, it was a hard sell at first to the community, agencies and churches,” said Schipper.

Stillwater CARES hosted a “brain trust” where they asked for honest feedback on their organization’s next steps and implementation of the CharityTracker system. “We literally told people to leave their purses and wallets in the car because we just wanted to pick their brains, not their pockets. The director of public safety got up and spoke about CharityTracker, asking for feedback,” explained Schipper.

CharityTracker would provide agencies and churches with the following:

- Technology to communicate with one another in real-time through bulletins and alerts
- Ability to create a services directory with referrals
- Ability to run collective and individual agency reports of outputs and outcomes
- A mechanism to record benevolence and assistance records and share them

The brain trust meeting provided more than feedback. Leaders left the meeting passionate to see collaborative solutions. Within a week’s time, CharityTracker was more than fully funded. “God brought the right people in that room. Having the funding was the tipping point,” said Schipper. Stillwater CARES launched CharityTracker in September 2014 with 40 agencies. “Our original goal was to launch with 24!” said Schipper. To date, 48 of the 58 associates of Stillwater CARES use CharityTracker for their database solution.

Responsible & Responsive Benevolence

How did implementing a shared case management system like CharityTracker, help with being responsible and responsive, as the pastors originally had explored? By communicating, agencies and churches in the Stillwater CARES association have been able to reduce the duplication of services. Through sharing case management, they get a better picture of who is asking for and receiving assistance regularly and why. Through collective reporting, they can also see where gaps and overlaps in services may exist.

In August 2015, after a full year of data entry, a meeting of the associates was held to present collective data that better informed them of the face of poverty in their community. “One outcome of initiating CharityTracker was that it helped us see and address food insecurity in our community. Stillwater CARES took a very proactive role in helping shape common practices among the existing five church-based food pantries as well as starting a separate nonprofit, Our Daily Bread Food & Resource Center, which connects under-resourced people not only to food but also to other resources to help them get ahead,” reported Schipper.

Relational, Respectful, and Redemptive Benevolence

In addition to implementing CharityTracker, churches and agencies in Stillwater are changing the language of poverty in their community. Pastors and leaders engaged in a 10-week discussion of the book *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. “This was a real game-changer for us. *When Helping Hurts* gave us a common language. For example, we are here to restore and develop, not just provide for crisis and relief. We talk very intentionally about preventing, not just alleviating, poverty. Language is very powerful,” explained Schipper. Faith and community leaders use this language, which flows into both congregations and community volunteers.

Stillwater CARES has also played a critical role in bringing the Getting Ahead course to their community and across the state. Getting Ahead is a 20-week course for people who want to move beyond their circumstances. The course puts the popular principles and research of Dr. Rudy Payne's book, *Bridges Out of Poverty* and Phil DeVol's book *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin-by-World* into practice. Over 100 people in the community attended a workshop introducing the Bridges Out of Poverty concepts and from that, 16 leaders have been trained to run the Getting Ahead course, including Schipper and his wife, Becky.

According to Schipper, there is nothing about Getting Ahead that is easy to get people to participate in; it requires a high level of commitment, spending three hours a week over 20 weeks to complete the course. "Our first pilot class successfully graduated every person but one, who had very legitimate reasons for needing to drop the course. In training for the class, we were told that two to four people drop out in the first month. Not only did we graduate all but one, over 60% of the group had perfect attendance," said Schipper.

The stories from the class show that people can be elevated above and beyond their circumstances of poverty—no matter what that poverty is, whether that be financial, relational, emotional or spiritual. Getting Ahead graduate Trisha Travis shared, "Money is not the answer to poverty. It is never the answer. The answer is hope."

April Taylor, another class graduate, shared, "Believing in yourself is difficult when you are brought up in poverty. My husband and I were both working hard but still on government assistance and still struggling. We really needed someone to pull out the map and show us the way. In the class, it didn't feel like they were saying 'you made bad choices and this is why'. It really left like people believed in me and I could rise above the poverty cycle."

“You can get ahead and build resources for a better life and it is all about relationships,” shared Schipper. The long-term goal is for a number of faith and community organizations to host Getting Ahead classes with church members or volunteers coming alongside participants as supportive mentors.

Schipper shared, “Quite often benevolence hasn’t been done in ways that are respectful because people are not always understood. One of the catchphrases in my life and ministry is that relationships are everything. They are messy in the best of times and when you throw in the complexity of poverty, generational issues, and sometimes mental health issues, relationships get really messy. We realized that unless assistance is relationship-based, we were a part of a system that was perpetuating brokenness. As pastors our greatest desire was to connect how Christ’s redemption story is part of the redemption of families.”

Getting Ahead & CharityTracker Working Together

Getting Ahead, Stillwater CARES, Inc. and CharityTracker have partnered to create assessments and measurements for tracking class participant success. Participants are called “investigators,” examining their own experience of poverty as well as explore issues in the community that impact poverty. The curriculum and facilitators guide investigators through an assessment of their own resources and how to build those resources as part of their move to self-sufficiency. Now those assessments can be easily recorded and success is tracked for both participants and class facilitators, making reporting of progress to stakeholders, participants and agencies more efficient.

Learn more in our [Getting Ahead Webinar Series](#)