

Location:
East-Central Oklahoma

Population:
11,134

**Estimated median
household income:**
\$31,335

**Estimated households
below poverty level:**
19.6%

Study Circle Participants:
40



"Tide has awoken some sleeping giants. When the light came on, we realized we had been asleep to problems in our community."

— "Keep Boley Beautiful"
participant

Thanks to the Southern Rural Development Center's Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative, several small communities in Okfuskee County, Okla., one of the state's poorest counties, have collaborated to promote community and economic development. For participants in Boley, Clearview and Weleetka, Tide opened the lines of communication and engaged residents who had not previously been involved in the community. A Study Circle facilitator said it best: "Linking people to people and people to resources is the key."

■ BOLEY

Big dreams, big payoff

One of the nation's oldest and largest historic black towns, Boley received in May 2011 a \$10,000 prize from the "Reader's Digest" We Hear You America contest, a national grassroots effort to aid towns facing economic hardship. Local organizers say Tide allowed residents to work together to determine community priorities, such as raising support for this contest.

Community outreach

Revitalization and economic development are two key issues facing Boley, where 35.9 percent of families are below poverty level. In response, Tide paved the way by facilitating communication and encouraging the "Keep Boley Beautiful" and "Save Boley" initiatives.

Through Tide, the local Well Springs Community Center, Inc., which offers counseling services and educational workshops, has added two additional buildings devoted to youth outreach.



Other Tide projects include opening a food bank, establishing a Red Cross equipment storage center and offering Healthy Lifestyles classes through the local health department. In addition, the town now offers computer classes to youth and senior adults. Boley has also held sidewalk and garage sales and a car show, with all proceeds benefitting the town.

■ CLEARVIEW

Technology advances

Clearview, a town of 52 located in a technology dead band between Tulsa and Oklahoma City, has focused on increasing the availability of technology resources. Thanks to a recent Wichita OnLine grant, the city will soon have wireless broadband access, provided by a new signal tower, and a newly created job for one of its residents. Clearview also has two new public access computers, bringing the county total to 10.

With the help of Tide facilitators, the county health department distributed smoke alarms to all residents, and emergency management personnel made available weather radios, a necessary safety tool because the area usually does not receive TV weather warnings due to its rural location.

Food initiatives

One Clearview resident created a community vegetable garden to help provide relief to those in need of fresh, healthy food, and in its first season, 15 community members picked free produce. The town has also initiated a fresh vegetable community meal, which includes five homegrown vegetables, meat, and cornbread for an affordable \$6 per plate, and a monthly Saturday morning \$5 all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast. The meals raise funds for community projects, promote community connections and provide income for local growers. Tide connections within the county have also enabled at least two residents who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to find local employment.

Hometown pride

Clearview focused on creating pride and unity to kickstart its community development programs with its first Hometown Pride Day in August 2010. Thanks to Tide's leadership, new voices spoke up and stepped up to put ideas into action in the months that followed.

A local hair stylist now offers free services to Clearview's low income and elderly residents. One couple purchased an abandoned church building in hopes of converting it into a museum, black educators hall of fame and bed and breakfast. Volunteers continue the upkeep of Clearview Lake following its initial cleanup. Another resident hopes to open a restaurant to bring in much-needed economic stimulus.



The town has also rejuvenated its rodeo parade and hosted youth trips, movie nights, and family gatherings to provide local recreation options for residents of all ages.

WELEETKA

Pride Day

Weleetka residents had been fixed in a state of grief after a series of tragedies rocked the community of 835. From 2008-10, two young girls were murdered, much of its historic downtown was destroyed by fire and six residents died in a house fire. The Tide pilot program began almost immediately after the house fire and helped the town heal. "Tide helped put it behind us so we could move forward utilizing what we have," said one Study Circle participant.

A new slogan, "Take pride—We'll thrive," and a new event has sparked Weleetka's efforts. The inaugural Pride Day, sponsored by the chamber of commerce and area merchants, brought residents and tourists to Main Street for parades, arts and crafts vendors, games, music, Miss Pride Day and baby pageants, and a variety of other family activities. The fall festival served as a testament to the community and economic development progress possible when a town unites.

Youth activities

In response to the needs of its youngest residents, Weleetka focused on youth programs. Donated funds provided the means to take children to an Oklahoma University football game in Norman, Okla., encouraging them to pursue higher education. A local bank has also sponsored family movie nights.

TIDE IMPACT

Focusing the Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative at the county level allows residents not only to achieve individual goals for their communities but also to work for the good of Okfuskee County as a whole. One resident says Tide allowed them to see similar issues each community faces. The three communities are now learning from one another and putting effective strategies into place.

Tide also helped residents overcome apathy and make progress in a variety of community and economic development areas. By involving a wide range of community members in seeking a place-based solution to poverty, the communities identified local concerns and now seek to use local talents and resources to find solutions. This internal progress, led by local voices, has created unity among residents and renewed hope for the future of their hometowns. A Boley volunteer summed up the motivation Tide provided for her town: "Our love for our community gives us the will to do what needs to be done to make it thrive."

Note: Statistics based on 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates from www.census.gov.