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Issue 2

# Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program

## People Recovering In-Spite of Devastating Events



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## A Community Healing Together

By Darla Absher, LPC, PsyD



People Recovering In-spite of Devastating Events is the meaning behind the name, Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program. The 2011 Labor Day fires struck with little warning, and for many in an instant their home, community, and sense of well-being was damaged or destroyed. For many the magnitude of the loss or damage set into motion weeks and even months of effort to recover and rebuild with many needing help to do so. The Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counselors with Bluebonnet Trails Community Services quickly became aware of and responded to these needs in their community.

Creating support groups of survivors has been one of the many ways the Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counselors have responded. These small groups of survivors gather weekly to share their experiences and challenges, and to provide much needed empathy and

support. These group support sessions have helped survivors understand their reactions, improve coping strategies, review their options, and connect with other individuals and agencies in their community that can assist with their recovery process.

The Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counselors historically have had a positive, strong relationship with the local Bastrop disaster first responders. Because of this relationship, the local fire departments of the Circle D and Tahitian Village subdivisions have provided the facilities where the weekly support groups are held. By providing a safe, private setting, local fire

departments have been instrumental to the success of addressing the community's emotional and psychological health throughout the disaster recovery process.

Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counselors strive to enhance social and emotional connections to others in the community and to promote effective coping strategies and resilience. The Crisis Counselors work closely with community organizations to familiarize themselves with available resources so they can link survivors to needed services. This community connection is essential for ensuring that the emotional and psychological health needs of local residents are being met.

Whether support comes from Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counselors, Bastrop first responders, or local residents, a community must come together to heal.



## With Spring Comes Recovery

By Kathryn Reeves



*A survivor of the Bastrop fire uses a phone in the Disaster Recovery Center to register.*

More information about the Texas wildfire disaster is available at [www.twitter.com/femargion6](http://www.twitter.com/femargion6). Other online resources are [blog.fema.gov](http://blog.fema.gov), [www.facebook.com/fema](http://www.facebook.com/fema) and [www.youtube.com/fema](http://www.youtube.com/fema).

With Bluebonnets, Indian Paintbrush, and Wine Cups blooming all around the Lone Star State, recovery from the historic wildfires of late summer 2011 is well underway. Although a good deal of work remains to be done, the diligent efforts of thousands of survivors and countless other Texans are making a positive difference. The Texas Department of Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have lent a helping hand in recovery efforts by partnering with other federal agencies, state and local governments, and volunteer organizations in Bastrop, Texas.

Kevin Hannes, FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for the Recovery Mission, estimates federal assistance alone for Texas survivors, their communities, and the state will eventually top \$115 million.

"Full recovery from the worst wildfire disaster in Texas history doesn't come easily or quickly," said Hannes. "Since the fires first erupted in Bastrop County and scores of other communities last summer, FEMA's commitment to Texas has been strong, and we will remain a powerful force in the recovery effort until our work here is done."

FEMA, along with their state counterparts and local officials, began assessing areas of devastation even while fires raged in Bastrop County. Thus, when the State of Texas requested and received the major disaster declaration for Bastrop County on September 9, 2011, FEMA was there ready to help. For example, FEMA approved (at the request of the state) the Transitional Sheltering Assistance program within six hours of the disaster declaration, eventually assisting 406 Texans and their families. FEMA also

anticipated the need for temporary housing for scores of survivors, and began bringing mobile housing units to Texas while fires still burned.

For many months after the disaster, FEMA and state recovery specialists were in burned out neighborhoods, on the phone and at dozens of Disaster Recovery Centers, listening to applicants' concerns, helping them apply for assistance and sometimes just lending an ear.

Early in the recovery process FEMA, via the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, provided funding to the Texas Department of State Health Services Disaster Behavioral Health Services (DBHS) Program. The DBHS Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program has been assisting individuals and the Bastrop community to deal with and to recover from the emotional trauma resulting from the Bastrop fires by providing community-based outreach and counseling services. To date, more than 4,000 individuals have been served.

Through FEMA's Individual Assistance (IA) Program, more than 1,000 eligible Texans and their families have received grants to help them begin the recovery process. When survivors' needs have gone beyond the scope of government assistance, FEMA outreach liaisons have provided referrals for assistance available within the Bastrop community. More than 2,780 survivors have received follow-up phone calls — and an additional \$2.5 million has been provided to eligible survivors. Since the September 9<sup>th</sup> disaster declaration, nearly \$49.5 million in state and federal recovery assistance has been approved or obligated for homeowners, renters and business owners under the IA program, or to the state, state

agencies, local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations under the Public Assistance Program.

Of this \$49.5 million, more than \$22.1 million in low-interest disaster loans from FEMA's federal partner, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) has been distributed. As the federal government's primary source of funding for rebuilding disaster-damaged private property, the SBA has approved loans to 188 homeowners and 15 businesses.

An additional \$13 million in FEMA funding has been set aside in Texas for the state-run Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for projects designed to protect lives and property during future fires or to foster safer communities in general. Dollar amounts, however, do not tell the full story of the state and federal commitment to Texans and their communities over the past six months.

FEMA's mission is to support citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards. Another of FEMA's missions in Texas is to help restore the quality of life in fire-ravaged communities and stimulate local economies.

Although FEMA's registration period for assistance has ended, survivors can still get questions answered or check on the status of an application at 1-800-621-3362 or TTY 1-800-462-7585. Those who use 711-Relay or Video Relay Services can call 1-800-621-3362. Updates are also available at [www.DisasterAssistance.gov](http://www.DisasterAssistance.gov).



## Sock Monkeying Around ...

By Darla Absher, LPC, PsyD

Imagine six hundred sock monkeys knocking on your door. Six hundred loveable stuffed sock toys made with recycled materials with button eyes and stitched faces have been sent to Bastrop, Texas, from around the world! The Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program did not literally have stuffed animals knocking on the door, but the opportunity surely knocked and the Fire Relief team answered!

Thanks to a chance meeting at the Chamber of Commerce while handing out flyers about free support groups, the Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counselors happened upon a great tip. Through her charitable organization, Craft Hope, Jade Sims, a generous woman in Georgetown, Texas, who is also a teacher, collected 600 sock monkeys. Craft Hope is a love inspired project designed to share handmade crafts with those less fortunate or in need. The mission of Craft Hope is to combine the love for crafting and the desire to help others into a project to make a difference around the world. Once the Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Counselors heard that these sock monkeys were waiting longingly to be shared with the children of Bastrop, they rushed to get in touch with Craft Hope.

Ms. Sims responded right away. She said the sock monkeys had been stored since the fall while she sought a most deserving cause to donate these adorable toys to. After the Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program presented their proposal to distribute the sock monkeys to the children of Bastrop who had survived the 2011 Labor Day fires, Ms. Sims with the help of her husband delivered bags and bags of sock monkeys. When she opened the door to her SUV, the bags kept coming. In total, there were about fifteen bags that filled the entire Bluebonnet Trails' office.

Of course the staff were anxious to look at and snuggle a few of the monkeys. Like children at a birthday party, they tore into one bag after another. Such a variety of monkeys tumbled out. Some were dressed like ballerinas with tutus and some were dressed in their Sunday best with bow ties. Some gazed up with large button eyes and short tails and some had long tails and short ears. Blue, green, red, purple, soft and happy little monkeys, all just as unique as each child who has received one!

Craft Hope is a great way to give back through crafting. If you're an avid crafter, you should check out Ms. Sims' blog at [www.crafthope.com](http://www.crafthope.com). This Facebook page provides the history of Craft Hope where Ms. Sims, along with her friends, creates craft projects for various causes, such as the Haiti earthquakes and the Bastrop fires. You can also see the story behind collecting all of the sock monkeys and how, upon hearing about the fires in Bastrop, Ms. Sims knew she had to respond. To learn more about the sock monkey story from the beginning go to [www.crafthope.com](http://www.crafthope.com)

Thanks to Jade Sims and Craft Hope, you will be seeing little sock monkeys with their happy new friends, the kids of Bastrop!



*Sock Monkeys waiting for a friend.*



From left to right: Lisa Naynes LPC, Dr. Darla Absher LPC, Gwen Barnes LPC-Intern, Jonathan Lemuel, Michele Henning MA, Sandra Brady LPC, Catherine Hotard LMSW



## Texas P.R.I.D.E. Success Stories

### Accounts from Bluebonnet Trails Counselors and Outreach Workers

#### M. W.'s Story

On the first day of the support group, the Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling staff was surprised and glad to have such a large turnout. Although preparations had been made to attend to children separately from the adults, when a young woman arrived with three boys, she politely asked that her children remain with her. She said the fires were the third disaster they had experienced recently and they felt better staying together.

After introductions and the group counseling had begun, we learned that this woman with the three boys was a single mother. In addition to the three boys, a younger sister was at home with a sitter. After explaining that this was their third disaster, this mother related that they were uninsured renters in the neighborhood and had been totally burned out.

Over the next four months the boys and their mother regularly attended the group counseling sessions. The dynamic of the group was positively affected by the

boys. They seemed to heighten the spirits of the others attending the group. It is as if their youthful presence was a reminder of growth and vigor which survivors of a tragedy always need. In addition these boys took pride in and assumed responsibility for assisting with setting up for, as well as cleaning up after, each group counseling session.

Most recently, their mother was faced with being without a home. Since their current rent was being increased, she could no longer afford the place they were living in. She presented her situation to the group and related that they had 30 days until they had to move out. The Texas P.R.I.D.E. team, along with the group members, researched many different options. With only a week before their move out date, a group member found an affordable home for her and her children.

This family's and all of the group members' lives are filled with similar challenges. To see them unite with such support for each other is inspiring. This group demonstrates the resiliency of Bastrop!



*Volunteer assists with the clean-up efforts in Bastrop, Texas*

#### J.T.'s Story

While in the community, I encountered a single mother of two who lost her home and all of her belongings in the wildfire. She had homeowner's insurance which covered most of her major belongings, but not everything. Through talking with her, it became apparent that she was suffering from high levels of anxiety. She said she could barely sit still in her new home. She was continuously being reminded that she did not have her own "stuff" and "the new home just did not feel like home." For example, she would go to get something and realize that it was no longer there because it had burned in the fire. After hearing this, I asked her, "What could she do when she feels this way? What did she enjoy doing? What could she do to take care of herself?" She said that she enjoyed taking long baths and spending time with her children. I urged her to do these things, and that she needed to take care of herself. When I visited her for a second time, I asked about her anxiety. She said her new the home was beginning to feel like home and she had started putting time aside for herself. When her children were not home, she would take a bath or just spend time alone. Since she started doing this, her anxiety had decreased. The last time I spoke with her, she was spending more time with her children, but also taking time for herself. She felt at home and was even able to sit down and watch a movie.

#### D.M.'s Story

Throughout our time going to visit folks at their homes and in businesses, we've come across a number of individuals who have often referred to themselves as being "one of the lucky ones." These folks were in the area affected, but their homes survived (or "just" had smoke damage). Often they were one of only a few, or the only ones in their neighborhoods or on their streets whose homes were spared severe damage. Some described not feeling like they had a right to be upset because they still had a home. Those with little damage did not access resources in the area (including the Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program) because they felt that they were taking it away from someone who needed it more. Both associated with what some refer to as "survivor's guilt." Just letting these folks know that we have encountered others that are describing similar experiences has provided a sense of relief that they are not the only ones experiencing these feelings. We also let them know that some folks have found it helpful has been doing something to give back in some way. This has helped affirm that our focus is not just on those that have been "burned out," but also on anyone in Bastrop County.



*Volunteers cleaning up in Circle D Subdivision, Bastrop, Texas*

Bluebonnet Trails Community Services, 275 Jackson Street  
Bastrop, Texas 78602

**512-321-7250**

Hours: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Monday through Friday

After-hours, weekends, holidays  
**800-841-1255**

SAMHSA 24-Hour Help Hotline  
**1-800-985-5990**



## My Disaster Recovery

By Kathryn Reeves



*"The first and only web-based trauma recovery program that both motivates and empowers individuals to guide their own recovery."*

BlueSun, Inc., the founding organization for *My Disaster Recovery* web site, strives to improve human well-being by providing products and services that empower individuals, families, and communities to guide their own recovery. They believe strongly in the incredible adaptive strength of people. Even though stressful events, such as a disaster, challenge our capacity to cope, they force us to re-evaluate our beliefs and find new ways to move ahead in our lives.

*My Disaster Recovery* is a free self-help, confidential, anonymous service designed to help survivors who have experienced a recent disaster.

The web site provides information about post-disaster stress and how to cope more effectively with the effects of the disaster. Using this site will provide important knowledge concerning what to expect when recovering from a disaster, and teaches specific skills helpful when dealing with the challenges of moving forward. It also provides progress feedback and, if needed, how to seek professional help.

Although this is a self-help web site, it is not intended to replace face-to-face counseling. If significant distress is experienced beyond the first weeks after the disaster, a

doctor should be consulted and counseling from a traumatic stress specialist should be considered.

To create a free *My Disaster Recovery* account you will need to use the activation code texas123. After you create this account, and sign in as a member, you will be provided with skills that will help you with relaxation, social support, self-talk, triggers and memories, and avoiding unhelpful ways of coping. More information about *My Disaster Recovery* is available at <http://www.texas.bluesunsupport.com> and at <http://www.bluesunsupport.com/products.php>.



*Americorps volunteers in Bastrop State Park building trails and anti-erosion retaining walls.*



*Horses recovering from exposure to the Bastrop fires. Photo provided by Texas Equine Emergency Response Network.*

## Volunteer Highlights

By Kathryn Reeves

Many volunteer workers will not see how their efforts ultimately will have helped Bastrop recover. Much of the labor to clean up, rebuild, etc., was provided by volunteer organizations that have had to move on to helping in other disasters around the state and nation.

Much of the labor provided in the rebuilding of homes has been provided by the Mennonite Disaster Service. These men and women drove for days to spend Monday through Friday working on jobs sites in disaster areas, such as Bastrop, then leave to go back home or on to other disaster sites.

"None of them see the end of their work," said Roger Friesen, a Mennonite Disaster Service Supervisor, "Instead they check Facebook for updates."

Many other groups have provided vitally needed volunteer services. At least 25 separate Boy Scouts of America collection drives were organized, with many run by individual neighborhood Scout units. Scouting's honor society, the Order of the Arrow, organized eight regional drop-off locations for donated items.

The Lost Pines Riding Club of Elgin, Texas, housed and cared for equine (horses) and bovine (cattle) refugees of the Bastrop fire at the Elgin rodeo arena.

Local AmeriCorps members participating in American YouthWorks' (AYW) Environmental Corps (E-Corps) along with Casa Verde Builders established a center where volunteers could learn about and sign up for volunteer opportunities throughout Bastrop County. Partnering with local groups and organizations working to provide disaster assistance, the center matched volunteers with opportunities based on interest, skills, and availability.

Chelsea Bodamer, Outreach Coordinator for AYW's E-Corps program summed up the importance of volunteerism best when she said, "We are excited to be a part of the relief effort here in Bastrop. We are moved by the strength of the community and organizations of all different backgrounds coming together for a common goal."



## Giving Back, After Losing It All By Dustin Butler



*Volunteers sort donated clothing and prepare them for distribution to survivors of the wildfires in Bastrop, TX.*

After the Labor Day fires scorched Bastrop neighborhoods, hundreds of tales of tragedy and loss have been balanced by stories of heroism, volunteerism, and giving. One of the most heroic acts involve those who had little left except for the memories of their homes and belongings, but amazingly found the strength to give what little they had to help their fellow survivors and neighbors.

Mark Schexnider, a resident of the Tahitian Village subdivision, lost everything in the devastating fire. He was given only ten minutes' notice to evacuate and to say goodbye to their beloved homestead. Although Mr. Schexnider's homestead was

a complete loss, he was one of the fortunate homeowners whose insurance helped him to recover fairly quickly.

When the Bastrop Walmart organized a donation station where clothes and household items could be donated for the fire victims, Mr. Schexnider decided this was the perfect place to give back. He bought towels and wash clothes for donation.

"It was very emotional because we were there very early that morning and had just found out that we lost everything," said Schexnider. "As we went to make the donation, a news crew ran up to us and asked how it

felt to give, and we told them that we lost everything, but we had insurance and wanted to give something to our neighbors who didn't. He added, "The news reporter almost started crying."

The act of giving is powerful, particularly when you have lost everything. This same charitable spirit embodied by the local residents of Bastrop County definitely has been and will be a driving force in the recovery effort. This entire disaster reflects how much community support truly exists within Bastrop County.

## Helping Children after A Disaster By Kathryn Reeves



*Bluebonnet Trails Community Services, 275 Jackson Street  
Bastrop, Texas 78602  
Hours: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Monday through Friday*

**512-321-7250**

*After-hours, weekends, holidays*

**800-841-1255**

*SAMHSA 24-Hour Help Hotline*

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Just as adults have worked to cope with stress after the 2011 Labor Day wildfires in Bastrop County, children also struggled emotionally. Fear after a disaster is natural, but parents and caregivers need to be aware that children may have experienced trauma or may have worries they are unable to express. How parents and caregivers behave at this time can have lasting effects. If a caregiver resumes a normal existence quickly, the child is more likely to have a quick recovery.

### Tips for helping children after a disaster:

- Take time to compose yourself when you are with your child. Your calmness and confidence will encourage your child to feel less afraid.
- Encourage your child to talk, draw, or tell stories so the child has an opportunity to talk through the experience.

- Be a good listener. If your child asks questions, answer as best you can and use words that your child might use.
- Give honest answers. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Calmly provide answers, even if they are painful.
- Spend extra time with your children. Your smaller children will need extra hugs and reassurance. Your older children may need more time to express themselves.
- Get back to daily routines for work, school, play, meals and rest. A familiar schedule can be very comforting.
- Involve your children in creating a family disaster plan and in practicing your plan. A disaster plan helps your child understand that there are positive things that can be done to help.

- During holidays or birthdays, replace a cherished stuffed animal or toy that was lost in the disaster.

Crisis counseling can help children and teens recover. Counseling also helps children develop coping skills to get through tough times now and later in life. The Texas P.R.I.D.E. Crisis Counseling Program provides free individual and group services through Blue Bonnet Trails Community Services.

FEMA for Kids at [www.fema.gov/kids](http://www.fema.gov/kids) is a disaster preparedness website with resources for children, parents, and teachers. The website offers free posters, video and information on how children recover from a disaster. Free FEMA publications can be ordered by phone at **1-800-480-2520**.



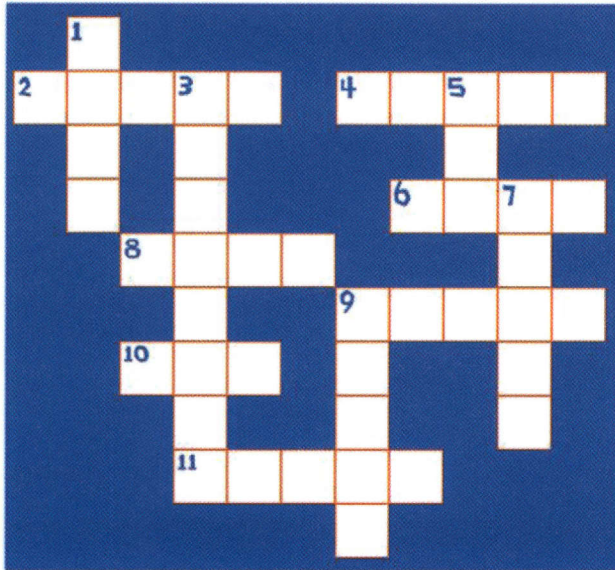
# Kids Page – Use Your Brain in an Emergency

Brought to you by FEMA Ready.gov for Kids

## DEAR FAMILY,

Family Reproducible Worksheet

To prepare for emergencies, families can collect items that might be useful and put them in an emergency supply kit. Go to [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) and click on *Ready Kids* to find out how your family can prepare for unexpected situations. Then complete this crossword puzzle to give you an idea of what kinds of things should be part of your family's emergency supply kit.



### CLUES

#### ACROSS:

2. \_\_\_\_\_ light: A handy tool to have if the lights go out!
4. Every person needs one gallon of this per day!
6. This comfortable piece of furniture should not be part of a family's supply kit.
8. Furry family members that should be part of your preparedness plan.
9. Some people have a \_\_\_\_\_ between meals if they are hungry.
10. You might find water, a flashlight, or a whistle in an emergency supply \_\_\_\_\_.
11. Fun items that families can play together.

#### DOWN:

1. Families can create a communication \_\_\_\_\_ so that they know where to meet and who to call during an emergency.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ bag: Great for napping or keeping warm.
5. Every family member should carry a contact list with at least \_\_\_\_\_ different phone numbers that will allow you to keep in touch during an emergency.
7. It's important to get the \_\_\_\_\_ about different kinds of emergencies, so that you know what to expect.
9. Keep an extra pair of these in your supply kit to keep your feet dry!

Visit [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) and click on *Ready Kids* for a family scavenger hunt to create your family's emergency supply kit!



### EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION

It's important to be able to contact your family if there is an unexpected event. Fill in the following information and keep a copy on the refrigerator, in your car, and in your child's backpack.

Parents/Guardians Contact Names: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

Out-of-State Contact Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Neighborhood Meeting Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting Place Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

**Dial 9-1-1 for Emergencies!**

Crossword Puzzle Answers:  
Across: 2. flash; 4. water; 6. sofa; 8. pets; 9. snack; 10. kit; 11. games.  
Down: 1. plan; 3. sleeping; 5. two; 7. facts; 9. shoes

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Homeland  
Security





*Michael D. Maples, LPC, LMFT  
Assistant Commissioner  
Mental Health and Substance  
Abuse Division  
Texas Department of State  
Health Services*

## **A Moment with Mike** By Mike Maples, LPC, LMFT

The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) is committed to a successful crisis response system that supports our citizens and first responders. Our goal is to work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all disasters. DSHS is not the team, but part of a team that includes federal partners, state, tribal and local officials, the private sector, non-profits and faith-based groups, and the general public.

One member of this team is the Texas P.R.I.D.E. (People Recovering In-Spite of Devastating Events) Crisis Counseling Program (CCP) which has been serving the survivors of the tragic Labor Day wildfires in Bastrop and Williamson Counties. The Texas P.R.I.D.E. CCP provides short term interventions to individuals and groups experiencing psychological reactions to large scale disasters such as the Bastrop fires. Interventions involve assisting disaster survivors in understanding their

current situation and reactions; mitigating additional stress; promoting the development of positive coping strategies; providing emotional support, and; encouraging linkages with other individuals and agencies that may help survivors recover to their pre-disaster level of functioning.

Every Texas P.R.I.D.E. newsletter includes CCP updates, so you can see the progress being made in the Bastrop community. The Labor Day fires that struck Bastrop and Williamson Counties devastated the lives of hundreds of people. DSHS is committed to assisting our fellow Texans, who are striving hard to rebuild their lives. The Texas P.R.I.D.E. CCP Counselors have furthered this effort by providing educational and individual counseling to over 14,000 Bastrop and Williamson County residents. I applaud this achievement and wish Texas P.R.I.D.E. CCP continued success.

Sincerely,  
Michael D. Maples, LPC, LMFT  
Assistant Commissioner  
Mental Health and Substance Abuse Division

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The editor reserves the right to edit all materials in this publication. Please send requests for items to be included in this publication and other inquiries to: [DBHS@dshs.state.tx.us](mailto:DBHS@dshs.state.tx.us).