

## Program Summary

Titus County Reads (TCR) is a program under the umbrella of Titus County Cares. This program focuses on comprehensive literacy development by targeting young readers.

In 2014, realizing that 93% of the Head of Households that came through the Titus County Cares (TCC) Food Pantry (FP) did not have a college degree, while 60% of those same Head of Households had not graduated from high school; and, understanding the link between illiteracy and poverty, TCC launched the Titus County Reads program to help address the rising problem of illiteracy in our community.

TCR has two goals. The first focus was to begin a volunteer reading program in our local elementary schools pairing an adult volunteer who would read 30 minutes per week with a 1<sup>st</sup> grade student in the school setting. Nationally, 1<sup>st</sup> graders from low-income families have 50% smaller vocabularies than their peers from higher income families. The goal is to build relationships between a volunteer mentor and the students, as well as assisting the students in increasing their love of reading. In the Fall of 2014, TCR launched with four volunteers on one campus. In the Fall of 2016, we have over 175 volunteers reading every week on 6 separate campuses to 1<sup>st</sup> grade students.

The second goal was to distribute books to all the elementary students at the end of school to build home libraries, promote literacy and to combat the “summer slide” or lack of reading over the summer due to no resources. Through various organizations, we are able to purchase high quality, age appropriate, grade level books at extremely low cost. Over the last three years, TCR has distributed approximately 8,000 new books to Kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in Titus County.

Our goal is to not just give each student one new book, but to give two books (of their choosing) to each student. Three of the elementary schools have 88% of their students on the FREE lunch program. Very many, if not most of the students do not have one book they can call their own in their home. The look on their faces when we tell them this is a book to take home and KEEP is priceless. Many of them ask the volunteers several times, “Can I really keep this book?” or “This is for me to take home and keep?” They can hardly believe it.

The expected outcome is if we help the young children in our community become the best readers they can be, it will give them a huge head start on living a successful and productive life. Higher tests scores, less school absences, higher high school graduation rates and more students attending college will all contribute to the making of a better future citizen in Titus County.

We are asking for \$5,000 to purchase two new books for each child in K-4<sup>th</sup> grade in all 7 Titus County schools. If we are chosen to receive the TRC grant, the funds would help fulfill this goal in the late spring of 2017.

## Section 1: Contact Information

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## Section II: Organizational Description

Titus County Cares was formed in May of 2005 as a result of the Ministerial Alliance (a group of pastors who met monthly; founded in 1971) seeking a new way to expand the Board and increase the help given to residents of Mount Pleasant and Titus County. The Alliance voted to form a new 10 person Board made up of community leaders and pastors, and change the name to Titus County Cares.

Titus County Cares is a Christ-centered non-profit organization, coordinating resources and services that meet the needs of our neighbors in Titus County.

In September of 2010, TCC became TCC Resource Center and combined 9 locations in Mt. Pleasant into one central building through the generosity of our community and winning two different contests. The "Helping Hands" contest gave TCC a 3,750 sf metal building through Mueller and Texas Country Reporter; and, the Hometown Hero contest (sponsored by Ford) was won by TCC Board Member Gordon Nelms, who received a new Ford F-150 truck and \$250,000 to give to the charity of his choice for use of building a new building. Since September 2010, TCC has been located on a visible corner location, in a 6,250 sf brick building with plenty of office, meeting, warehouse and parking space!

TCC serves people in emergency situations by giving food to help them make it through the month (Food Pantry); by sending home backpacks (Food4kids Club) of food every weekend during the school year with child friendly foods; by filling the gap between summer school and when school starts serving lunch daily at various locations (Summer Kids Cafe); by caring adults sponsoring specific children (Cares4kids); by reading to First graders weekly and giving new books to elementary students to read over the summer (Titus County Reads); and by

providing Christmas boxes of food for the neediest families (Spirit of Christmas Food Drive). We consider these programs as preventative measures against homelessness, hunger and poverty. Local businesses, agencies and organizations have joined forces with TCC to assist in these needs.

Our county has a 30% poverty rate among children 17 and under. Our schools have an average of 85% of the children in the FREE lunch program. We are pleased to help children by providing over 1,200 bags of food on Friday of every week for those who are hungry over the weekend (Food4kids).

Over 175 adults are volunteering each week to read with a First Grade child for 30 minutes. Titus County Reads started in the fall of 2014 with four readers and has grown exponentially in two years. Literacy development is a priority in preventing poverty. The Titus County schools have been very supportive in encouraging community involvement and allowing TCC to help them make sure ALL our children can read.

### Section III: Program Description

a.

Titus County Reads started as a way to make sure the children in our county would be able to read by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. TCC is invested in the future of our county and would love to put ourselves out of business by beating poverty! We found through our Food Pantry (FP) database that 93% of the FP recipients do not have a college degree. Sixty percent of all the FP clients do not have any kind of high school degree. There is obviously a connection between education and poverty, so it made perfect sense for TCC volunteers to get involved in the education system.

When we researched more statistics regarding literacy, we found that 69% of children in Texas aren't proficient in reading by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. There also is a direct correlation between literacy and crime. Two-thirds of students who can't read by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade end up either incarcerated or on welfare. Sixty percent of America's inmates can't read above a fourth grade level.

In regards to passing out new books to all the elementary children at the end of the year, we found that 61% of low income families have NO books at home for their children. I would not be surprised if that number is higher in Titus County. It is a known fact that children lose two to three months in their reading skills over the summer if they are not reading; sometimes called the "summer slide".

**b.**

The combination of high poverty among our local families and the risk of illiteracy among our youngest children drove our organization to come up with a two-prong approach to solving this immense problem under the program name of Titus County Reads.

**Titus County Reads,**

- 1. Provides volunteers to 6 schools, in an organized way, to read to as many 1<sup>st</sup> graders as possible, for 30 minutes every week of the school year.**
- 2. Gives all Kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade students at least one brand new book of their choice, to take home, keep and read over the summer.**

**Number 1 is being accomplished through an Orientation for new volunteers in August with a lot of publicity through our local newspaper and TCC social media.**

**Number 2 is being accomplished through several very dedicated volunteers who are in the school system and former school teachers. They work hard to find inexpensive, age appropriate books to hand out at the end of the school year.**

**c.**

**The beneficiaries of the program are the 2,500 plus students who receive new books (of their choosing) to read over the summer; many of whom do not own one book of their own.**

**Also benefitting are the 175 plus 1<sup>st</sup> graders who are learning to read at an accelerated level, because of a caring adult who has taken the time to invest 30 minutes a week with them. Not only are their reading skills improving, but the relationship with loving adults has improved their self-esteem and outlook on life.**

**The K-4<sup>th</sup> grade elementary schools in Titus County are about 80% Hispanic, 10% White and 10% African American. There is no race discrimination in this program. The children are chosen to have 'reading buddies' if they are struggling to read. Naturally, it is more difficult for a Hispanic child if they only hear Spanish at home, to learn to read English at school. The child that I read to is Hispanic and I am amazed at how well she can read English and Spanish. I notice that several letters give her trouble that are sounded out differently in English and Spanish. Like the word 'you', she will always say 'jew' because the 'y' is sounded like a 'j' in Spanish. I know of a man who reads with a child whose dad is in jail. This man has become best friends with his reading buddy! His life will be changed because of the time one man invested in reading with him once a week.**

d.

I do not know of another program that is as simple as TCReads. TCC looked at several 'reading' or 'literacy' programs. Most had an intensive training that would take many hours or required the adult to read to the child for an hour a week. I believe it is the simplicity of our program that appeals to most adults and, as a result, benefits the children the most. The combination of the two – reading with a child and then giving new books to ALL the elementary students is unique and we will see the benefits in a few years when the test scores continue to go up.

Titus County Reads is definitely a model to other communities. The explosion of volunteers over the last two years in a small community like ours has been incredible. From the Fall 2014 with 4 volunteers in one school to over 150 volunteers in 6 schools. And, the collection of new books and buying new books to hand out has gained steam with new volunteers and, of course, with the children who receive the books and are so excited to have their OWN book.

We have a connection to a nationally known speaker who has touted our program to other cities across the United States. Dr. Reggie McNeal was a pastor many years ago in Mount Pleasant. He comes to speak and inspire our volunteers and then meets with the TCC Board once a year to motivate and check on our successes and failures! He also shares with us what other cities are doing and motivates us to keep moving forward.

e.

The budget for Titus County Reads is simple. We need money to buy new books to send home with every child in Kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade in Titus County. Because of the demographics in Titus County, we know that most of these children live in poverty or just above the poverty level and that most do not have any books in their home.

Budget 2017 –

5,000 New books for K – 4<sup>th</sup> grade in English and Spanish      \$5,000

If TRC is unable to fund the total amount we have requested, we will distribute one book to each child (instead of two) and do fundraisers to raise the money. We would definitely accept whatever grant money is given.

f.

We expect to have solid test results in two more years. The program was too small the first year; we will be looking at the children who were in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade last year and follow the test results from their whole class when the STARR test scores come out at the end of their 3<sup>rd</sup> grade year.

Test results are just part of the expected outcome. There are other achievements that we will be following in the years to come. We found that when Food4kids started, not only did tests scores go up, but absenteeism went down and trips to the school nurse went down.

Helping build a 'home library' for so many children will affect their whole families. High school graduation percentages and the percentage of students who continue on to college will also be measured in the future. One volunteer told a story of buying her student (that she reads to) a new book to reward him for improving so much in his reading. She asked him to bring it back the next week so they could read it together. The next week he didn't have the book. She said, "Did you forget to bring your new book I gave you?" And he said, "No, I didn't want to bring it back to school because I was afraid I would lose it and it's the only book I have."

Wouldn't it be great if there were no need for Titus County Cares in the future! But, until then, we will work to change the future of our county by caring for and encouraging our children to get a good education and read, read, read!!!

g.

February 2017 – April 2017 Purchase and divide books according to reading levels

Usually we are invoiced for the purchases and will be paying for the books in April and May 2017.

f.

Titus County Cares has not received any grants from TRC.