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Tim Dygon and Michael Powers lead The Arc of the Ozarks, which recently acquired TheraCare Outpatient Services.

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# Expanding the Arc: The Arc of the Ozarks continues entrepreneurial ways to broaden its services

**BY: JAN PETERSON, CONTRIBUTING WRITER**

Posted online July 5, 2022 | 1:58 pm

The reach and scope of The Arc of the Ozarks has changed dramatically since its 1964 founding.

But the nonprofit's guiding mission remains as it was in 1959 when Carolyn Davis Newport sat down at her kitchen table with two other moms, determined to find a way for their children with disabilities to live their best possible lives.

Institutionalization was at its peak, says Tim Dygon, executive vice president of The Arc of the Ozarks.

“At that time, group homes were the standard, and workshops,” he recalls. “The whole industry has changed.”

The independent supported living movement that began in the 1970s really began to take off in the 1990s. Dygon says at that time, The Arc had 19 group homes. Now, it has a couple.

The types of programs and support systems for people living with disabilities have exploded. “We’ve tried to meet and serve people all through the spectrum – children with therapy all the way through the adult lifespan – to live the best life possible, whether that means they’re home with family, independent or need full care,” Dygon says.

Today, The Arc offers a variety of services:

- five independent supported living services;
- six therapeutic services, including behavior analysis, therapy and counseling, occupational and speech therapies, and psychiatric services; and
- programs that include community living, recreation such as summer camps, employment, education and autism services, and family advocacy.

The Arc’s reach has expanded from Greene County to include 20 additional counties, with offices in Springfield, Kansas City, Joplin and Monett.

Alexandra Bodenhamer, marketing and development coordinator, says The Arc serves 3,682 people a year and has an operating budget of \$57 million annually.

Bodenhamer says much of the organization’s funding comes through fees for service, rental income, fundraising, contract services and investments.

But in recent years, the nonprofit has embarked on more entrepreneurial ventures.

### **Creative solutions**

Last year, The Arc purchased the A.M. Donuts & Coffee food truck to help its clientele with skills training.

“We have to be really creative in how we provide services in a labor market that is so tight,” Dygon says.

He says the truck has been a success. It’s at a farmers market every Saturday, was at Gardens Aglow at the Mizumoto Japanese Stroll Garden and is booked regularly for private events.

“It is so cool to have people with and without disabilities working together to provide good coffee and doughnuts,” he says.

In 2014, The Arc purchased the Rivendale Institute of Learning and Center for Autism. Eight years later, that relationship with Rivendale led to The Arc’s most recent acquisition, TheraCare Outpatient Services LLC, purchased in June from Melanie Stinnett. The purchase price was undisclosed.

Stinnett says she launched her speech therapy private practice in 2014, expecting to work a couple of days on her own.

“I found the need was greater than I’d known,” Stinnett says.

Within nine months, she was working full time and adding office staff. The business continued to grow to about 20 therapists and four office staff today.

Over the years, TheraCare added occupational and physical therapy services, music therapy and swallow therapy, and until 2021, it was the only Medicaid-approved site in the Ozarks for augmentative alternative communication device determinations. Put simply, when a child is minimally verbal or nonverbal, they may get a device to act as their voice.

Dygon says TheraCare had been providing services for Rivendale for a while when the two organizations met to discuss how they could work better to reach more families and provide more services.

“We had this vision – especially with the increase in autism – how can we have better reach? What would it look like if we joined forces?” Dygon says.

Stinnett says partnering with The Arc will make services more readily available to families.

“We know people drive to us from as much as two hours away. That’s unreasonable for a family that needs weekly specialty visits for their child,” Stinnett says. “These are kids who need continuous treatment to make

progress.”

While TheraCare was her baby, Stinnett says she had no qualms about selling. With The Arc, she remains vice president of therapy services and works with the same staff she had previously.

“I thought I would feel concern but I just – it sounds corny – but I just feel joy. I feel excited about what we can do together and how we can expand things,” she says.

### **Changing demands**

Dygon says The Arc has a variety of challenges ahead.

Currently, The Arc has 1,300 employees, but it needs at least 200 more to be fully staffed.

Meanwhile, the client base is shifting, and the need is going up – particularly in the number of kids diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

For example, Dygon says, “Our summer camp program has been around since Arc existed. Typically, we’d have one or two (kids with autism). Now, it’s 80% of our summer camp.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder rose dramatically between 2000 and 2018 – from 1 in 150 diagnosed to 1 in 44. Furthermore, about 1 in 6 children between the ages of 3 and 17 were diagnosed with a developmental disability that includes autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, blindness or cerebral palsy.

Dygon says no one has the answer as to why so many children are diagnosed with autism.

“Awareness has changed, more people recognize that, but I think the evidence points to an increase in autism and no one knows why. There are a lot of theories but nothing definitive,” he says.

Dygon says he expects the tight labor market to worsen, so The Arc is turning to technology. He says about 70% of the services provided rely on labor. So in 2020, The Arc collaborated with Hearo Technologies LLC to find ways to deliver services remotely.

Here's how it works: Sensors attached to a tablet in a home can monitor a bed for seizures, doors opening or a stove being left on, for instance. Dygon says clients can hit an emergency button, if needed, or talk with staff. That enables one employee to monitor four or five locations, rather than placing an employee in each space.

"It allows greater intervention with safeguards and lets us use our labor force in a better way," he says. "I think five years from now, we're going to look back and say, wow, look what we can do."

Despite a gloomy labor forecast, The Arc's recent acquisitions and embrace of technology leaves Dygon feeling optimistic.

"We're just excited about providing new therapies and supports and integrative ways to serve our communities," he says.

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