



2024 CHILDREN’S LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

As approved by the OICA Board of Directors, December 12, 2023

PREAMBLE

The following recommendations were developed by the assembled child advocates and subject matter experts in attendance at the 2023 Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA) Fall Forum, held at the Oklahoma State Capitol on November 8, 9, and 10. The proposals herein represent the recommended elements of the Children’s Legislative Agenda to be presented to the Honorable Members of the Oklahoma Legislature for their consideration and action during the 2nd Session of the 59th Oklahoma Legislature.

After careful consideration of the various recommendations made during the online session held November 3, OICA’s Advocacy Committee, and the OICA Board of Directors, the final recommendations in the following area of child wellbeing initiatives includes action on legislation reflecting the following four articles:

ARTICLE I – CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION & CHILD SAFETY MEASURES

Among the most important responsibilities of state government is to ensure the safety of the children within its borders. As such, reducing and preventing child abuse and measure to improve the safety of children in a variety of circumstances are of paramount importance as lawmakers look to ways to fulfill that responsibility during the 2024 session of the Oklahoma Legislature.

- Measures to implement the recommendations of Governor Stitt’s Child Welfare Task Force (CWTF).
- Measures to improve child abuse tracking systems by educating family centers, parental evaluators, and pediatric services and partnerships about the child abuse hotline and enhancing reporting requirements.
- Improvement and expansion of preventions efforts by passage of legislation to enhance:
 - Social skills classes for students.
 - Sufficient funding of Medicaid and healthcare initiatives to prevent child health neglect, consistent with the recommendations of the Child Welfare Task Force.
 - Partnerships and enhanced communications among government agencies and commissions, nonprofits, child advocacy organizations, and parents.

- Partnerships with and among nonprofit family resource centers (FRCs) to provide a variety of services ensuring a comprehensive assessment of families’ needs, utilizing a multi-generational, family-centered, and strengths-based approach, consistent with multiple recommendations made the CWTF.
- Enactment of legislation to prevent public schools from inflicting corporal punishment on students with disabilities who may not be able to control their actions or may not understand why they are being punished. Further, OICA will work to the goal of ending all punishment options that are ineffective or counter to the latest peer-reviewed research on the topic.
- Enhanced funding for efforts to reduce and investigate child abuse, including but not limited to additional support for state agencies charged with this oversight.
- Implementation of the CWTF recommendations that relate directly to the improvement of quality of life for those children burdened by poverty, family substance abuse, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).
- Passage of the “Hope Shaffer Act” to protect students in drivers’ education vehicles.

ARTICLE II – ACCESS TO CHILDREN’S SUPPORT PROGRAMS

The various programs designed to support the health, well-being, and safety of children often face challenges when it comes to connecting with the populations to which they are targeted. As such, the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy recommends a variety of efforts to better link these programs with the children they are designed to assist, as well as further continuity and enhancement of such programs as is prudent or necessary. We recommend:

- Continued funding of the “Double Up Oklahoma” (DUO) program to match the value of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars spent at participating farmers markets and grocery stores to promote healthy food choices among lower-income households and families.
- Passage and funding of the Family Representation and Advocacy Act located at <http://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=HB1017>.
- As childcare is critical not only to the wellbeing of children, but to a vibrant state economy, we recommend the following: 1) Enhancement of childcare funding in the form of subsidies or tax advantages; 2) Improved access to specialized childcare; 3) Childcare availability during nontraditional hours; and 4) Enhanced rates for services for those children with special medical or behavioral needs.
- Legislative investigations on making out-of-school suspensions limited and consistent.
- Enactment of legislation to improve the access to affordable and adequate housing for families across the state, addressing the critical shortage of safe and sustainable housing supply.
- While all 77 Oklahoma counties face a shortage in mental health services, according to a federal Health Resources and Services Report located at <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/charts/7?state=OK>, the problem is especially acute in rural Oklahoma. And while telemedicine has helped in rural areas of the state, the shortage of broadband coverage has limited its efficacy. OICA supports enhanced mental health care in all areas of the state and recommends appropriate legislative action to

achieve that goal. Further, crisis and trauma interventions need to be improved, with better training and more crisis response availability for families and parents in crisis and the augmentation of trauma-informed practices in school districts statewide.

- Implementation of a streamlined enrollment system for all assistance programs such as SNAP, CHIP, WIC, and SoonerCare to make the application process easier and seamless for residents to obtain the assistance for which they qualify.
- Implementation of a successful teacher retention system to retain talented teachers including but not limited to evidence-based teacher induction programs and concepts similar to the Oklahoma City Public Schools' Teacher Pipeline Program providing aspiring teachers with resources.
- Enhance the "Handle with Care" concept to boost trauma-informed training for those who might come in contact with children who have or are enduring adverse childhood events (ACEs), to ensure those children who have endured trauma are, indeed, handled with care.

ARTICLE III – CHILD TRAFFICKING, COUNSELING, MENTAL HEALTH, AND LEARNING LOSS

Oklahoma children face a variety of challenges, especially with the access to social media channels. Despite the learning and positive social opportunities this level of connectivity provides, there is a dark side. Further, Oklahoma children, especially those who have been subjected to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), should have access to counseling, and steps should be taken to improve children's mental health and reduce potential learning loss from the difficulties and dangers they face. We recommend:

- Lawmakers should examine ways to improve social media safety education and enact measures to carry that into effect.
 - There should be a coordinated effort and funding to educate children about the dangers of social media with specific focus on the dangers of human trafficking and how predators use social media channels to target potential victims.
- The Legislature should enact funding and substantive legislation to increase the number of school counselors across the state to meet the student-to-counselor ratio of 250-to-1.
 - Fully funding school-based social workers throughout the state in a manner to not place the financial burden on school districts or allow for needs-based grants to alleviate costs to local districts.
- Lawmakers should propose and enact measures to increase the number of mental health providers across the state and provide funding to ensure it occurs.
- Lawmakers should fund grants and/or enact tax advantages to help reduce the out-of-pocket cost of expensive educational requirements to become a therapist. Additional proposals to enhance funding that reduce therapist education and training costs also should be investigated further and considered.
- Expand access to home visitation programs.
- Lawmakers should propose and adopt legislation that supports workforce strategies; however, OICA opposes loosening of child labor laws and the stripping of protections to

ensure children focus on education rather than becoming trapped in low-skill, low-wage jobs.

ARTICLE IV – DEPRIVED AND JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTH

The legal system is the entity in which children in the most dire situations should be able to find the protection they deserve. For those who are deprived, abused, or justice-involved, the judiciary is where critical decisions are made; as such, lawmakers and advocates have special responsibilities to ensure the regulatory and statutory structure is such that children’s best interests are paramount in the decisions being made. We recommend:

- Lawmakers should examine the outcomes and accountability of the judiciary and officers of the court, increasing training, education, and accountability of legal professionals – judges and attorneys – working in the child welfare space. One example is the model provided by Texas with its “children’s courts” system, comprised of child support courts and child protection courts.
 - Child support courts were created in response to the federal requirement that states create expedited administrative or judicial processes to resolve child support cases.
 - Child protection courts were created to assist trial courts in the rural areas in managing their child abuse and neglect dockets.
- Legislation should be enacted to ensure foster families, foster children, adoptive families, and adopted children have appropriate access to quality and timely legal, mental health, and community-based services including:
 - Post adoption needs.
 - Transition age youth.
 - Reunification services for foster children and biological families.
- Lawmakers should improve recruitment and retention efforts to attract more foster families to the system.
 - Enhanced services to foster families and addressing their needs while being evaluated for foster placement and while they are fostering Oklahoma children.
 - Oklahoma needs to address post-adoption needs for families once the child has either aged-out or been returned to the biological parents.
- Reduction or elimination of group homes should be a goal for policymakers, consistent with the recommendations of the CWTF.
- Lawmakers should examine means to reduce the number of children entering the foster care and justice-involved system by implementing provisions outlined in the report of the CWTF.
- Access to prevention and assistance programs in lieu of placement for children into foster care and group homes should be a goal for policymakers.
 - Among the proposals is to fund Medicaid benefits to 205% of the federal poverty level for biological parents with children in care or at-risk of being in care.

The foregoing recommendations are respectfully submitted to the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy for consideration to be included in the 2024 Children's Legislative Agenda to be presented to lawmakers prior to the convening of the 2nd Session of the 59th Oklahoma Legislature.