# 2024

The Oklahoma Academy

# PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES





reating Solutions for a Stronger Oklahoma

The honest broker lies in an open, sincere, civil discussion inclusive of all persuasions, ideas and strategies, without preference for party involved.



#### CONSENSUS BUILDING We are dedicated to providing a safe,

We are dedicated to providing a safe, supportive forum where the art of listening, debating, and collaborating are not only valued but also protected.



#### MOVING IDEAS INTO ACTION

We empower citizens to contact their leaders to enact the necessary changes needed to make Oklahoma a better place to live, work, and play.



Building Awareness, Developing Policies, Inspiring Oklahomans to Move Ideas Into Action!

### THE HISTORY OF

### The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals

The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals was founded in 1967 by one of Oklahoma's greatest statesmen, Henry Louis Bellmon. As the first Republican Governor of Oklahoma, top officials, who were Democrats, surrounded Bellmon. In order to achieve a mark of success in office, Bellmon relied on factual information and rational decision making to work with both the state's lawmakers and the citizenry.

As a politician, Bellmon believed in doing what was in the best interest of the public even if it cost him the next election. Still, he knew the people were an important part of the equation for a successful state. Not only did he seek to engage them in the development of public policy, he understood the connection between a sound quality of life for the citizens and the promise of a prosperous state. Dedicated to fiscal responsibility, Bellmon increased government efficiency and invested in critical government services.

Bellmon's humble upbringing in a farming family and his service in WWII cultivated an honest, thoughtful, nonconformist who valued education, collaboration, and integrity. His vision of The Oklahoma Academy was not unlike a farmer planting seeds in the



Henry Bellmon

spring in anticipation of a bountiful crop in the summer. To cultivate an informed, engaged citizenry, the people must first have an opportunity to study the issues and participate in the policy development process.

After his first term as governor, Bellmon knew there was a need for open, nonpartisan dialogue in the young state. He sought to create a public policy organization that was independent, nonpartisan, and inclusive. The purpose of which was to provide citizens the opportunity to participate in a truly democratic process designed to shape the future of Oklahoma. To this day, The Oklahoma Academy upholds Bellmon's vision and the organization's long-standing reputation as the state's premier citizen-based organization for nonpartisan public policy development.

From its inception in 1967, to its revitalization in 1985, to its adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001, The Oklahoma Academy has maintained its relevance in raising awareness and shaping public policy in Oklahoma. Despite its small staff and limited resources, The Oklahoma Academy generates and manages an impressive amount of public policy information, engages the citizens of Oklahoma in discussing and developing policy recommendations, and works ardently with the community leaders and policymakers to implement the resulting ideas through community and legislative action. To date, more than 105 pieces of legislation passed since the adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001.

In a time when those we elect often hear only the keyboard warriors and dissenters, the work of The Oklahoma Academy is more important than ever. In this divisive political era, The Oklahoma Academy is dedicated to providing a safe, supportive forum where the art of listening, debating, and collaborating are not only valued but also protected. We've covered a wide range of topics, including education, small business development, government structure, crime, technology and the future, and the state's constitution. We've achieved many milestones and accomplishments, and thanks to citizens like you, we continue to grow in numbers, reach and influence.

It is our sincere hope that you will continue to support us in this endeavor to unite the public in working toward creating solutions for a stronger Oklahoma and its people.



Building Awareness, Developing Policies, Inspiring Oklahomans to Move Ideas Into Action!

### ACADEMY PRESIDENT/CEO

### A Letter from Julie Knutson

As the president and CEO of The Oklahoma Academy, it is my privilege to connect with our passionate and dedicated membership who are leaders for a stronger Oklahoma. Our shared commitment to the Academy's cause has driven remarkable achievements and, as we step into this new year, I am excited to outline our public policy priorities for the 2024 year.

Firstly, let me express my profound gratitude for your ongoing support and involvement. It is your commitment that fuels our mission and enables us to effectively create solutions for change. In listening to the members of the Academy as well as other citizens from around the state, we are singling out four major consensus priority recommendations that have resulted from recently held Town Hall Conferences. These are specifically timely and are critical to our future prosperity. We are also including twenty-four other consensus recommendations that focus on improving our economy, health, and education.



Some of the policies are short-term in nature and could possibly be implemented within a year or two. Others are more long-term in nature and will take thoughtful and collaborative work to prepare properly for implementation. All have been developed by Oklahoma citizens through our annual Town Hall Conferences. That is the important part --- these are grassroots recommendations, not top down driven, and they were developed through a nonpartisan process that incorporates evidence-based research, deliberative thinking and discussion, civil discourse, and results in sound consensus recommendations.

We need you and your involvement! Take the time to look at these, be open to the ideas, and recognize that likely you know or are aware of several of the participants who developed the recommendations in one or more of the Town Halls these public policy recommendations represent.

The role and mission of The Oklahoma Academy is to help citizens across the state be more aware and familiar with the policy issues that affect them. Most all items surrounding the economy, health, and education, directly affect each of us. As citizens are better informed, the more control they actually have in making good, productive change. The Academy encourages "inclusion" of ALL people -- all ages, geographic location, vocations, all ethnicities. We must work together for the betterment of Oklahoma.

The background resource documents prepared in advance of the Town Hall Conferences and the full sets of recommendations developed from the Town Halls are on the Academy's website at www.okacademy.org under the Library tab. If you see a policy priority that resonates with you, please contact your elected officials and share the information. Together, we have the power to create change and make a lasting impact. Thank you for your continued support and dedication to the Academy's mission. Here's to a year of progress, and success! It's with your help we are creating solutions for a stronger Oklahoma.

Thank you,

Julie Knutson, President and CEO



# Solutions for a Stronger Oklahoma

Dedicated to strengthening our state, one public policy at a time.

### We are Dedicated to:

**Economy**: We work together as an honest broker to develop and enhance the economic climate and quality of life.

**Health**: We develop and promote good public policy designed to produce a stronger and healthier Oklahoma.

**Education**: We focus on education policy that best prepares students for life and work in a global marketplace.

### **Key Policy Priorities**

- Affordable Housing Stock solutions are need for low to medium income families.
- Create the OCEEE. The Oklahoma Center for Energy and Environmental Excellence would coordinate in all facets of the energy industry.
- Paid Parental Leave is an investment Oklahoma must make to provide flexibility to the labor force.

### We are Moving Ideas Into Action

The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals has been instrumental in public policy development in Oklahoma for more than three decades. This unique nonpartisan organization has had an enormous impact on policies affecting education, economic growth and development, health statues and services, and the list goes on with issues directly related to these three areas.

### We are the Honest Broker

Honest Broker: Is an entity (individual or organization) that is accepted by all sides in the policy-making process as impartial. Neutrality does not equal an absence of interest; rather, the interest of the honest broker lies in an open, sincere, civil discussion inclusive of all persuasions, ideas and strategies, without preference for either party involved.



## Adopt a Top Two Open Primary System

Oklahoma must move away from party primary elections and adopt a Top Two Open Primary System. A top-two open primary election is a primary in which all candidates are listed on a single ballot, and only the top-two vote-getters in the primary election – regardless of party preference - move on to the general election. It is most often noted that the top-two system does not change the party composition of your elected bodies but allows all voters the freedom to vote for whomever represents their priorities and in turn produces elected officials that works harder for their constituents.

From a practical standpoint, any proposal that reduces inefficiencies, cost, runoffs, and voter fatigue deserves attention. The current electoral system is cumbersome and inefficient, in that there are so many elections between party primaries, runoffs, generals, special elections, and local elections. Adopting the top-two system will shift more of a burden off voters and will increase confidence in a more competitive election system.

Even if a voter is affiliated with one of the three recognized parties in our state, their options are limited in the current Oklahoma – "closed-primary" – system. If Republicans, Democrats or Libertarians want to vote for a candidate from outside their party, they don't have that freedom. That means, Oklahomans are unable to vote for whom they consider the best candidate. Elections are paid for by the taxpayers and not the parties. The closed-primary system is undemocratic.

There are extensive benefits to the top-two system when used for all primaries. Reducing the number of times a voter must go to the polls should lead toward enhanced voter turnout, engagement, and voter buy-in. The need for primaries that let all voters vote, regardless of political affiliation, will only increase bipartisanship that works for the people. Without an open primary system, we risk silencing the voices of countless voters in Oklahoma eager to do their civic duty. We as Oklahomans must have the freedom to vote, and this can only be accomplished through consolidating elections and implementing a top-two primary system in Oklahoma.

4

### KEY FACTS

- There are 2,301,188 registered voters in Oklahoma.
- Unaffiliated voters are Oklahoma's largest-growing voter block, with registered independents now making up 19% of voters. Meaning nearly 1 in 5 registered Oklahoma voters are currently barred from participating in 2 of the 3 party primaries.
- Average voter turnout in Oklahoma's last two elections was 47.7% (47th out of all 50 states)
- Less than 25% of registered voters age 30 and under cast a ballot in the November 2022 election, according to State Election Board data.
- Nearly 70% of Oklahoma's state legislative elections were decided without a single vote cast in the November 2022 elections.
- Oklahoma has experienced one of the largest ranking decreases of all 50 states over the past 24 years in voter participation.

(Oklahoma State Election Board, States Newsroom, and Oklahoma Watch)

#### Political ideology among adults in Oklahoma by political party

(by Pew Research Center)

Party affiliation	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Don't know	Sample size
Republican/lean Rep.	60%	32%	6%	2%	177
Democrat/lean Dem.	18%	43%	36%	4%	161

Sample sizes and margins of error vary from subgroup to subgroup, from year to year and from state to state. You can see the sample size for the estimates in this chart on rollover or in the last column of the table. And visit this table to see approximate margins of error for a group of a given size. [https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/compare/political-ideology/by/party-affiliation#political-ideology]

# Improving Affordable Housing Stock

As our local and state economies have grown, pressure on existing housing has grown to a breaking point. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports, Oklahoma needs over 81,000 additional affordable rental homes to meet the needs of extremely low-income renters and housing costs have rapidly outpaced wages. 40% of Oklahoma workers do not earn enough to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment working one full-time job.

Considering the shortages in our housing supply -- Oklahoma must develop a long-term vision to increase affordable housing stock for low to medium income families in no small part to battle the barrier that the lack thereof presents for workforce development initiatives. While there are many challenges to creating more affordable housing opportunities such as construction workforce challenges, and housing in decline in need of rehabilitation and revitalization, Oklahoma's low cost of living may provide us an opportunity to be a national leader in housing affordability if we approach the problem holistically.

Incorporating municipalities, Tribes, developers, service providers, economic developers, chambers of commerce and other stakeholders with facilitation and tool development by the state is the needed approach for developing policy solutions to meet the needs of all.

#### **QUICK FACTS**

- Oklahoma has the third-lowest median sale price of \$256,000. The state is largely rural, with two main cities: Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Oklahoma's median household income is \$63,440. As a result, its residents pay a higher percentage of their income for housing costs. Oklahoma's population is gaining 1.5% annually, so real estate prices should continue to rise.
- Oklahoma needs more than 81,000 homes or apartments to meet the affordable housing shortage for low-income residents.
- In Oklahoma, there are only 46 homes available for every 100 extremely low-income renter households.
- Low-income is defined as someone earning 30% or less than the area median income.
- 70% of Oklahoma's low income renter households are severely cost burdened, paying more than half their income on housing and utilities.
- Oklahoma's unsheltered homeless population has increased by 15% over a decade. It has steadily risen since 2015.

(Redfin and 2023 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Background Resource Document)



### Create a Multi-Stakeholder Energy Industry Council

The energy market is driven by new technologies and changes in customer demands and expectations, which provides both opportunities and challenges for Oklahoma's energy industry. All forms of energy production lead to intensive use of various natural resources, either directly or indirectly.

Energy production in our state requires that we manage the land use, water consumption, and air quality. Collaborative approaches to balancing the impact of our valued energy industry and consumption with environmental protection are critical to a successful approach in Oklahoma. We must continuously examine best practices, emerging scientific and medical data, and resource conservation when dealing with this balancing act of energy and environmental policy. This can be achieved by utilizing a multi-stakeholder Council focused on diversity.

Oklahoma must implement the formation of the Oklahoma Center for Energy and Environmental Excellence ("OCEEE"). The OCEEE would be a one-stop-shop to handle and coordinate all task force research and council related recommendations tasked with proliferation of energy literacy, education workforce development, public private partnerships, and growth opportunities in all facets of the energy industry.

The OCEEE should be comprised of diverse delegates from public and private sectors, public at-large, and representing constituencies such as energy trade associations, education entities, the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry, Oklahoma State Department of Health, Department of Commerce, Interagency Tribal Councils, Oklahoma Electric Cooperative, Oil and gas Interstate Compact Commission, Oklahoma Water resources Board, Oklahoma Energy Resources Board, Oklahoma Corporation Commission, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), CareerTech, Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, Oklahoma Attorney General, the oil and gas industry, wind and solar industries, investor owned utilizes, municipal power authorities and other critical stakeholders.

#### **QUICK FACTS**

- In 2022, Oklahoma was the nation's fifth-largest producer of marketed natural gas and the sixth-largest producer of crude oil. Overall, the state consumes only about one-third of the energy it produces.
- As of January 2022, Oklahoma had 5 operable petroleum refineries with a combined daily processing capacity of almost 524,000 barrels per calendar day. That is 3% of the total U.S. crude oil refining capacity.
- In 2022, Oklahoma ranked third in the nation in electricity generation from wind, which supplied the largest share of Oklahoma's electricity generation at 44%. Wind also accounted for 93% of the state's total renewable generation.
- The benchmark price in the domestic spot market for the U.S. crude oil known as West Texas Intermediate (WTI) is set at Cushing, Oklahoma, which is home to about 14% of the nation's commercial crude oil storage capacity.
- In 2021, Oklahoma was the nation's sixth-largest consumer of natural gas on a per capita basis. The electric power sector and the industrial sector together use about four-fifths of the natural gas delivered to consumers in Okla homa, and the residential and commercial sectors consume almost all the rest.

(EIA: Last Updated: June 15, 2023)

# Paid Parental Leave

Our state has failed to adopt basic policies that support families. It is time for Oklahoma to implement a paid parental leave policy. Paid parental leave is an investment Oklahoma must make to provide flexibility to the labor force.

The federal solution of Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) does not adequately provide for flexibility in Oklahoma because FMLA mandates apply to private sector employers who employ 50 or more employees. In Oklahoma, the majority of businesses have fewer than 50 employees.

Parents need to manage the exigencies of their children during the workday. Women in particular, would benefit from the flexibility that paid parental leave could provide because women are often the primary care providers for children, and also for the elderly and the disabled.

Impossible choices between work and family are hurting Oklahoma's economy. Paid leave means people — especially women — aren't forced to leave the labor force to care for their families or health. Paid family leave means a stronger economy, healthier families and businesses, and greater equality for all Oklahoma families.

#### **QUICK FACTS**

- Most working people in the United States do not have paid family leave through their jobs, including about 74 percent about 1.4 million workers in Oklahoma.
- Unpaid leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act is inaccessible for 64 percent of Oklahomans.
- In Oklahoma, a typical worker who takes four weeks of unpaid leave loses nearly \$2,900 in income. As the cost of living rises, income loss hits families especially hard.
- Women make up nearly half of Oklahoma's labor force (46 percent) and more than one-quarter of its business owners (28 percent).
- About 48,400 children are born in Oklahoma each year, and in 67 percent of all Oklahoma households with children more than 604,000 homes all parents report to work.

(Content source: National Partnership for Women & Families)

#### **ECONOMY**

- The state must identify ways to incentivize small scale landlords who rent to vulnerable populations (e.g. studying homestead exemptions, income tax credits, etc.) The state should consider offering a tax credit to landlords who modify their property to be ADA compliant or who accept Section 8 housing vouchers. We support tax incentives for landlords who invest their capital into housing that serves vulnerable tenants and/or which is affordable.
- State leaders must be tasked with prioritizing early interventions, preventive measures, and more cost-effective treatment for mental health issues in Oklahoma. There must be greater involvement on the part of the business community (e.g., chambers of commerce) to play a larger role in the support of mental health services, since employee productivity is so closely tied to those services. It is imperative we expand Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) in the state, either through individual businesses or state government (Oklahoma offers an EAP through the ODMHSAS).
- Working in collaboration is the solution to improving the lack of affordable childcare centers in communities across the state. Businesses and communities must work together to create solutions such as community childcare centers with investment by the community, business partners and the state. These community centers, which could be organized as non-profits, could tap into available grants and private income streams to support their efforts.
- Oklahoma must achieve "economic agility" with policies and actions that optimize all our resources: natural, human, physical, and entrepreneurial. The best strategies for mitigating the negative effects of the state's high concentration of energy are to broaden our tax base, diversify our economy, grow and attract higher waged jobs, and continue smart, forward-thinking governmental reforms. Three energy-supporting strategies must be implemented: (1) expansion of connectivity/broadband, with specific references to rural Oklahoma and rural health, (2) a greater focus on technology jobs and investment, with multiple references to organizations like OCAST, i2e, and the recruitment of information- and STEM-based businesses, and (3) improving educational opportunities.
- Oklahoma has an affordable housing crisis and solving this crisis must be a priority at every level of government in the state.
   Instead of restrictive zoning that reduces affordability, "inclusionary zoning" within residentially zoned subcategories is a needed way to create community in Oklahoma.
- Oklahoma should tax services with a judicious approach. A tax on services should be applied across the board, rather than to a list of specified industries. Stacking of taxes must be avoided, and, in areas where consumers may be paying taxes on services, special care must be applied so as to ensure those services would not become too expensive for the vast majority of Oklahomans. Doing so is necessary because of the ever-increasing trend towards becoming a service-based economy in order to capture a broader revenue source. Owing to the overall increase in services in our economy, it is specifically recommended that the tax rate on goods be reduced accordingly if the tax base is broadened to include services resulting in a collective increase in revenue. The impact upon municipalities and their available budgets must be considered prior to imposing sales tax expansions to services.
- Implement a Career Pathways methodology that integrates PreK-12, Career Technology and Training, and Higher Education (both public and private) while horizontally meeting the needs of business and industry to provide Oklahoma with a home grown workforce that is competitive in the global economy of the future.
- An increase is needed in the eviction timeline from the current 5 days to 10 days with the condition that District Courts in rural counties hold a small claims court docket between the 16th and 31st to ensure timely hearings. There is also a need to amend the Landlord Tenant Act to include anti-retaliation provisions addressing the bad actors (serial evictors) that abuse the eviction system.

#### **HEALTH**

- Communities need to use mixed-use zoning/housing to support healthy and environmentally sound municipal growth.
- Strengthening economic supports for families is the most effective strategy for preventing ACEs. Poverty and financial insecurity are the primary contributors to the prevalence of ACEs in Oklahoma. Strengthening the process of securing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are a must for Oklahoma families. The Oklahoma Academy supports family friendly policies and the programs of employers to better inform and educate the private sector about their role in preventing and mitigating ACEs (e.g., utilization of Employee Assistance Programs).
- A unified message and educational campaign must be developed to drive public health needs to the forefront in order to
  improve our public health. The goal of the Oklahoma campaign should be to raise awareness on the importance of good
  health and health literacy, and should be designed to help offset the widespread addictions in Oklahoma to fast food and
  sedentary lifestyles.
- Oklahoma must utilizing the options available to the state through federal waivers to increase access and eligibility to SNAP, school meals, and other antipoverty programs to support working Oklahomans and address the benefit cliffs that are disincentives to work and wage growth. The state should use the existing structure of OKDHS community TANF grants to provide support and preventive services to people at risk of eviction or homelessness.
- Starting at the youngest age of development and education, a disparity in health education and literacy exists. There is a real need to improve health literacy and education among parents and students to secure a more integrated approach to healthy lifestyle implementation. While classroom education regarding health awareness, dietary lifestyles/options, and exercise implementation is critical to improving youth health literacy, it is important that these concepts are implemented at home with the full support of caregivers, such as parents and grandparents.
- Expand the mental health and medical workforce. Oklahoma faces significant shortages in healthcare professionals. The professional position shortages that should receive immediate attention are tele-psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, physician assistants, advanced practice nurses, and increased residencies for psychiatrists. Additionally, improve/strengthen state licensure laws and address the "scope of practice" issues of allowing all medical professionals to "practice at the top of their license."
- Crisis Intervention Training for all police officers is necessary, and must be included as a mandatory part of the Council on Law Enforcement Education and Training course, with local communities adding additional trainings. There is a need to overcome the distrust between law enforcement and the mental health community as a way of expanding fundamental training of law enforcement.
- When addressing skills building, education, and career planning with regards to justice-involved persons, attention should be given to each person's mental health both while incarcerated, and upon re-entry into the workplace to reduce recidivism and to encourage resilience. Oklahoma must invest in strategies to sustain Individual Placement Support (IPS) services. IPS supported employment helps people living with behavioral health conditions work at regular jobs of their choosing. With IPS, case management is assigned for persons experiencing barriers and that person checks in frequently.

#### **EDUCATION**

- To lessen the skills gaps in Oklahoma, postsecondary institutions must first identify what skills are in demand and establish a consistent statewide skills-based assessment. Data must be collected and reviewed, and educational programing to fill skills gaps should be data driven to guide growth and direction. It is necessary that data sources include district reports of the workforce needs. Postsecondary institutions must be flexible in utilizing data to ensure policies meet work force demands. Postsecondary institutions should endeavor to communicate with employers to assist with identifying what skills need to be integrated into curriculum.
- It is imperative Oklahoma implements a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) statewide as a way to prevent and/or reduce mental health issues in the K-12 system. To achieve this goal, school administrators at certain levels must receive training to attain the trauma-informed designation.
- The student-to-school counselor ratio in Oklahoma must be reduced to increase the educational outcomes of our students. As of 2021 in Oklahoma, the average ratio for student-to-school counselors is 411-to-1, far higher than the American School Counselor Association's recommendation of 250-to-1. The impact school counselors have on students or lack thereof is easiest to understand in the high school context, where students face an increasingly dizzying array of choices about "what comes next" after high school. Without knowing their options, students inadvertently may bypass the best path forward, or simply make no choice at all.
- There is a need to develop wellness teams in school systems to facilitate referrals and partner with community groups outside of the school to access the expertise and resources of the community groups. These types of community partnerships can build resiliency through embedded programs to increase belonging and support.
- Evaluate, envision, and build an Early Childhood, Pre-Kindergarten through 20 Educational System that provides consistent
  academic and career counseling throughout the educational process; and includes access to mentoring, internships, and
  training opportunities with potential employers and vocational education. Oklahoma must ensure students maintain
  maximum time in the classroom and that qualified school counselors are able to maintain a focus of academic and career
  guidance with students rather than handling non-counselor/guidance paperwork.
- The key to building wealth through homeownership is education, and the need for education must focus on financial literacy in K-12 all the way through adulthood, specifically at times when individuals are seeking to enter into the real estate rentals or purchasing market. Financial literacy education for first-time homebuyers at all income levels is also needed.
- Oklahoma needs to build upon its nationally recognized early childhood education model and revitalize its education system
  by emphasizing strong basic education skills, including math, science, reading and writing, with a transition to workforce
  skill training and life skills during intermediate and high school education.
- To better prevent future shortages in education from arising, it is imperative there be a continuous re-evaluation of teacher certification requirements and educational standards. Creating a five-year moratorium on legislative action that would change educational standards in K-12, addressing added costs to restart certifications that have not been completed, and ensuring that K-12 works cohesively with higher-ed and career technology centers are strategies to better prevent future shortages from arising.

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### Creating Solutions for a Stronger Oklahoma

525
members of The
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Academy

More than 105
pieces of legislation
passed since the
adoption of the Town
Hall process in 2001

8,425 participants in the conferences held since 1986

For more information about us, specific public policy topics, or to get involved with The Oklahoma Academy right away, call (405) 307-0986 or email President and CEO Julie Knutson at julie@okacademy.org