



Solutions.

We believe that Oklahomans deserve a meaningful voice in shaping their future and improving the quality of their lives. This belief drives our commitment to working hand-in-hand with citizens across the state, ensuring they are engaged and empowered throughout every stage of the proposal process. By fostering collaboration, we aim

Stronger.

to uphold the principles of democracy, providing individuals and communities with the tools and opportunities to actively participate in decisions that impact their lives. Our mission is rooted in the idea that collective effort and shared vision can lead to tangible change. Together, we identify challenges, listen to diverse perspectives, and craft

Oklahoma.

practical, commonsense solutions that reflect the needs and aspirations of all Oklahomans. Through this collaborative approach, we strive to create stronger communities, enhance economic opportunities, and build a more prosperous and vibrant Oklahoma for generations to come. **We are The Oklahoma Academy.**



CIVIL DISCOURSE

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, 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 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 112 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.



Henry Bellmon



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, I am honored to engage with our passionate and dedicated members who are driving forces behind a stronger Oklahoma. Your commitment to the Academy's mission has led to remarkable achievements, and as we embark on this new year, I am eager to share our public policy priorities for 2025.



First and foremost, I want to express my sincere gratitude for your continued support and involvement. Your dedication is the foundation of our efforts to create meaningful change. Through listening to Academy members and citizens across the state, we have identified four major consensus priority recommendations from recent Town Hall Conferences. These priorities are timely and critical to our shared prosperity. In addition, we are presenting 9 other consensus recommendations aimed at improving Oklahoma's economy, health, and education.

Some of these policies are short-term and could be implemented within a year or two, while others require long-term planning and collaboration to achieve successful outcomes. Each recommendation is the result of grassroots input gathered during our annual Town Hall Conferences. This bottom-up, nonpartisan process emphasizes evidence-based research, thoughtful deliberation, civil discourse, and sound consensus-building.

Your involvement is vital! I encourage you to review these recommendations, remain open to new ideas, and recognize the collaborative effort of fellow Oklahomans—many of whom you may know—who contributed to these public policy solutions during our Town Halls.

The Oklahoma Academy's mission is to increase awareness and understanding of policy issues affecting all citizens. Issues related to our economy, health, and education impact every one of us. By becoming better informed, citizens can take meaningful action to drive positive change. The Academy strives to be inclusive, embracing all people—regardless of age, geography, profession, or ethnicity—to work together for the betterment of Oklahoma.

Detailed background resource documents and the full list of Town Hall recommendations are available on our website at www.okacademy.org under the Library tab. If a policy priority resonates with you, please reach out to your elected officials and share your support. Together, we have the power to enact change and create a lasting impact.

Thank you for your dedication to The Oklahoma Academy's mission. Here's to a year of progress and success! With your help, we are crafting 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

For more than 30 years, the Oklahoma Academy for State Goals has been a driving force in shaping public policy across the state. This unique nonpartisan organization has made a substantial impact on policies concerning education, economic development, healthcare, and a wide range of related issues. By fostering research, open dialogue, and collaborative decision-making, the Academy remains a trusted resource, dedicated to guiding Oklahoma's future with informed and forward-thinking strategies.

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.

FEATURE POLICY PRIORITY



Adopt an Open Primary System

Oklahoma is one of only 12 states in the nation that clings to the outdated system of closed primaries. In stark contrast, 38 states have embraced some form of open primaries, allowing greater participation from Independent voters and reducing the outsized grip of political parties on the electoral process. The Oklahoma Academy strongly supports transitioning to an open, unified election system that puts voters—not parties—at the center of our democracy.

Closed primaries restrict participation, stifle competition, and often push forward the most extreme and partisan candidates. This system sidelines nearly half of Oklahoma’s registered voters who identify as Independents or members of minority parties, effectively shutting them out of the critical first stage of elections. Such exclusion undermines the principles of fairness, representation, and accountability that are foundational to our republic.

By adopting an open, unified ballot system, we can ensure that every Oklahoman has a voice in shaping the future of our state, regardless of their party affiliation—or lack thereof. Under this proposed system, all candidates, regardless of party, will appear on a single ballot, accessible to every eligible voter. Each candidate’s party affiliation will still be listed, preserving transparency while promoting inclusivity.

An open, unified ballot empowers all voters. It breaks down the artificial barriers imposed by party lines, allowing Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and Independents to weigh in on the full slate of candidates. This is not just about fairness—it’s about ensuring elections truly reflect the will of the people. When all voters have the opportunity to participate, the results are more representative, and the leaders we elect are better positioned to govern with the broad support of their constituents.

Moreover, open primaries encourage candidates to appeal to a wider audience, fostering consensus rather than divisive partisanship. By removing the narrow gatekeeping of party primaries, we create a system that rewards those who can unite rather than divide, offering Oklahomans leaders who represent the whole state.

It is time for Oklahoma to join the majority of states in modernizing its election process. By adopting open primaries and a unified ballot, we can reduce the undue influence of political parties, expand opportunity for voter participation, and strengthen our democracy. Let’s empower all Oklahomans with a system that reflects the values of fairness, freedom, and representation for all.

KEY FACTS

- There are 2,442,211 registered voters in Oklahoma as of November 1, 2024.
- Independents are the fastest-growing voter demographic in the state. The number of registered Independent voters has risen to 481,817, marking a 32.4% increase since 2020. In contrast, Democrat voter registration has dropped by 12.2%, while Republican registration has grown by 13.1% during the same period.
- Nearly 50% of Oklahoma voters are registered Independents, Democrat, or Libertarian, yet most are excluded from participating in primary elections.
- Nearly 70% of state legislative races were effectively decided before November, either because they were uncontested during the April filing period or resolved in a single-party primary election.
- Oklahoma lags behind other states in political engagement, with low levels of voter registration and participation. Ranked 47th overall, it is the fourth least politically engaged state in the United States.
- In 86% of Oklahoma’s federal, state, and county races, there was either no general election in November 2024 or the election was effectively meaningless because candidates from both major parties were not represented.
- Oklahoma has experienced one of the largest ranking decreases of all 50 states over the past 25 years in voter participation.

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

Public Policy Priorities



Improving Affordable Housing Stock

As Oklahoma's local and state economies have grown, the demand for housing has surged, pushing the housing market to a breaking point. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the state requires 77,344 additional affordable rental homes to meet the needs of extremely low-income renters, as housing costs have rapidly outpaced wages. A household must earn at least \$41,407 annually to afford a two-bedroom rental home at HUD's Fair Market Rent (FMR) while keeping housing costs at or below 30% of their total income—the standard for housing affordability.

To address this critical housing shortage, Oklahoma must develop a long-term vision to increase the supply of affordable housing for low- to moderate-income families. Addressing this issue is essential to overcoming barriers to workforce development. Despite challenges such as a limited construction workforce and the need to rehabilitate and revitalize aging housing, Oklahoma's low cost of living offers a unique opportunity to become a national leader in housing affordability through a holistic approach.

Collaboration is key. Municipalities, Tribes, developers, service providers, economic developers, chambers of commerce, and other stakeholders must work together, with the state taking the lead in facilitating efforts and creating tools to develop comprehensive policy solutions that meet diverse housing needs.

Incentivizing small-scale landlords who rent to vulnerable populations is a critical step. The state must explore measures such as homestead exemptions, income tax credits, and other incentives. Tax credits should also be considered for landlords who make their properties ADA-compliant or accept Section 8 housing vouchers. Additionally, tax incentives for landlords investing in affordable housing or housing for vulnerable tenants would further encourage the expansion of affordable housing options. These strategies would help Oklahoma build a sustainable and inclusive housing market while addressing the pressing needs of its residents.

QUICK FACTS

- **Oklahoma's population grew by 0.85% in 2023, the fastest rate since 2013. This follows two consecutive years of 0.7% growth in 2021 and 2022.**
- **Oklahoma needs more than 77,000 homes or apartments to meet the affordable housing shortage for low-income residents.**
- **In Oklahoma, there are only 42 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.**
- **71% of extremely low income renter households are severe cost burden, spending more than 30% of their incomes on housing expenses. Oklahoma ranks 10th in poverty, with a median household income in the 12th percentile.**
- **Oklahoma's unsheltered homeless population has increased by 15% over a decade. It has steadily risen since 2015.**

(Redfin, National Alliance to End Homelessness, and National Low Income Housing Coalition)

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Public Policy Priorities



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 utilities, municipal power authorities and other critical stakeholders.

QUICK FACTS

- **In 2023, Oklahoma was the nation's sixth-largest producer of marketed natural gas and producer of crude oil. Overall, the state produces almost three times more energy than it consumes.**
- **In 2023, Oklahoma's 5 crude oil refineries had a combined processing capacity of about 547,000 barrels per calendar day, which is about 3% of the U.S. total refining capacity.**
- **In 2023, Oklahoma ranked third in the nation in electricity generation from wind, which supplied 42% of Oklahoma's electricity generation. Wind also accounted for 94% 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.**
- **Oklahoma has more than 6% of the nation's total proved natural gas reserves and ranks sixth in the nation, after Texas, Pennsylvania, Alaska, West Virginia, and Louisiana.**

(EIA: Last Updated: July 18, 2024)

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Public Policy Priorities



Paid Parental Leave

Oklahoma has made strides in supporting families, but there is still work to be done to ensure comprehensive policies are in place. 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 72% — about 1,409,000 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 more than \$3,000 in income. As the cost of living rises, income loss hits families especially hard.**
- **Women make up nearly half of Oklahoma's labor force (47%) and one-quarter of its business owners (25%).**
- **About 48,300 children are born in Oklahoma each year, and in 69% of all Oklahoma households with children — nearly 615,000 homes — all parents report to work.**
- **If women in Oklahoma participated in the labor force at the same rate as women in countries with paid leave, there would be an estimated 85,000 additional workers in the state and \$2.4 billion more wages earned statewide.**

(Content source: National Partnership for Women & Families)

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2025 Public Policy Priorities

ECONOMY

- 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 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 care should be taken to prevent services from becoming prohibitively expensive for most residents. With the shift toward a service-based economy, expanding the tax base to include services should be accompanied by a reduced tax rate on goods if the broader base leads to an overall increase in revenue. The impact upon municipalities and their available budgets must be considered prior to imposing sales tax expansions to services.

HEALTH

- From the earliest stages of development and education, significant disparities in health education and literacy are evident. Addressing these gaps is essential to implementing healthy lifestyles. Improving health literacy and education among both parents and students can lead to long-term economic and social benefits, including reduced healthcare costs and increased productivity. While classroom education plays a critical role in raising awareness about health, nutrition, and exercise, these principles must be reinforced at home. By fostering this collaborative effort, communities can cultivate a healthier, more informed, and economically prosperous population.
- Expand the mental health and medical workforce. Oklahoma faces significant shortages in healthcare professionals. The position shortages that should receive immediate attention are telepsychologists, 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.

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 programming 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 workforce demands. Postsecondary institutions should endeavor to communicate with employers to assist with identifying what skills need to be integrated into curriculum.
- 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 398-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.
- Evaluate, envision, and build an Early Childhood, Pre-K 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 engaged in learning environments 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.

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The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals has long been the forum for learning, dreaming, thoughtful discussion and bold exploration of topics and issues most important to our state.” – Kris Steele, Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, 2011-2013



The mission of the Academy is educating Oklahomans about public policy, with the goal of equipping them to take a proactive role with our leadership on every civic level.

There's Only

1

Nonpartisan, citizen driven organization that develops public policy by involving literally hundreds of our citizens for truly grassroots led outcomes.

37

Conferences and Town Halls held that provide all people the opportunity to research the issues facing our state and come to a consensus in creating solutions for a stronger Oklahoma.

536

Academy members who are devoted to improving the lives of all Oklahomans by creating betterment opportunities in health, education, and livelihood.

More than

8,525

Participants in the Conferences held since 1985 with 180 Student Scholarships Provided.

More than

112

Pieces of grass roots citizen driven legislation passed since the adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001. Making Oklahoma a better place to live, work, and play.

We
Are

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



Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Ultimately, a genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.” This profound insight describes how we’ve delved into a diverse range of critical topics, including education, the economy, health/ mental health, the criminal justice system, workforce, housing, and, most recently, political polarization. Through these dialogues, we have sought to build understanding, foster collaboration, and shape actionable solutions. It’s the members of the Oklahoma Academy who have been instrumental in these efforts, bringing their expertise, dedication, and shared commitment to addressing the complex challenges facing our communities and creating a brighter future for all.



Creating Solutions for a Stronger Oklahoma

*536
members of The
Oklahoma
Academy*

*More than 112
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*8,525 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