



2026 PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES



We've Got An Idea



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 President and CEO of The Oklahoma Academy, I am grateful for the opportunity to begin 2026 alongside such a committed and engaged membership. You are the driving force behind our work, and your dedication continues to strengthen Oklahoma through thoughtful, citizen-led public policy.



As we move into this new year, I am pleased to share the Academy's consensus public policy priorities shaped through our recent Town Hall Conferences. First, I want to sincerely thank you for your continued support and involvement. Your engagement is the foundation of everything we do.

By listening carefully to Academy members and citizens from across the state, participants identified four major consensus priority recommendations that reflect both urgency and opportunity for Oklahoma's future. In addition, nine other consensus recommendations address critical needs related to our economy, health, and education. Together, these ideas reflect the collective wisdom of Oklahomans committed to practical, forward-looking solutions.


Some of these recommendations are achievable in the near term, while others will require sustained collaboration and long-range planning. Each one emerged from our bottom-up, nonpartisan Town Hall process, grounded in evidence-based research, respectful dialogue, and a shared commitment to consensus. This process remains the hallmark of The Oklahoma Academy and a defining strength of our work.

Your involvement continues to matter. I encourage you to review the recommendations, remain open to new perspectives, and recognize the collaborative efforts of fellow Oklahomans, many of whom you may know, who devoted their time and expertise to shaping these policy solutions.

The Oklahoma Academy's mission is to increase awareness and understanding of policy issues that affect all citizens. Decisions related to our economy, health, and education touch every community in our state. An informed citizenry is essential to meaningful progress, and the Academy remains committed to being inclusive — bringing together people of all ages, regions, professions, and backgrounds to work toward a stronger 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, I encourage you to share your perspective with your elected officials. When citizens speak thoughtfully and collectively, positive change follows.

Thank you for your continued commitment to The Oklahoma Academy. With your support, we enter 2026 ready to turn ideas into action and craft lasting solutions for Oklahoma's future.

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

- **Municipal Funding Structure** must pursue a comprehensive modernization the state's restrictive funding structure
- **Affordable Housing Stock** solutions are need for low to medium income families.
- **Reduce Social Media Impacts.** Did scrolling replace conversation, and what is it costing us?

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

- Oklahoma was dead last in the nation for voter turnout in November 2020 and 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



Modernize Municipal Funding Structure

Oklahoma must pursue comprehensive modernization of its restrictive municipal funding structure. Municipalities should be granted diversified revenue options, including the ability, with voter approval, to assess modest property taxes, utilize broader excise taxes, and employ updated bonding tools. The Legislature should also conduct a thorough review of Title 68 and require full municipal impact analyses for all state-enacted tax exemptions. A modernized municipal revenue framework is essential to ensuring long-term fiscal stability, infrastructure sustainability, and community resilience across the state.

This modernization is urgently needed because Oklahoma municipalities are the only ones in the nation that rely almost exclusively on sales tax to fund core services such as police, fire protection, streets, and quality-of-life infrastructure. This narrow revenue base leaves communities vulnerable to economic downturns, shifts in consumer behavior, competition from neighboring jurisdictions, and the growth of online commerce that bypasses local retail activity. It also forces cities to divert utility fees to cover general operations, delaying maintenance and accelerating infrastructure decline. Without diversified revenue authority, municipalities cannot plan strategically, recruit employers, support housing development, or invest in long-term community health and competitiveness. Updating Oklahoma's municipal revenue structure is necessary to ensure that every community — rural, suburban, or urban — has the tools to adapt, grow, and thrive in a changing economic landscape.

QUICK FACTS

- **Oklahoma is the only state in the nation where cities depend almost entirely on sales tax for general operations. State statutes significantly limit municipal revenue options, restricting cities' ability to diversify funding without express legislative authorization.**
- **The state legislature has granted tax exemptions over time, from 6 in 1980 to 143 in 2010. State-enacted tax exemptions can reduce municipal revenue by millions of dollars statewide, often without a required local fiscal impact analysis under current law.**
- **Oklahoma has \$5,038 in total state and local tax collections per capita, ranking 45th in the U.S.**
- **Oklahoma's current framework offers few voter-approved options for communities to tailor revenue tools to local needs, conditions, and growth strategies..**
- **The state rate for both the sales tax and use tax in Oklahoma is 4.5%. Municipalities and counties may also levy sales taxes. There is no limit on the amount a municipality may levy, although voter approval is required. Counties may levy up to 2%. Use tax is paid by the buyer for items purchased to be used in OK when the seller has not collected OK sales tax.**

(Content source: Tax Foundation, OML, and ACCO)

www.okacademy.org

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 84,718 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 \$43,640 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 continues to rise, reaching over 4.09 million in 2024, up from 4.05 million in 2023. This growth marks a 0.77% increase.**
- **Oklahoma needs 84,718 additional homes to meet the shortage of rental homes affordable and available for extremely low income renters.**
- **In Oklahoma, there are only 38 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.**
- **137,094 or 25% of Oklahoma renter households are extremely low income.**
- **Oklahoma’s unsheltered homeless population has increased 44.7% between 2015–2024.**

(U.S. Census Bureau, Redfin, National Alliance to End Homelessness, and National Low Income Housing Coalition)

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Public Policy Priorities



Address the Negative Impact of Social Media

There must be a coordinated, statewide approach to address the growing impact of excessive screen time, digital dependency, and misinformation on the mental health, civic wellbeing, and social connectedness of Oklahomans. The pandemic accelerated a shift away from in-person interaction toward increased reliance on cell phones, social media, and digital platforms, contributing to social isolation, weakened interpersonal skills, and rising mental health challenges.

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services should prioritize research-informed prevention and intervention strategies that address digital addiction and its effects on brain health, emotional regulation, and social development. These efforts should encourage individuals to regain control over digital usage, rebuild face-to-face social skills, and maintain a healthy balance between technology and daily life. Initiatives such as a voluntary statewide “Unplug Initiative” could promote intentional offline engagement, community connection, and overall wellbeing.

At the same time, it is imperative to expand meaningful media literacy and nonpartisan civic education for all ages to strengthen civic understanding and resilience in an increasingly digital environment. Social media and digital platforms frequently amplify low-quality or inaccurate information, contributing to public confusion, political polarization, and declining trust. A comprehensive media literacy strategy should include public awareness campaigns that teach critical thinking skills, help individuals identify misinformation, and encourage responsible digital citizenship. Media literacy education should begin in elementary school and continue through adulthood, incorporating guidance on both evaluating information and maintaining a healthy relationship with the digital environment.

Together, these strategies recognize that technology itself is not the problem, but unmanaged use and misinformation can undermine mental health, civic engagement, and community cohesion. By promoting healthier digital habits and stronger media literacy, Oklahoma can support a more resilient, informed, and socially connected population.

QUICK FACTS

- **In 2023, there was an estimated 4.9 billion social media users worldwide. The average person spends 145 minutes on social media every day.**
- **Almost all teenagers (96%) report using the internet daily, with 46% reporting being on the internet almost constantly (up from 24% in 2015).**
- **In 2020, 44% of all internet users in the U.S. said they have experienced online harassment. 59% of U.S. teens have personally experienced at least one of six types of abusive online behaviors.**
- **Young people have an especially negative view of the way politicians are tackling the issue of cyberbullying – 79% of teens say elected officials are doing only a fair or poor job of addressing this problem.**
- **In 2023, 68% of high school students don’t have confidence in their ability to evaluate the credibility of online information.**

(Cornell University, UC Davis Health, and Pew Research Center)

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2026 Public Policy Priorities

ECONOMY

- Oklahoma must implement a legal and fiscal framework to support regional, MAPS-style investment programs. This framework should allow revenue pooling across jurisdictions, multi-city ballot initiatives, and state matching funds for shared investments in infrastructure, housing, transit, and quality-of-life projects. Many small and rural communities lack the tax base or authority to fund major projects alone. Regional collaboration lets communities share resources, reduce harmful competition, and deliver projects that strengthen economies and improve quality of life statewide.
- 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.

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

- Oklahoma needs statewide investment in comprehensive civic education, including required middle school civics courses, project-based learning, direct exposure to government institutions, and expanded programs such as the Page Program and Generation Citizen. Civic Engagement Centers at colleges and career techs should serve as regional hubs for civic learning. Early and frequent exposure to civic processes builds future leaders and strengthens democracy.
- 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.
- 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.

38

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.

525

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

More than

8,605

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

More than

122

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

*525
members of The
Oklahoma
Academy*

*More than 122
pieces of legislation
passed since the
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Hall process in 2001*

*8,605 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