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1921
TULSA
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LOCAL & STATE
PRIVATE SCHOOL TAX CREDIT
OKLAHOMA LEGISLATURE NEGOTIATES TAX CREDIT & TUITION CAPS **A2**

LOCAL & STATE
MEDICAL MARIJUANA SALES TAX
THE PLANS TO DIRECT TAX REVENUE FOR THE 'HEALTH AND WELL-BEING' OF EDMONDITES **A10**

OKLAHOMA LAWMAKERS TRY FOR SECOND YEAR TO EXPAND. OKLAHOMA WATCH PREGNANCY HELP

OKLAHOMA LAWMAKERS continue to be frustrated with a vendor hired to help pregnant women for expanded services under the state's Choosing Childbirth Act. The slow pace of getting money to nonprofit organizations that provide crisis pregnancy care means that almost \$8 million is sitting unused in a state account. Oklahoma's abortion ban and the fallout from the U.S. Supreme Court ruling striking down Roe v. Wade in June 2022 adds to the urgency to provide more flexibility under the state's Choosing Childbirth Act.

By **PAUL MONIES**, OKLAHOMA WATCH
PREGNANCY HELP *On A3*

LOCAL & STATE

Ryan Walters Announces Teacher Pay Recruitment Incentives, Merit Bonuses

By **BENNETT BRINKMAN**, NONDOC
TEACHER COMPENSATION *On A5*

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Black Children Experiencing Brunt of Child Abuse Crisis

By **RASHONDA TATE**, WORD IN BLACK
CHILD ABUSE *On A13*

LOCAL & STATE

FOR TENENTS BEHIND ON RENT ANTI-RETALIATION WOULDN'T HELP

By **LIONEL RAMOS**, OKLAHOMA WATCH
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LOCAL & STATE

OKLAHOMA OFFICIAL WHO DISCUSSED KILLING REPORTERS RESIGNS

By **SEAN MURPHY**, ASSOCIATED PRESS
OK OFFICIAL RESIGNS *On A9*





LOCAL MEDICAL MARIJUANA SALES TAX
The Edmond City Council unanimously approved a resolution to address marijuana sales tax allocation . A10

OKLAHOMA OFFICIAL RESIGNS
A county commissioner, identified by a local newspaper discussing lynching Black people, resigns. A9



PASSING ANYTHING

As Legislature Negotiates Private School Tax Credit, Tuition Cap Floated to Break Stalemate



By BENNETT BRINKMAN AND TRES SAVAGE, NonDoc
PRIVATE SCHOOL TAX CREDIT

As Republican leaders of the Oklahoma Legislature negotiate their competing versions of a new refundable tax credit paid to families who send their children to private schools, prominent senators have proposed a \$7,500-per-student credit with an eligibility cap of \$250,000 in annual household income. The House’s version, however, proposed a \$5,000-per-student credit with no income cap for eligibility.

Now, with the rest of the session’s budget negotiations delayed until an education agreement is reached, leaders of the House, Senate and Gov. Kevin Stitt’s administration have been kicking around alternate parameters for the controversial private school tax credit in an effort to strike a deal.

Among other ideas, negotiations have at least briefly included concepts aimed at prioritizing private school access for lower-income students, phasing in an income eligibility cap, or capping tax credit eligibility based on a school’s tuition cost instead of a family’s income.

“At this point, our perspective is kind of, ‘Pass anything, pass something.’ We need universal school choice, particularly for the kids in the lower economic bracket, and we think that any version of what has been proposed in one of the chambers will help out a great deal,” said Brett Farley, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Oklahoma. “This is the first time in history where both chambers have proposed something that is really similar, so to miss this opportunity would be an incredible failure on the part of leadership.”

While private schools around the state have similar hopes to Farley’s, there is no organized private school association lobbying at the State Capitol. That has placed Farley in a position to be consulted by Republican leaders of both chambers.

“I’ve had conversations with leadership here and there just to make sure that they understand where we are at, and that’s what we’ve told them: Get something on the books that you are willing to agree on,” Farley said.

If what legislators are willing to agree on is tax credit eligibility based on a private school’s tuition cost, Farley said he would support it.

“We’re not championing it, but if that’s what gets them across the finish line to a compromise, then we’ll take it,” Farley said. “Our goal is to get something passed. We’re open to just about any compromise to get that done because failing with this much progress down the road is unacceptable. So pass anything.”

“I don’t like the tax credits. I just don’t like tax credits going to people sending their kids to private school.”

REP. RONNY JOHNS (R-ADA), House Common Education Committee member

‘One of the issues that’s always been a problem’

Not everybody in the Legislature is so keen on lawmakers passing “anything” to create the new refundable tax credit for private school enrollment.

Rep. Mark Vancuren (R-Owasso), who serves as vice chairman of the House Common Education Committee, voted against HB 1935 and HB 2775, which proposes the \$500 million in new education funding.

A former high school biology teacher and basketball coach, Vancuren said his district broadly opposes creating tax credits to incentivize private school enrollment, and he said it’s unlikely any of the possible parameters being negotiated — such a private school tuition cap or phased-in implementation — would change his mind.

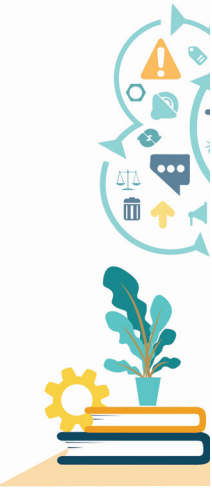
“One of the issues that’s always been a problem: Public schools? We take them all. We take everyone. We educate every kid that wants to come,” Vancuren said. “Private schools? They’re not that way.”

House Common Education Committee member Rep. Ronny Johns (R-Ada) agreed with his officemate, Vancuren.

“I don’t like the tax credits. I just don’t like tax credits going to people sending their kids to private school,” said Johns, who voted against the tax credit bill, HB 1935, on the House floor.

Some lawmakers have argued that Oklahoma Legislature’s tax credit proposals are not any different

PRIVATE SCHOOL TAX CREDIT continued A3



BLACK FAMILY, anticipating the birth of their first child. PHOTO ADOBE STOCK



TRACKING DATA SHOWS *Just 3,032 Women Have Been Helped From July 2020 to January 2023*

PREGNANCY HELP *from A1*

Senate Bill 538 would let the Oklahoma State Department of Health send payments directly to qualified organizations providing pregnancy care, including for mental health services and transportation. It would leave an existing vendor in place, but allow for flexibility for more pregnancy services from additional vendors.

The bill’s author, Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat, R-Oklahoma City, said it remains one of his personal priorities this session. The bill would need to pass on the House floor by Thursday’s deadline to stay alive. The proposal is similar to SB 1522, which failed at the same stage in last year’s session.

“We want to open that up and make sure money gets to go where it’s supposed to go,” Treat said last week in a media availability. “We’ve been dissatisfied with the progress of the current, third-party, private administrator. I’m very passionate about making sure those dollars actually go where we want, so I’m watching that one closely.”

The Health Department said the

Senate Bill 538 would let the Oklahoma State Department of Health send payments directly to qualified organizations providing pregnancy care.

vendor, the Oklahoma Pregnancy Care Network, predicted it could help up to 10,000 pregnant women annually. Tracking data shows just 3,032 women have been helped from July 2020 to January 2023.

Lawmakers have also expressed concerns about administrative expenses of the vendor to the religious-affiliated nonprofits providing services under the law. A snapshot of spending shows administrative expenses were 40% of the total expended in the past three years.

“With the regulatory environment we’ve created over abortion and birth, that money we’ve been putting

aside for Choosing Childbirth needs to be disseminated out to crisis pregnancy centers all over the state,” the bill’s House author, Rep. Marcus McEntire, R-Duncan, said Tuesday. “Right now, those funds are just dribbling out, and it should be more like a stream. They should be exhausting that money every year.”

Part of the problem is that services need to be provided before the state reimburses under the Choosing Childbirth Act. Few of the nonprofits contracted with the vendor have the cash flow to provide those services up front.

An internal audit report last year by the Health Department showed

the Oklahoma Pregnancy Care Network had some questionable administrative expenses and was slow to provide help to eligible nonprofits. Its leaders at the time acknowledged the slow start but said it was at a “tipping point” and poised to grow exponentially across the state.

Madeline Craig, executive director for the Oklahoma Pregnancy Care Network, said the organization didn’t see a need for the latest legislation.

“OPCN is on track to spend all \$3 million awarded under the contract, and current projections exceed the contracted amount for this (fiscal year),” Craig said Tuesday.

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PRIVATE SCHOOL TAX CREDIT *from A2*

from a voucher system, wherein state dollars are sent directly to private schools.

“Oklahomans have spoken loudly of their support of public schools. We don’t need vouchers in order to reinvest in public schools that serve all students,” said Sen. Carri Hicks (D-OKC), who sits on the Senate Education Committee. “Regardless of negotiations, regardless of compromises, what we know is that we need more investment into our public schools that serve every student.”

If lawmakers do reach an income cap agreement, Johns said he wants the cap to be as low as possible.

“If it’s going to happen, then I think there ought to be a limit,” Johns said. “I would be for an income limit to sit down there with Oklahoma’s Promise (that provides scholarship for college tuition).”

House Speaker Charles McCall, however, opposes an income cap, arguing that one would disincentivize marriage and not provide a win for “all Oklahomans.” Asked about alternative

parameters floated during negotiations, McCall (R-Atoka) said tying eligibility for the tax credit to private school tuition rates could be a viable alternative.

“If you take the five most expensive private schools — [by] their tuition cost — out of the list of all the other private schools, the cost of a private education is very close to the \$5,000 that the House

is proposing in their education plan, and so there could be talks about the level of tuition with regard to the tax credit, but we know that the \$5,000 tax credit uncapped would give lots of parents and students many options if they choose to seek a private school route for education,” McCall said.

Farley offered a similar sentiment on the proposal.

“It of course depends where they would put something like that,” Farley said. “I think you’re maybe carving out five schools in the state, and I don’t think that any Catholic schools would be caught up in that. Really, again, it depends on what the cap is.”

Farley also wondered if a tuition cap would actually encourage lower private school costs.

“It would actually have a depressing quality to it in the sense that some schools that would be above that cap could actually lower their prices to make sure that they catch more kids because some revenue is better than none,” Farley said.

McCall: Income cap would be ‘a form of class warfare’

McCall’s original version of HB 1935, which House members have tied to HB 2775’s proposal of a \$500 million increase in public school funding, would create a new \$5,000-per-child refundable tax credit for parents who send their kids to private schools. The bill would also create a \$2,500-per-child tax credit for families who homeschool their kids. Both tax credits would be refundable, meaning families could receive cash payments from the state beyond their tax liabilities.

After they received the two bills, senators added a number of amendments. Those included increasing the private school tax credit to \$7,500-per-child and decreasing the homeschool tax credit to \$1,000 per family.

PRIVATE SCHOOL TAX CREDIT *continued A8*



Ernie Fields: “Territory Band” Leader

By MICHAEL LAPRARIE, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE

A “territory band” leader, Ernie Fields made his mark on a touring circuit that stretched between Kansas City, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Dallas in the 1930s and 1940s.



Born in Nacogdoches, Texas, on August 28, 1904, and raised in Taft, Oklahoma, Fields settled in Tulsa after graduating in 1921 from the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He soon began leading The Royal Entertainers, which became one of Tulsa’s most popular dance orchestras during the 1920s. Fields initially refused offers to join other bands, believing that touring was an unacceptable lifestyle. Ironically, the Great Depression forced him to take his own band on the road in the early 1930s.=

The Ernie Fields Orchestra became one of the most popular groups among African Americans in the Southwest. Playing exciting big band jazz at nightclubs and open-air pavilions, the band eventually caught the attention of record producer John Hammond. Under his guidance Fields went to New York in 1939 and recorded “T-Town Blues” for

Vocalion, a nationally distributed record label. With this minor hit under his belt he began nationwide tours, culminating in a 1942 engagement in Harlem’s legendary Savoy Ballroom.

World War II interrupted the band’s initial success. Fields began entertaining troops, playing for more than one hundred camp shows and twelve overseas broadcasts. After the war he kept a scaled-down version of the band together and continued to feature popular Oklahoma City singer Melvin Moore. Although the band regularly packed venues with dancers and teenagers in the Southwest, nationwide success seemed elusive. In 1959 Fields finally earned widespread recognition. His mambo-style version of “In The Mood” shot into the top ten on the Billboard pop charts, and after thirty years in the music business Ernie Fields had a gold record.

He retired from the music business in the late

1960s, settling permanently in Tulsa and residing there until his death on May 11, 1997. In 1989 he was inducted in to the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. His daughter Carmen pursued a successful career in broadcast journalism. Ernie Fields, Jr., followed his father’s footsteps into music business and worked as a saxophonist, producer, and talent agent at the end of the twentieth century.

THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY is an agency of the government of Oklahoma dedicated to promotion and preservation of Oklahoma’s history and its people by collecting, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge and artifacts of Oklahoma.

ERNIE FIELDS, Jr. Collection, OHS.

Featured Last Week



Tulsa Educators Who Overcame The Pandemic’s Challenges



Wake Up.: 12 Black Women Educators You Should Know



As OKC Pursues A ‘Housing First’ Strategy,

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The Oklahoma Eagle | Founded in 1921 | Vol. CII No. 17

THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE is published weekly on Fridays by The Oklahoma Eagle, LLC, P.O. Box 3267, Tulsa, OK 74101. General office is 624 E. Archer St., Tulsa, OK 74120. Periodical Postage (WSPS 406-580) is paid at Tulsa, OK. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the above address. Delivery subscription rates (Continental United States, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). All subscriptions may include Premium Edition issues throughout the year.
Mail Subscriber Rates: Single copy \$1 | Yearly \$52 | 2 Years \$100

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“We want you here.”

WARNER — *“What we’re here to announce today is the biggest signing bonus in the country — that teachers can make up to \$50,000 through a signing bonus to come teach in the highest-need areas,”* Walters said, flanked by students, teachers, administrators and a pastor in the Warner Public Schools gymnasium. “The highest-need areas are special ed and pre-K through third grade. We have seen every school across the state struggle to build these areas. We have states around us that are competing for applicants, and we want to give our districts the ability to compete for the best and brightest teachers in the state of Oklahoma and outside the state of Oklahoma.”

TEACHER COMPENSATION *from AI*

WALTERS OUTLINED the criteria for the bonuses in a press release. Each of the totals listed would only be available if an educator commits to five years in the profession:

- Teachers with less than three years of experience can receive \$15,000
 - If those teachers agree to teach in a rural or high-poverty district, they could get \$20,000;
- Teachers with three or more years of experience can earn \$25,000
 - If those teachers agree to teach in a rural or high-poverty district, they could get \$30,000;
- Teachers with five or more years of experience who commit to teach in a rural or high-poverty district could get \$50,000;
- Teachers with five or more years of experience and who teach special education can receive \$50,000;
- Teachers moving to Oklahoma with less than five years of experience can get \$25,000;
- Teachers moving to Oklahoma with five or more years of experience can get \$50,000.

Walters’ program, which he said could be paid for with existing State Department of Education discretionary funds, launched today, but it would begin with educator contracts signed for the 2023-2024 school year. Certified teachers who did not teach in Oklahoma during the current school year can sign contracts with “critical shortage area” districts and receive bonuses up to \$50,000. Walters said thousands of Oklahomans have teaching certificates, making them prime candidates to recruit back into classrooms. “We’ve got over 40,000 people with a teaching certificate that aren’t retirement age, and then we’ve got obviously thousands above retirement age that are out there with certificates,” he said. “We want to give them the incentive to go ‘You’ve done an exceptional job.’”

‘I may not be able to match to meet the system’

Beyond signing bonuses, Walters announced a so-called “teacher empowerment program,” which he said will allow districts to give up to 10 percent of their teachers raises of up to \$10,000, which OSDE would then match. Asked his reaction to that program, Warner Public Schools Superintendent David Vinson said he worried that his district would not have the funds to provide the first half of the raises. “I have a whole list of teachers that I would give extra money to right now, if I could,” Vinson said. “My concern is that — (with) any matching system — I may not be able to match to meet the system.” Walters, who took over OSDE in January, said the agency is pursuing private funding to finance an ad campaign that would let people know about the new signing bonuses. He declined to give details on that aspect of his plan. “There will be a campaign. We’re getting that off the ground, and you’ll see [billboards] soon,” Walters told members of the media after Wednesday’s event. “And we will absolutely (say), ‘Hey, we’re coming for you, great teachers in other states. We want you here — we’ve got great schools here. We want the best for our kids.’ And so we are going to be actively getting some of the best teachers out of other states, and you’re gonna see that shortly. I don’t want to get specific with it.” Walters also avoided specifics regarding the source of funds for his new OSDE programs, although the agency’s press release listed American Rescue Plan Act funding, money from the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and “other state level activities.” “This is all money that we have at the agency. These are discretionary dollars that we have decided to allocate to attract teachers, so this doesn’t require any legislative oversight — or legislative approval or any type of approval from the [State Board of Education],” Walters said.

‘Problems that we’re facing are very complex’

Walters made his announcements in Warner, a 1,500-person town just north of Interstate 40 in the southern leg of

Muskogee County. With 814 students enrolled in the K-12 district, Warner Public Schools displays numerous academic state championship flags on the walls of its gymnasium. During his announcement, Walters proclaimed Warner as “one of the highest performing schools in the state.”

Vinson, who acknowledged during the roundtable discussion that he disagrees with Walters’ policy priorities such as school choice, called the signing bonuses a “great start” to addressing the teacher shortage that has plagued Oklahoma and other states for years.

“What we need to understand is that the problems that we’re facing are very complex, so there’s not going to be just this one program that fixes it, but I think it’s a good start,” Vinson said. “And I think that it will attract some really high-quality teachers to Oklahoma who might not have come otherwise. Or it might also attract people that are doing other types of jobs and just got out of education for this reason or that reason, and now they want back in because they see the incentive there. And we need all of those people to get back in because the shortage areas that they’re targeting with this program — special education and the early childhood — they’re pretty severe.”

Other educators in the district had mixed feelings about the plan.

“I think it’s a great idea — we need more teachers,” said Warner elementary counselor and curriculum director Charla Jackson.

But Jackson said current teachers also need a substantial raise, and she groused about the ongoing legislative negotiations in Oklahoma City.

“It’s almost a slap in the face to our teachers who are here, and they’re in the grind, and our legislators can’t come to an agreement to give them an incentive to stay,” she said.

Special education director Renee Murphy, whose area has been hit hardest by the teacher shortage, had similar feelings.

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different outcome. I was in Oklahoma City in 1990. I was there several years ago at the Capitol,” said Murphy, referencing Oklahoma’s two most recent teacher walkouts. “And then, once again, we’re kind of in the same boat. The children are Oklahoma’s greatest resource. But yet, education — we’re the only industry, if you want to call it that — that has to beg to be supported.”

Walters will be back in Oklahoma City on Thursday for a State Board of Education meeting. Among other agenda items, board members could take action on a special report regarding districts’ diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

BENNETT BRINKMAN has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2017 and covers state agencies and public health. Contact him at (571) 319-3289 or pmonies@oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter @pmonies.



(TOP) **SABRINA ELLIOTT**, 42, takes a break from packing her home to contemplate moving into her mother's house temporarily after having been evicted last week, April 23, 2023. Elliott withheld rent from her landlord after months of requests for repairs and was given four days to pack everything and move. "I feel like an inconvenience to my mom. She doesn't have room for me," she said. (BOTTOM) **SABRINA ELLIOTT**, cleans out her art supply closet as she prepares to leave her southwest Oklahoma City rental home of two years on April 23, 2023. One of her three chihuahuas, Emmie, watches her from the top of a cockroach-infested sofa. PHOTO **LIONEL RAMOS/ OKLAHOMA WATCH**

THE *Bill Does At Least One Thing Tenant Advocates Have Long Sought*

RENT, ANTI-RETALIATION *from A1*

It didn't take long for problems to arise with Sabrina Elliott's two-bedroom rental home off South Pennsylvania Avenue.

The garage flooded the first week, while most of her belongings were stowed in boxes on the floor. Her sofa and bed retain a wavy brown streak from the water damage. Within a month, cockroaches made nests in the stove, kitchen cabinets and cracks throughout the house. Eventually, they began falling from curtain rods and crawling out of light sockets.

"Besides spraying for the roaches once, he's never fixed anything I've asked for," Elliott said of her landlord, as she scrolled through text messages showing complaints and repair requests she's made the last two years.

In May 2021, the landlord raised her rent by \$100 a month to \$850. By October, she fell behind. With an outstanding balance and a \$50 monthly late fee, any request Elliott made for repairs was met with threats of eviction from her landlord.

This month, after receiving a letter demanding rent and threatening eviction via text, she decided to withhold rent and save for a new place. She was served by the sheriff last week and ended up on Wednesday's eviction docket, along with 104 other Oklahoma County residents.

A proposal aimed at helping people like Elliott faces a deadline this week in the Legislature. Two Lawton-based Republican lawmakers introduced HB2109, which would protect some tenants from retaliation if they file complaints or lawsuits against landlords. No more surprise rent hikes, neglected repairs, or threats of eviction just for submitting maintenance requests.

If passes it would apply only to landlords with 10 or more units and exempts situations like Elliott's, when a tenant is behind on rent. Thursday is the last day the bill, which has already passed the House, can be discussed on the Senate floor.

Most evictions are filed because a tenant is behind on rent, studies show. Oklahoma is one of only six states that offer no protection for people who fall behind or withhold rent to pressure for repairs.

With the end of the Covid-19 eviction moratorium in August 2021, exhausted federal rental assistance and expanded food stamp benefits, evictions in the state are returning to pre-pandemic levels.

More than 110,000 eviction orders have been filed in Oklahoma since 2019 — two-thirds of which were in Oklahoma and Tulsa counties, according to the Legal Services Corporation eviction tracker. The figures do not include 2023.

There are still concerns from lawmakers as to how certain provisions will be enforced and the prospects of tying up renters and

With the end of the COVID-19 eviction moratorium in August 2021, exhausted federal rental assistance and expanded food stamp benefits, evictions in the state are returning to pre-pandemic levels.



their landlords in expensive lawsuits, but the bill passed its second committee hearing on April 10 in a 6-5 vote and is being carried by Sen. John Michael Montgomery to the Senate floor for its last round of questioning and debate before potentially becoming law.

Some fair housing advocates call the bill a welcomed step toward protecting tenants, but worry that language meant to safeguard landlords with fewer rental units from costly litigation will allow certain large-scale real-estate investors to continue predatory renting practices.

Landlords say the bill will cause them to raise their standards for whom their average renters are by increasing qualifying credit scores and refusing to rent people with criminal backgrounds, ultimately hurting those low-income families and individuals the bill is meant to help by.

'A Balanced Approach'

Rep. Daniel Pae said the goal of his legislation is to balance and modernize the Landlord-Tenant Act, bringing Oklahoma up

to the standards of 44 other states in the U.S. with anti-retaliation provisions in their state laws.

Neighboring states like Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico spell out their own versions of anti-retaliation provisions in their state laws and allow tenants to withhold rent when their landlords neglect or ignore requests for repairs.

Oklahoma is among those states that allow tenants to make their own repairs and deduct the costs from their monthly rent.

"When it comes to making a complaint about the safety or health-related conditions of a rental property, the bill explicitly protects the tenant from any sort of retaliation," Pae said, "On the other hand when it comes to a tenant who does not make that complaint in good faith, there are still ways for the landlord to use eviction and to increase rent.

"I think it's a balanced approach that we're taking, incorporating both the landlord's perspective and the tenant's perspective and making sure it's a fair process and a transparent process."

The bill does at least one thing tenant advocates have long sought, said Eric Hallett, an attorney representing Tulsa tenants in eviction proceedings. It allows renters to claim damages and attorney's fees from their landlords in court if they can prove they were retaliated against.

Convincing judges to hear a retaliation case is difficult because many rule in the landlord's favor if there is any back rent owed, said Hallett, who coordinates housing advocacy at Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Access to Justice Foundation's August 2022 study of eviction courts highlighted a "two-question approach" to rapid rulings:

"Do you have a lease?"

"Are you behind on rent?"

If the answer to both questions is yes, judges grant the eviction order without questioning the landlord or the landlord's lawyer, according to the report.

"Hopefully, this bill will get judges to start considering that there may be a defense as to why the tenant hasn't paid rent," said Hallett.

For Elliott, 42, it would've meant an opportunity to explain her situation to a judge and perhaps be reimbursed for enduring substandard conditions while paying rent.

Instead, she is worried about her credit score. In Oklahoma, evictions appear on a person's credit and rental history 30-60 days after a court judgment and remain for seven years.

"Hopefully having an eviction doesn't stop me from getting a place," Elliott said.

The Bill's Limitations

Pae said the language focusing on landlords with 10 or more rentals is meant to crack down on out-of-state apartment complex investors and protect others. But the provision raised some concerns during HB2109's last public discussion.

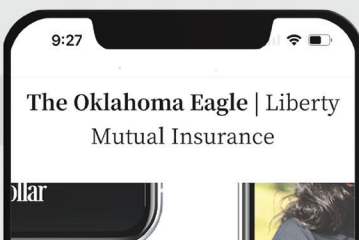
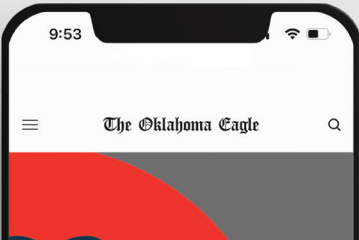
Sen. Joe Newhouse, R-Tulsa, said he likes the spirit of the bill, adding that he doesn't think landlords should be able to retaliate against their tenants for making complaints. Still, a self-proclaimed property manager of 12 years, Newhouse questioned how that language would be enforced beyond apartment owners.

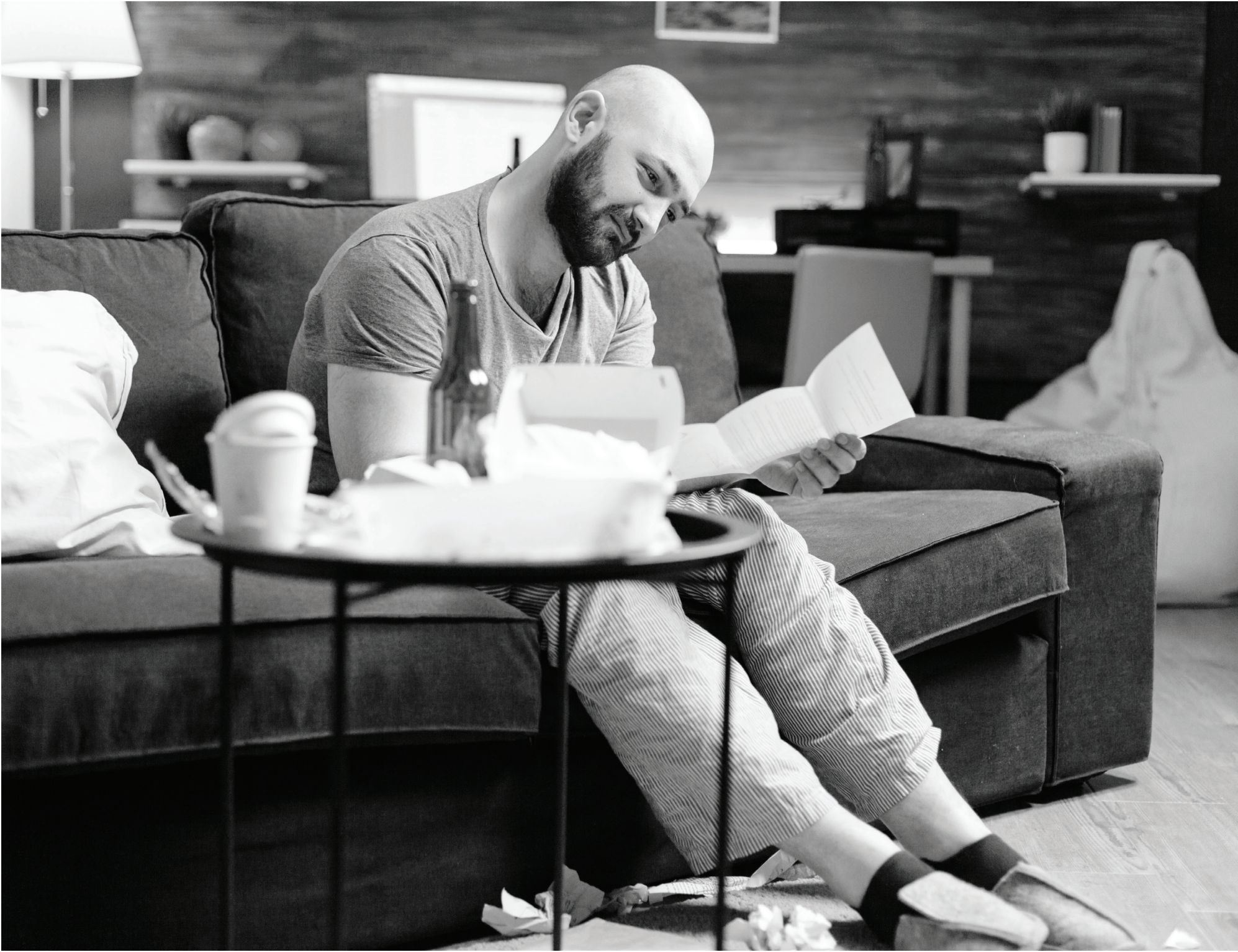
"If this is just one building with 10 units,

RENT, ANTI-RETALIATION *continued A7*

Our Mission

To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial" is the cornerstone of our continued success.





(TOP AND BOTTOM) **RENTER** reading past due notices for financial obligations, including rent, utilities and necessities. PHOTO **ADOBE STOCK**

RENT, ANTI-RETALIATION from A6

then I can see a scenario where you would want to not have drastic price increases on one tenant who might have fear of retaliation. I get that,” Newhouse said, “My question applies to a landlord who might have 10 or more units across an entire city in different areas. How would you enforce the price increase retaliation bit?”

Hallett pointed out another challenge to enforcing that provision. Most landlords with more than 10 rental houses in Tulsa don’t own all of their investment properties under one name or limited liability company, he said.

“For someone who owns 20 or 30 homes in town, each home might have a different owner according to property records because each one is owned by a different LLC. That hides the true number of units owned by one person. This law wouldn’t apply to them,” Hallett said.

Last summer, a nonprofit aimed at helping low-income Oklahomans studied evictions in eight counties — Canadian, Cleveland, Comanche, Garfield, Logan, Oklahoma, Payne, Rogers and Tulsa. Of the 510 eviction orders granted last June and July in those counties, 89% were filed by corporate landlords. Most filed multiple evictions in a single day, according to the Oklahoma Access to Justice Foundation.

More than half of landlords had lawyers. Only 4% of tenants had legal representation.

A System For Keeping Tenants Behind

Casey Robinson remodels and rents properties in North Tulsa. Under his LLC, Robinson Properties, he owns 150 rental homes, which he described as affordable to low-income renters. He said despite owning more than 10 rentals, local landlords like him are not the problem HB2109 is trying to address and putting pressure on them will only hurt the low-income renters it’s meant to help.

“I believe this bill will bottleneck the court system even further and make the cost of business go up,” Robinson said, explaining that retaliation cases will keep renters and their landlords in court for longer — causing people to lose out on their investments and exacerbating the issue of an already packed eviction docket. Tulsa County, in the two days Access to Justice Observed its docket, saw 172 evictions filed, but the number can balloon to well over 200.

Hallett said the fact that an eviction or reduction of service won’t be considered retaliatory if a tenant is behind on rent negates what the law is meant to accomplish in the first place, and the only real way to know if it works is to watch its provisions play out in court.

Most low-income tenants start their rental journeys behind, Hallett said. A study by the

“One way to be a slumlord in Oklahoma is to make sure your tenant is always behind.”

- ERIC HALLETT, an attorney representing Tulsa tenants in eviction proceedings

Terry West Legal Clinic at the University of Tulsa law school showed 97% of evictions filed in January 2020 in Tulsa were because of past due rent for amounts as low as \$39.

“One way to be a slumlord in Oklahoma is to make sure your tenant is always behind,” Hallett said, “You do that by requiring upfront pay of two months rent. Then what happens is the tenant says they can only pay one month and the landlord says they will let them catch up over time. In the ledger, it shows that the tenant is always behind.

“Then anytime they complain, the landlord just calls in that rent and files a rent-based eviction. That’s always been the case.”

Robinson said he’s seen that system play out in another, but similar fashion, attributing the practice to hedge fund apartment owners.

“It’s the same complexes that advertise an apartment for \$600 and get people interested that way,” He said, “But they only have \$700 apartments.”

He said the trick is to allow someone to pay just a little less than the total amount they owe for one month to ensure they’re behind, then charge them high late fees every month thereafter until they have a reason to evict them.

Robinson said that while he does see the need to address apartment complexes that target low-income tenants with evictions, he worries HB2109 will cause landlords like him to raise application standards for renters and avoid people with past evictions or criminal histories.

“We are one of the landlords who try to provide affordable housing,” he said, “but I could see a bill like this cause everyone to raise their standards. They would say ‘We’re not going to give this person a second shot because they are a little bit iffy on their background.’”

Pae said the listed exceptions were included as amendments after the bill’s initial introduction to placate the concerns of landlords and fellow Republicans who didn’t want to support the bill otherwise.

“With the amendments we’ve made, we’ve addressed concerns about where the burden of proof is, and making sure landlords still have the options of eviction and increased rent,” Pae said.

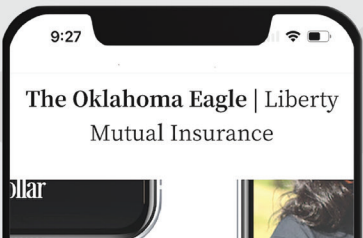
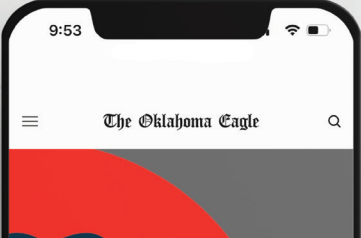
LIONEL RAMOS is a Report for America corps member who covers race and equity issues for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at 405-905-9953 or lramos@oklahomawatch.org.



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OKLAHOMA LEGISLATORS CONSIDER PROPOSALS THAT CAP **HOUSEHOLD INCOME THRESHOLDS AT \$250,000** FOR FAMILIES.

Bennett Brinkman became NonDoc's education reporter in August 2022 after completing a reporting internship. He holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma and is originally from Edmond.





GLEND AUSTIN OF IDABEL, OKLA., holds a sign with other protesters, Monday, April 17, 2023, outside the McCurtain County Commissioners meeting room in Idabel, Okla. A number of McCurtain County residents were outraged by comments made by local officials on a recording and are asking for the resignation of the sheriff, two county commissioners and others.. PHOTO LORI DUNN/THE TEXARKANA GAZETTE VIA AP

The *Threatening Comments...* *were obtained following a March 6 meeting*

OK OFFICIAL RESIGNS from AI

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A county commissioner in far southeast Oklahoma who was identified by a local newspaper as one of several officials caught on tape discussing killing reporters and lynching Black people has resigned from office, Gov. Kevin Stitt’s office confirmed Wednesday.

Stitt spokesperson Carly Atchison said the office received a handwritten resignation letter from McCurtain County Commissioner Mark Jennings. In it, Jennings says he is resigning immediately and that he plans to release a formal statement “in the near future regarding the recent events in our county.”

The threatening comments by Jennings and officials with the McCurtain County Sheriff’s Office were obtained following a March 6 meeting and reported by the McCurtain Gazette-News earlier this week in its weekend edition. They have sparked outrage and protests in the city of Idabel, the county seat.

In a post on the sheriff’s office Facebook page on Tuesday, officials did not address the recorded discussion but claimed the recording was illegally obtained.

Also on Wednesday, the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation confirmed it has launched an investigation into the matter at the request of the governor.

The recorded conversation included Sheriff Kevin Clardy, sheriff’s Capt. Alicia Manning, Jennings and Jail Administrator Larry Hendrix. During that conversation, Clardy, Manning and Jennings appear to discuss Bruce Willingham — the longtime publisher of the Gazette-News — and his son Chris Willingham, a reporter.

Jennings tells Clardy and Manning “I know where two deep holes

are dug if you ever need them,” and the sheriff responds, “I’ve got an excavator.”

Jennings also says he’s known “two or three hit men” in Louisiana, adding “they’re very quiet guys.”

In the recording, Jennings also appears to complain about not being able to hang Black people, saying: “They got more rights than we got.”

The Associated Press is working to verify the authenticity of the recording. None of the four officials returned telephone calls or emails from The Associated Press seeking comment.

Bruce Willingham told the AP the recording was made when he left a voice-activated recorder inside the room after a county commissioner’s meeting because he suspected the group was continuing to conduct county business after the meeting had ended, in violation of the state’s Open Meeting Act.

Willingham said he twice spoke with his attorneys to be sure he was doing nothing illegal.

Joey Senat, a journalism professor at Oklahoma State University, said under Oklahoma law, the recording would be legal if it were obtained in a place where the officials being recorded did not have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

Bruce Willingham said he believes the local officials were upset about “stories we’ve run that cast the sheriff’s office in an unfavorable light,” including the death of Bobby Barrick — a Broken Bow, Oklahoma, man who died at a hospital in March 2022 after McCurtain County deputies shot him with a stun gun. The newspaper has filed a lawsuit against the sheriff’s office seeking body camera footage and other records connected to Barrick’s death.

Separately, Chris Willingham has filed a federal lawsuit against the sheriff’s office, Clardy, Man-

“I know where two deep holes are dug if you ever need them,” and the sheriff responds, “I’ve got an excavator.”

Jennings also says he’s known “two or three hit men” in Louisiana, adding “they’re very quiet guys.”

ing and the Board of County Commissioners alleging Manning slandered him after he wrote an eight-part series of articles detailing problems inside the sheriff’s office. The lawsuit claims after the first few articles were published, Clardy and Manning began investigating which office employees were speaking to the newspaper and were attempting to get a search warrant for Willingham’s phone.

The lawsuit, which was filed on the same day the recording was made, alleges that after the series was published, Manning told a third party during a teleconference that Chris Willingham exchanged marijuana for sexually explicit images of children from a man who had been arrested on child sex abuse image charges.

“Manning made these (and other) false statements about Willingham in retaliation for articles he wrote about the (sheriff’s office) as a reporter for the McCurtain Gazette and to destroy his credibility as a reporter and journalist,” the lawsuit states.

More than 100 people gathered outside the McCurtain County Courthouse in Idabel earlier this week, with many of them calling for the sheriff and other county officials to resign.

On Tuesday, the Oklahoma Sheriff’s Association, a voluntary membership organization and not a regulatory agency, held an emergency meeting of its board. It voted unanimously to suspend Clardy, Manning and Hendrix from the association.

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LOCAL MEDICAL MARIJUANA SALES TAX *Directed To ‘HEALTH AND WELL-BEING’ Of Edmondites* | By Joe Tomlinson, NonDoc

The Edmond City Council unanimously approved a resolution Monday night directing staff to develop a process allocating all city sales tax collections from marijuana dispensaries toward community programs and projects “that positively impact the health and well-being of youth and adults.”

Ward 2 Councilman Josh Moore, who proposed the resolution, said he saw this as an opportunity to support “positive, healthy community programs.”

“On purpose, I left the language broad for current council and future councils at budgeting time — and staff — to really narrow it into positive projects or programs for the health and well-being of youth and adults,” Moore said.

Additionally, Moore said the resolution will allow the city to better track its sales tax collections from medical marijuana purchases. Oklahoma Tax Commission data show that the City of Edmond collected \$916,964.70 from medical marijuana purchases in 2021 and \$818,424.59 in 2022. However, there is some confusion surrounding the city’s total collections from those purchases.

“There is the need to improve that with the Oklahoma Tax Commission on how we know exactly what revenue (we receive),” Moore said. “So to be a little more specific, they need a specific report that’s provided to us to be able to know what that dollar amount is, because it does include businesses in our ZIP code which might be out of our city limits.”

The resolution passed Monday will also redirect those sales tax proceeds from the city’s general fund, which is dedicated to street maintenance and parks and recreation, among other services.

“Right now, it’s going into our general fund, which would be the same as a department store, a clothing store or a grocery store. My own personal feeling was that’s not a tax that I feel like that we should grow

Right now, it’s going into our general fund, which would be the same as a department store, a clothing store or a grocery store.

JOSH MOORE, Ward 2 Councilman

dependent on,” Moore said. “And so in the future, if it were to ever change, or be changed or even be repealed, then we wouldn’t be depending on it for other jobs in the city of Edmond.”

Edmond city manager Scot Rigby said the resolution’s broad language allows for future councils to allocate the money for various uses.

“One year it could be some youth scholarships in our parks and rec program for kids who love to play that sort of sport, but they don’t have the financial means to do that. The next year it could be ‘Hey, let’s help Mobile Meals because they have a surge in demand,’” Rigby said. “It can vary from year to year.”

Moore, who will be succeeded in the Ward 2 seat by Barry Moore after the April 24 council meeting, said he hopes the medical marijuana sales tax resolution will support future generations of Edmond citizens.

“I think about my own kids and their lives at school and their lives outside of school and programs,” Josh Moore said. “If it’s five, 10, 20 years from now and I’m thinking that this is helping our next generations in some way and in any way, I will just be so proud.”

Kelly Corner Rezoning Approved

Also Monday, the Edmond City Council unanimously approved a rezoning application from developer Clay Coldiron for a 150-acre property on the southeast corner of Covell Road and Kelly Avenue to a

planned unit development (PUD). The zoning will allow for mixed residential development on the property’s interior and commercial uses on the outer edges along Covell Road and Kelly Avenue.

One parcel of the property, which abuts Covell Road, is proposed for a high-density multifamily community with up to 300 units in a three to four-story building. The southernmost parcel on the property proposes a community for seniors with up to 120 units. Another interior parcel proposes two-story townhomes.

As both residential and commercial uses are within the development plan, attorney Todd McKinnis, who represents Coldiron, said the area will create its own commerce.

“Clay uses the term really well of ‘new urbanism’ when he talks about this project. Which is kind of difficult, because you’re looking at 150 — plus or minus — acres, and it’s really not urban. I mean, it’s not like the wonderful things you guys are doing downtown,” McKinnis said. “But the idea is to create a micro-economy up in this area.”

JOSEPH TOMLINSON graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a journalism degree in 2021. After covering politics in Washington, D.C. for Gaylord News, he completed a NonDoc internship and joined the newsroom as a staff reporter in 2022, predominantly covering the community of Edmond, Oklahoma. He is a corps member of Report for America.

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(918) 584-3206

Minister RJ Smith

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Sunday Worship - 10:45am
Monday Worship - 6:00pm
Wednesday Bible Study - 5:00pm

CAPERNAUM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

1962 N. Sheridan Rd.
(918) 834-4747
Pastor Ruthie I. Howard
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Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
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For Transportation (918) 402-6027

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Gethsemane Baptist Church

727 East 56th St. North
(918) 425-6613

Dr. W. T. Lauderdale

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Church Services 11:00 a.m.

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Tulsa OK
(918) 625-2374
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Sunday Morning Worship - 10:45
Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm
Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm
Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm
Wednesday worship - 8pm
Rev. John W. Anderson

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P: 918-587-1428
F: 918-587-0642
vernonamechurch@sbcglobal.net

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Rev. Dr. Robert R. Allen Turner

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Morning Worship - 11:00 a.m.
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ABUSE OF BLACK CHILDREN

AND THE POTENTIAL OF BIAS

CHILD ABUSE *from AI*

A Houston mother beats her 4-month-old daughter because the baby’s father no longer wanted a relationship with her.

A 7-year-old boy was found dead in a washing machine where his adoptive parents reportedly stuffed him after he was beaten, suffocated and possibly drowned – all because the boy stole the father’s snacks.

Two teen siblings who made a daring escape from a Cypress home, revealed unimaginable abuse and horror at the hands of their own mother and her younger boyfriend. The 16-year-olds were “severely malnourished” and had lacerations on their wrists consistent with being restrained with handcuffs.

The tragic stories are endless. And child advocates say they’re a prime example of the growing problem of child abuse in the Houston area.

April is National Child Abuse Awareness month and community leaders say now, more than ever, it’s necessary to discuss ways to work together to prevent child abuse and neglect, especially in the Black community.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, Black children were three times more likely to die from abuse or neglect than white children.

“Child abuse occurs within the Black community pretty much at about the same rate that Black people exist in the population, 13%. But it is in the death that results from that child abuse where the numbers are skewed and Black children are far overrepresented,” said psychologist Dr. Norman Fried. “Twenty-five percent of all child abuse cases in America are of Black children. And we know that one in every four Black children by the age of four will be abused, but one in every 10 white children will be abused at that same age range.”

According to Be A Resource, the number of children under child protective services in Houston continues to grow. For example, 16,000 children are involved with CPS-related cases. Over 1,000 of them were removed from their homes in an emergency.

“These children and victims suffer severe and often life-altering consequences,” said Monica Sanders, regional director for Child Protection Investigations in Harris County. “As a result of their abuse, the abuse they suffer can have lasting consequences and impact them physically, psychologically, behaviorally and cognitively as well.”

Sanders said that abuse is manifested in different ways. “Many times when we encounter runaways, we learn that they were running from abuse. Many times when we encounter someone that may be involved in prostitution, we soon learn that they were running from abuse. Often when we have people that are incarcerated, we learn that at some point they too were abused and we know that a great deal of the abuse that happens happens at the hands of people that were abused when they were children. So we must break those cycles, the impacts that they have, they could feel for years and we must do what we can to prevent it.”

Spare the rod

Children’s rights advocates have identified the abuse of children in Black communities as a byproduct of the normalization of abuse experienced by Black people as a whole. We often hear, “I was beat, and I’ve turned out fine.” Or “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” And the excuses behind physical punishment becomes muddled because of traditions in the Black community. But Fried says while mindsets have changed, it’s important to draw the distinction between child abuse and normal discipline.

“The different types of cultural norms that go into parenting, whether it’s Black versus white families or different religions or cultures, that’s not included in the statistics for child abuse,” Fried said. “What we talk about when we discuss child abuse are heinous crimes whereby a child’s sense of safety is threatened and it’s a life-threatening event. And so its any experience for a child that involves a sense of absence of safety where they are hurt either emotionally and/or physically. That doesn’t mean that certain cultures that allow spanking should be considered abusive. This is more a traumatic event that is placed somewhere in the brain of the child. And their worldview is changed forever.”

Child psychologist Alana Breed says it’s important to recognize that physical discipline, such as spanking, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child or youth.

“Many parents feel like their rights have been taken away from them because society as a whole has lumped child abuse together with any form of physical discipline. We have to be careful not to do that because it takes away from the very real issue of child abuse,” Breed said.

A Broken System

For years, child-welfare agencies, family courts and various activists have looked to fix racial disparities in the system. A new study from the Journal of Pediatric Surgery shows Black families are more likely to be investigated than their white peers, investigations involving Black children are more likely to be substantiated and Black children are more likely to be removed from their families into the foster-care system.

In an effort to combat the structural racism of the “family policing system,” a movement to abolish the child-welfare system has sprung up. Using the “Defund the Police” movement as a model, its leaders demand the elimination of foster care and congregate care, of mandated reporting of maltreatment (by teachers and doctors, for instance) and of drug testing of infants and new mothers. They also want less police involvement in



PHOTO ADOBE STOCK

“Many parents feel like their rights have been taken away from them because society as a whole has lumped child abuse together with any form of physical discipline.”

- ALANA BREED, Child psychologist

domestic violence (because it leads to more reporting of child maltreatment).

The study highlights the potential for bias in doctors’ and nurses’ decisions about which injuries should be reported to Child Protective Services, according to the researchers. Medical caregivers are mandated reporters, obligated to report to CPS any situations in which they think children may be victims of abuse. Because caregivers rarely admit to injuring their children, such reports rely in part on providers’ gut feelings, making them susceptible to unconscious, systemic bias.

Bias can harm both Black and white children, said senior study author Stephanie Chao, MD, assistant professor of surgery at Stanford Medicine.

“If you over-identify cases of suspected child abuse, you’re separating children unnecessarily from their families and creating stress that lasts a lifetime,” Chao said. “But child abuse is extremely deadly, and if you miss one event — maybe a well-to-do Caucasian child where you think ‘No way’ — you may send that child back unprotected to a very dangerous environment. The consequences are really sad and devastating on both sides.”

Distinguishing Race and Poverty

Racial disparities in reporting child abuse have been documented before, but prior studies have not controlled well for poverty, which is a risk factor for abuse. Some experts argue that disproportionate reporting of injured Black children as possible abuse victims reflects only that their families tend to have lower incomes, not that medical professionals are subject to bias.

“Even when we control for income — in this case, via insurance type — African American children are still significantly over-represented as suspected victims of child abuse,” said Chao. “In addition, they were reported with lower injury severity scores, meaning there was more suspicion for children with less-severe injuries in one particular racial group.”

In general, the researchers found medical professionals had a higher threshold for suspecting white families of abuse and a lower threshold for suspecting Black families. For example, white children in the suspected abuse group were more likely than Black children to have worse injuries, and they were more likely to have been admitted to the intensive care unit.

By the Numbers

77% of abuse among Black children occurred in children 0 to 5 years of age

61% of Black children abused by biological parents

656,000 victims of child abuse/neglect nationwide

64,093 Texas victims

10% of all children suffer sexual abuse before age 18

1,840 child fatalities from abuse and neglect in Texas

**Children’s Bureau (Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Administration for Children and Families) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (acf.hhs.gov).*

Recognize the Forms of Abuse

Physical abuse: Any physical injury resulting in substantial harm to the child, or the genuine threat of substantial harm from physical injury to the child.

Sexual abuse: Any sexual conduct harmful to a child’s mental, emotional or physical welfare, as well as failure



PHOTO ADOBE STOCK

**RACIAL
DISPARITIES**
***in reporting
child abuse
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documented.***

CHILDREN'S BUREAU

U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH
& HUMAN SERVICES

ABOUT
The Children's Bureau (CB) partners with federal, state, tribal and local agencies to improve the overall health and well-being of our nation's children and families.

CHILD ABUSE *from A13*

to make a reasonable effort to prevent sexual conduct with a child.

Emotional abuse: A pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth.

Neglect: The failure to provide for a child's basic needs to sustain the health and life of the child, excluding failure caused primarily by financial inability unless relief services have been offered and refused.

Medical Neglect: A type of maltreatment caused by failure of the caregiver to provide for the appropriate health care of the child although financially able to do so, or offered financial or other resources to do so.

Human Trafficking: The exploitation of a child for the purpose of commercial sex or through force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of forced labor.

Resources

Texas law requires that any person suspecting that a child has been abused or neglected must immediately make a report to The Department of Family and Protective Services at (800) 252-5400 or visit txabusehotline.org.

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Child Advocates – Child Advocates mobilizes court-appointed volunteers to advocate for abused/neglected children in court so they can find safe, permanent homes. childadvocates.org/

Children @ Risk – Uses research and data to understand the needs of Texas children and their families. childrenatrisk.org

Children's Assessment Center – Provides a safe haven to sexually abused children and their families. cachouston.org/

Houston-Area Internet Crimes Against Children – Taskforce engaged in proactive and reactive investigations and prosecutions of persons involved in child abuse and exploitation involving the Internet. icactaskforce.org/

Be a Resource or BEAR – Raises awareness about how necessary it is to be a voice for at-risk children and help put an end to child abuse across the greater Houston area. BEARresourcehouston.org.

DePelchin Children's Center – visit: <http://www.depelchin.org>.



The Oklahoma Eagle

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Education
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