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SERVING GREATER TULSA SINCE 1921

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**FORMER BLACKWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS TEACHER HALEY CURFMAN**, shown here during her pregnancy, will not return to teach in the fall after she said the district moved her out of her classroom when she tried to take maternity leave. PHOTO PROVIDED

# 'Frustrated As Hell': Blackwell Teacher Quits After Trying To Take Maternity Leave.

**TEACHER MATERNITY LEAVE from A1**

**BLACKWELL** — A Blackwell Public Schools teacher quit her job in May after she said she received conflicting information from administrators and was “forced out” of her classroom when she tried to take maternity leave. But the district said it was simply following its policies, a claim that highlights the significance of a new state law that took effect July 1 mandating paid maternity leave for full-time employees of school districts.

Haley Curfman, who had taught second grade at Blackwell Elementary School for the past eight years, gave birth to her first child in May, five days after the school year

ended. Although it felt fortuitous that the birth coincided with the end of the school year in a way that might minimize her absence from the classroom, Curfman said she still wanted time home with her newborn that would extend into the fall semester. As a result, she told the district in February that she would be using her accrued personal and sick leave to take time off.

While Curfman said she was initially told that would be fine, she said her principal and superintendent eventually told her she would not be able to use accrued sick leave to stay home with her son after the doctor said she had recovered from childbirth. Curfman still

**Haley Curfman, who had taught second grade at Blackwell Elementary School for the past eight years, gave birth to her first child in May, five days after the school year ended.**

planned to use her 12 weeks provided by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows women to take maternity leave at any time within a year after the birth of a child.

Eventually, when administrators told Curfman they could not find a long-term substitute teacher for her class, she said they told her she would be moved to a different position. Curfman said she felt like she was facing backlash for trying to take maternity leave, a policy topic discussed extensively by the Oklahoma Legislature this year.

“It’s been a definite upsetting and frustrating

**TEACHER MATERNITY LEAVE cont. A6**

## Education Watch: Education Department Facing Criticism Over Open Records

**OPEN RECORDS from A1**

When KFOR reporter Kaylee Olivas called out Superintendent of Schools Ryan Walters for dragging out a public records request for more than 100 days, education journalists around the state could no doubt relate.

Public records are an important tool for journalists — part of our lifeblood, really. But the state’s Open Records Act doesn’t contain a time limit for response, only the standard “prompt and reasonable.” Olivas asks how transparent can the agency really be if it takes months to provide answers?

Her request is for evidence that the department has found inappropriate reading materials in schools since Walters took office in January. Walters claims there is pornography and indoctrination in classrooms and rooting that out was one of his main campaign promises.

Other media outlets say they, too, are facing lengthy delays. Oklahoma Watch has filed more than a dozen records requests with the department since January, and while some have been fulfilled, were still waiting on others, including the resumes of top administrators hired by Walters and financial records including contracts and purchase orders.

I discussed the issues on this week’s podcast if you want to give it a listen.

In other education news, the department’s press secretary, Justin Holcomb is resigning from the agency after just five months. He earned at least \$130,000 a year, payroll records show.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

## OHFA Gets An Earful During Housing Stability Session

**By MATT PATTERSON, NonDoc**

**OHFA SESSION**

Oklahoma’s Legislature took a crack at making housing more accessible and affordable to middle- and lower-income people across the state this year by creating the new Oklahoma Housing Stability Program and dedicating \$215 million toward the construction of new homes and assistance for those looking to live in them.

The Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency is administering the program and proposing rules for implementation. As part of that process, the agency is holding a series of listening sessions open to the general public, realtors, developers and those who work in nonprofits that help people get into homes, either as renters or buyers.

Monday’s session was held at Metro Tech in Oklahoma City and featured plenty of feedback from industry players. Another session was held Tuesday in Tulsa, and a Zoom meeting is slated for 1 p.m. Wednesday.

OHFA program director Darrell Beavers said four other sessions will be scheduled in rural areas of the state over the coming months.

“Our goal is to take what we hear at these meetings and use the ideas where we can and where they fit,” Beavers told the crowd in the Metro Tech auditorium

**OHFA SESSION cont. A6**

# The Feud

## Between Stitt And The Tribes Has Now Spilled Into The Republican-Controlled Legislature

STITT, TRIBAL FEUD from AP

DAWES COMMISSION  
PHOTO 821, AVLESWORTH  
ALBUM COLLECTION, OHS

**O**KLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt's ongoing feud with many of the Native American tribes in the state has grown so contentious that fellow Republicans in the Legislature and the state's attorney general are considering pushing him out of tribal negotiations altogether.

Those agreements, called compacts, have been worked out between the state and tribes over the last couple of decades to divvy up revenue from gambling, vehicle tags and the sale of tobacco and motor fuel on tribal land, all of which provide major revenue streams into state and tribal coffers.

Tribal casinos alone paid nearly \$200 million to the state last year under agreements giving tribes the exclusive right to offer casino gambling.

State Republican leaders are grumbling publicly that Stitt's hostile posture toward the tribes, including vetoing the extension of some compacts, are costing more than just money. They say it's also eroding the relationship with tribal leaders that, although sometimes testy, has been nurtured for decades during Republican and Democratic administrations.

"Even (former) President Trump has mentioned he doesn't know why the governor has such animosity toward the tribes," said Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat, an Oklahoma City Republican. "It's nonsensical."

Stitt's relationship with many tribal leaders has deteriorated since he unsuccessfully tried to rework gambling contracts by renegotiating the state's share of casino revenue early in his first term. Many of the state's most powerful tribes attempted to use their political influence last year to prevent Stitt from winning a second term.

This year, Stitt, himself a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, responded by vetoing virtually every legislative measure endorsed by the tribes, including a bill that would have allowed Native American students to wear tribal regalia at graduation ceremonies.

Stitt says he is trying to negotiate the best deal for all of the state's more than 4 million residents, particularly when it comes to the tobacco compacts.

Stitt is concerned that unless the compacts are renegotiated, the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark McGirt decision on tribal sovereignty, which determined a large swathe of eastern Oklahoma remains a Native American reservation, could allow tribes to undercut non-tribal retailers across that area.

Under the current compacts, tribal tobacco sales are limited to retail locations on tribal trust land, but since the McGirt decision, courts have determined more than 40% of the state is now within the boundaries of historical reservations.

The feud between Stitt and the tribes has now spilled into the Republican-controlled Legislature, which is scheduled to meet in a special session Monday just to override Stitt's vetoes of bills that would extend tribal compacts on tobacco and motor vehicles for another year.

Treat said he is willing to give the governor another year to negotiate with the tribes "in good faith," but that if no progress is shown the Legislature could take over the right to negotiate the compacts. Although the governor's office historically has handled compact negotiations with tribes, Treat said state law also authorizes the Legislature to do so.

Oklahoma's Republican Attorney General Gentner Drummond also has been critical of Stitt's posturing against the tribes and urged the Legislature to let him assume the defense of Oklahoma's interest in an ongoing legal fight over gambling compacts involving the governor's office and Cherokee Nation.

"Oklahoma's relationship with our tribal nations has suffered greatly as a result of the governor's divisive rhetoric and ceaseless legal attacks," Drummond said.

Five of Oklahoma's most powerful tribes — the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek) and Seminole nations — issued a joint resolution last week accusing the governor of not negotiating in good faith and threatening "to undo decades of work and damage tribal-state cooperation for generations to come." Stitt disputes he is not negotiating in good faith.

Feuds between governors and Native American tribes are not unique to Oklahoma.

Republican legislative leaders in Arizona in 2020 threatened to prevent tribes from renewing gambling licenses, a critical funding source for many tribes, if they had unresolved disputes over water rights.

In Connecticut, during the height of the pandemic, the state's governor engaged in a rare dispute with its two federally recognized tribes, the Mohegan Tribe and Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, over the tribes' decision to reopen their massive casinos.

But in Oklahoma, where the tribes are vitally important to the economy, particularly in depressed rural areas, even fellow Republicans are scratching their heads at Stitt's continued hostility toward the tribes.

Treat described Stitt's 2021 choice not to renew tribal compacts over hunting and fishing a "stupid decision" that has cost the state \$35 million. Stitt's office said at the time the compacts were unfair because tribal citizens could purchase licenses at a cheaper rate.

The number of licensed hunters and anglers in Oklahoma, which is used to calculate federal funds for wildlife conservation, has been reduced because many Native Americans have chosen to obtain licenses from the tribes, which no longer have an agreement to remit funds to the state.

The governor's concerns about the fallout from the McGirt Supreme Court decision were heightened last month when a federal appeals court determined the city of Tulsa had no authority to issue a speeding ticket to a Choctaw citizen.

"Citizens of Tulsa, if your city government cannot enforce something as simple as a traffic violation, there will be no rule of law in eastern Oklahoma," Stitt said.

Stitt's argument about cascading effect of the McGirt decision has merit. Already, thousands of Native American taxpayers in Oklahoma have claimed an exemption from paying state income tax under regulations governing taxation of tribal citizens in "Indian Country."

An Okmulgee woman and Muscogee (Creek) citizen, Alicia Stroble, claims she

is exempt from paying state income tax in a case pending before the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Several tribes have filed "friend of the court" briefs siding with Stroble's position.

"It's not going to work," Stitt said. "We can't have two different systems."

While many tribal sovereignty issues remain unresolved following the McGirt decision, experts on tribal law say the solution can be found by working with the tribes rather than fighting them in court.

"There has to be a way for us to work together, and that tends to be the answer to almost all the questions," said Sara Hill, attorney general for the Cherokee Nation. "The alternatives are always painful, expensive litigation."

Associated Press reporters Felicia Fonseca in Arizona and Susan Haigh in Connecticut contributed to this report.

**Stitt is concerned that unless the compacts are renegotiated, the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark McGirt decision on tribal sovereignty, which determined a large swathe of eastern Oklahoma remains a Native American reservation, could allow tribes to undercut non-tribal retailers across that area.**

# Dawes Commission & Federal Allotment Policy

By KENT CARTER, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



The Dawes Severalty Act (the General Allotment Act) of 1887 ushered in the allotment era. Drafted by U.S. Sen. Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts, the act did not pertain to the Five Tribes. Therefore, on November 1, 1893, Dawes, then retired, was appointed to head a three-member commission to the Five Tribes to negotiate agreements with the leaders of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole that would end tribal land ownership and give each member individual possession of a portion of the tribal lands. The Dawes Commission established its headquarters in Muskogee, Indian Territory, and its membership was expanded to five in 1895. Dawes died in 1903, and Tams Bixby replaced him as chairman, but the commission has always been called the Dawes Commission.

From 1894 to 1896 Dawes and his fellow commissioners, Meredith Helm Kidd of Indiana and Archibald S. McKennon of Arkansas, had no success convincing tribal leaders to accept the federal government's allotment policy. By 1896 congressional frustration led to passage of the first

in a series of acts that increased the commission's powers and changed its character from a diplomatic mission to a judicial tribunal that decided who was eligible for tribal membership and what land they received.

Under powers granted to it by the Curtis Act of 1898, the commission processed enrollment applications of more than 250,000 people and approved more than 101,000 whose names were put on what are commonly called the "final rolls of the Five Civilized Tribes." The enrollment process was closed as of March 4, 1907, and the final rolls remained the definitive source on eligibility for each tribe's membership. In order to allot the land, the commission surveyed and appraised the 19,525,966 acres of tribal land. The persons enrolled by the commission were allotted 15,794,000 acres, with individual allotment sizes based on the appraised value. Some persons eligible for allotment received cash rather than land. The rules governing both enrollment and allotment were unique to each tribe and were contained in agreements negotiated between 1897 and 1902 and were ratified by both

Congress and the tribes. Many enrollees wanted the same land, and the commission ruled on 10,952 contested allotments.

The commission reserved 125,497 acres for railroad rights-of-way, townsites, churches, schools, and cemeteries and segregated 431,080 acres of Choctaw and Chickasaw land holding coal and asphalt deposits and 1,278,753 acres containing timber. These segregated lands were leased under government supervision and eventually auctioned. After allotment was completed, 3,174,988 acres of unallotted land were sold. The commission surveyed 308 townsites and platted them into lots and blocks that were auctioned. The commission received and maintained accounts for the revenue from all these transactions and prepared, approved, and recorded patents for each tract of land. The Dawes Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes was abolished by act of Congress on August 1, 1914, and its unfinished business was transferred to the Five Civilized Tribes Agency in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

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DAWES COMMISSION 821, Aylesworth Album  
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Top 10 Black History Events In July



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# A CORNEL WEST CANDIDACY? The Stakes Are Too High to Ignore Political Reality

DONALD M. SUGGS, WORD IN BLACK



CORNEL WEST PHOTO IMAGE BY LIZ COURQUET-LESAULNIER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

CORNEL WEST

**B**lack Americans need to recognize that we face a disturbing political reality. Despite his avalanche of seemingly intractable legal problems, Donald J. Trump remains the favorite to be the nominee of the Republican Party in the general presidential election in 2024.

That would mean a rematch between President Biden and Trump.

The outcome of that election is likely to be determined by a few tens of thousands of votes. In the 2020 presidential election, the margin of victory for Joe Biden in Georgia and Arizona was less than 12,000 votes.

In stark terms, the winner of the presidential election next year will be sworn in in just 18 months. A second Trump administration will be better thought out and effective than his first — which saw a huge setback to our interests and concerns.

It is this alarming political reality that makes the self-absorbed, narcissistic third-party candidacy of Cornel West troubling.

Notwithstanding his right to run and the idealism he cited in his announcement (much of which I agree with), any measure of political acumen forces one to recall West's ill-fated support of Ralph Nader's spoiler campaign against then-Vice-President Al

**We need to learn from our history in this country about the strategic importance of a galvanized Black electorate to make realistic and smart decisions.**

Gore in his race against George W. Bush. There were disastrous consequences of the outcome of that race for people all over this country, in Iraq, and around the globe as a result of Bush's denial of climate change.

Expressing no regrets for his stance with Nader in 2000, West is about to do something like that again. There is much to admire in what West has advocated in the past. Although we should not forget some of his over-the-top ad hominem attacks on Barack Obama after he won the presidency in 2008.

Of course, West always cites his outspoken defense of poor and working-class people as the motive for his actions. I don't disagree with his avowed purpose for running as a champion for "truth and justice" as a presidential candidate "to reintroduce America to the best of itself — fighting to end poverty, mass incarceration, ending wars and ecological collapse, guaranteeing housing, health care, education, and living wages for all."

Amen.

I don't disagree — and I

respect him as a pioneering theorist, but I think he is making a poor political choice with his quixotic third-party presidential campaign.

But that is not the issue here. Rather it is the damage his third-party candidacy could do to Biden's re-election and the future direction of the country if Trump or a MAGA facsimile prevails next year. The only possible impact of West's vain, selfish candidacy is to take some votes away from Biden that might allow Trump or some likeminded far-right wing Republican to return to the White House.

Whatever Biden's shortcomings, the political system does not give us an opportunity to build a viable political and electoral coalition alternative. West and many other Black political figures seem to think that because they have every right to run, they should run campaigns that satisfy their personal aspirations and/or needs at the expense of the greater good of their communities.

We need to learn from our history in this country about

the strategic importance of a galvanized Black electorate to make realistic and smart decisions.

In 1948 the FDR political but reprehensible Democratic Party coalition — that included racist Southern Democrats — was shattered after a civil rights initiative was included in the party's platform.

President Truman's upset victory was only made possible by a surge of Black voters in swing states. This is an experience that has been repeated in several other closely decided presidential elections.

This teaches us that we should not squander our votes on Black "vanity" candidates, no matter how sincere, who offer no path for advancing our interests and concerns.

The stakes in next year's election are too high to ignore hard political reality. Remember how we got a 6 to 3 hard-right majority on the U.S. Supreme Court? Elections do have consequences.

# "Whenever that doctor releases you to go back to work (after giving birth), you can no longer use sick days unless you're sick."

SHAWN HASKINS, Blackwell Public Schools Superintendent

TEACHER MATERNITY LEAVE *from A2*

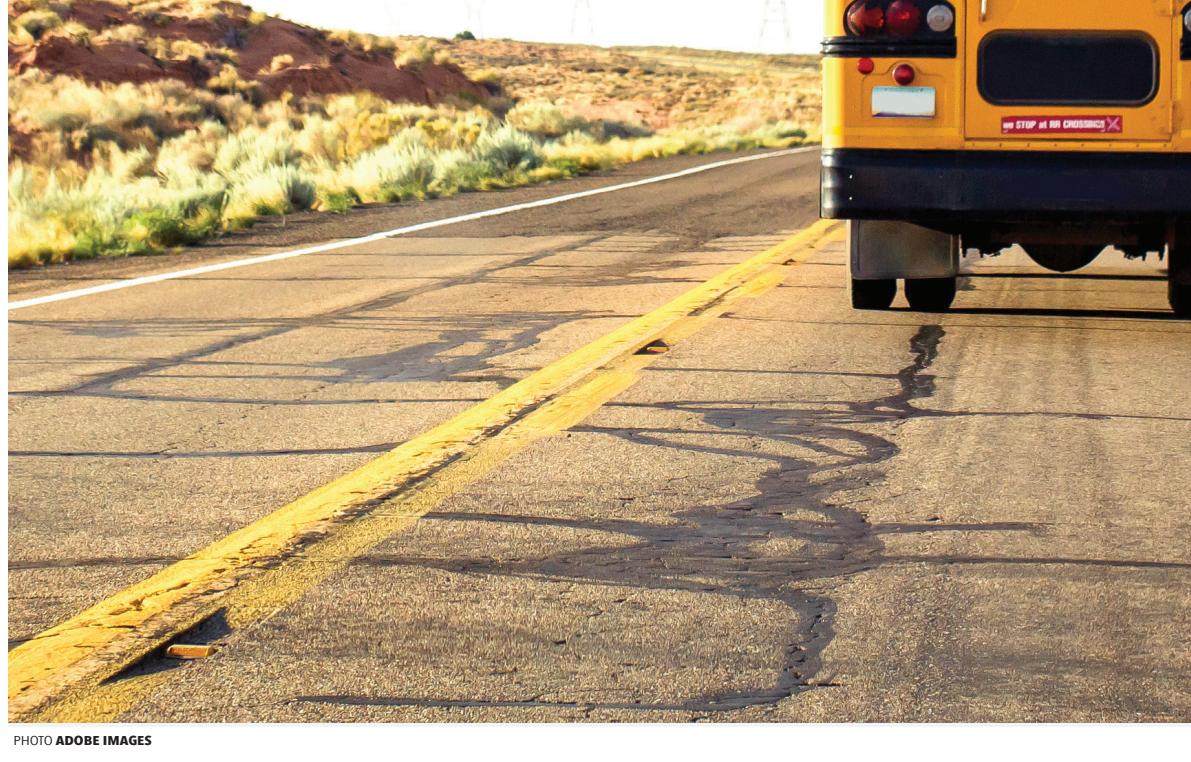


PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

time," Curfman said in an interview Monday. "That's an understatement."

Curfman, who had been in the same second-grade classroom for eight years, said the district wanted to move her to a "kindergarten reading specialist" position requiring less instructional time with fewer students. Although the district called it a "lateral" move and said she would not lose any pay, it felt like a demotion, Curfman said. Under the FMLA, temporary lateral moves are allowed when a teacher takes maternity leave. Curfman said she received conflicting information about whether the transfer would be temporary or permanent.

"I was losing my classroom and everything that I put in it because of maternity leave," Curfman said. "The only thing they could give me was, 'We have to think about the students. We have to think about the students.' But (...) I think about the students every single day. It's condescending to say that to me. It's literally all I think about, which is why I gave you (administrators) six or seven months to find [a substitute]."

Curfman said she felt as though she were being punished for doing nothing wrong.

"The whole point of it is I should not have lost my classroom and my position of eight years because of maternity leave," Curfman said.

'Schools can't find people'

After a school board meeting Monday night, Blackwell Superintendent Shawn Haskins said that he could not discuss specific personnel issues involving Curfman, but he emphasized that the district does not discriminate against employees.

"Sometimes life sucks, and sometimes you think you're getting screwed," Haskins said. "Just pick up your bag and march forward. But nobody's getting discriminated — I'm not gonna allow it. It's against the law."

Haskins said his district tries to find long-term substitutes for teachers, but he noted that the ongoing teacher shortage makes it difficult.

"Schools can't find people," Haskins said. "We're going to make decisions (about) what's best for our kids to get them the best education."

Curfman's departure, however, leaves Blackwell Public Schools with one less veteran teacher. In a Facebook post July 6, she described the seemingly callous way Haskins treated her as she attempted to take time off.

"The superintendent even told me, in one of our meetings, 'Don't take this the wrong way, but I know a lot of people by face in this town, but when I look at yours, I don't recognize you,'" Curfman wrote on Facebook.

Curfman, who said she has lived in Blackwell for 24 years since she was in second grade herself, provided NonDoc with portions of audio recordings she made while discussing her situation with Haskins. One recording includes Haskins making the remark about not recognizing Curfman around town.

On Monday, Haskins defended his conversations with Curfman, saying he is well-liked and polite.

"I love all my employees," he said. "And this is what I challenge you to do. Go talk to them. Go talk to them. And you will find out I'm not rude to anybody. I love people."

During Monday's Blackwell Public Schools Board of Education meeting, Haskins described the district's FMLA and sick leave policies, saying that teachers are not allowed to use accrued sick leave simply to stay home with their child. Rather, he said sick leave must be used for sickness or injury or to care for a family member who is sick or injured.

In Blackwell Public Schools, personal leave does not accrue, but teachers get a set amount each year in their contracts.

"Whenever that doctor releases you to go back to work (after giving birth), you can no longer use sick days unless you're sick," Haskins told board members.

But BPS district policy states that when employees are using their 12 weeks of leave authorized by FMLA, which can be used to stay at home and care for a newborn, employees must use accrued paid leave first, which includes sick leave.

Curfman said the stress of conflicting information about her requested maternity leave and the possibility that she might lose her classroom affected her pregnancy.

"I was actually hospitalized a couple times, because anxiety and stress and all that stuff was playing a part, and I was in the hospital for late nights and stuff, you know, borderline preterm labor," Curfman said.

In another recording provided by Curfman, Haskins even seemed to agree with Curfman's feeling that she was being demoted from second grade teacher to kindergarten reading specialist.

"I understand the frustration," Haskins said.

Curfman replied: "Yes. I'm frustrated as hell."

"I get that," Haskins said. "I get how you can feel like, 'Hey, I'm losing my position because I'm having a baby.'"

"I don't just feel like that, that's exactly what's happening," Curfman said.

Haskins responded: "I see your point. I see your point."

Teacher maternity leave bill becomes law

The confusing situation comes as the Oklahoma Legislature recently passed a bill aimed at alleviating the stress faced by teachers who have children.

After SB 1121 became law July 1, any employee of a public school district — as well as full-time CareerTech instructors and educators with the Department of Corrections, the Office of Juvenile Affairs and the Department of Rehabilitation Services — will now be entitled to take up to six weeks of paid maternity leave.

Although the bill says the leave must be used immediately following birth, it also stipulates that it "shall be in addition to and not in place of sick leave due to pregnancy." The new law also creates the Public School Paid Maternity Leave Revolving Fund to compensate districts implementing the policy. While the maternity leave proposal was being considered over the past two years, lawmakers heard concerns from some district leaders about the difficulty finding and paying for long-term substitute teachers.

Still, Haskins said that he does not expect the new law to change anything in his district.

"That's something we will deal with, but what they just passed isn't going to change anything here," Haskins said. "Right now, the burden on (paying for) subs is on the district. Now the state is just going to take up that burden up to six weeks."

Curfman, meanwhile, said she is unsure whether she will end up teaching in another district this falls or next spring. She said she has had offers already.

"I'm just kind of weighing my options right now," Curfman said. "I have nothing set in stone at this point. I'm focused on my child."

PAUL MONIES 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.

# Lawmakers, the state is drastically lacking workforce housing

OHFA SESSION *from A2*

as Monday's session began.

## Program includes homebuilder subsidies, downpayment support

A purpose of the program is to increase the number of single-family homes available for purchase across Oklahoma by providing gap financing to assist buyers and offer incentives to entice developers to build homes within specific parameters: from 1,300 to 2,200 square feet in size and between \$140 and \$160 per square foot in cost, depending where the home is located.

Lawmakers said during session that the state is drastically lacking workforce housing.

"There's a housing shortage, period, every place I look, and I'm from rural Oklahoma," House Appropriations and Budget Chairman Kevin Wallace (R-Wellston) said in May. "Every time a new teacher comes in, there's never a place they can live. There's never any open housing."

Included in the Legislature's \$215 million funding package is \$81.7 million for homebuilder subsidies, including 0 percent interest loans. Those homes would eventually be sold to individuals who qualify for OHFA's down-payment assistance program.

Also included is another \$81.7 million of subsidies for developers to construct affordable rental properties at a maximum cost of \$250,000 per unit.

An additional \$40.8 million will be used to assist consumers with down payments and closing costs to buy new homes built through the program. Those who participate are required to live in the home for at least five years. If the resident stays in the home for that period, the down payment costs are eventually forgiven on a pro-rated basis determined by the amount of time the resident lived in the property.

Finally, \$10.7 million has been allocated for OHFA

**"There's a housing shortage, period, every place I look, and I'm from rural Oklahoma."**

Kevin Wallace (R-Wellston),  
Oklahoma House Appropriations and  
Budget Chairman

administrative costs associated with running the program.

"It is not our goal to make money off of this," Beavers told the audience at Metro Tech. "We want this money to go to what it is intended for, so our administrative money will be spent on getting the money out there and monitoring it and making sure it is doing what the Legislature intended."

OHFA homeownership director Valentia Doolin told the audience that down-payment assistance helps with one of the key barriers to home ownership.

"What we know is people lack the ability to come up with the down payment required to purchase a home," Doolin said. "Any effort to improve home ownership in Oklahoma needed to include an aspect that will help individual households have enough money to finance down payment and/or closing costs."

## Feedback: 'Leave some flexibility for what the market dictates'

OHFA officials had no shortage of realtors and developers who attended their first public session on Monday. OKC-based real estate agent Boston Snowden said more education is needed for those in the industry.

"I find that as a BIPOC developer, it's not an even playing field," he told OHFA officials. "And that's no offense to anyone here. I'm pretty sure everyone here would like it to be. But the situation just isn't that way. Learning about affordable housing is very complicated, and once you learn it, you also learn you need a lot of money. Just to get started you need marketing analysis, pre-development fees, and site control. There are lots you have to have. My question: Is there going to be money for developers who aren't traditionally in this situation? It could be education or other help — loans, grants, some of these things that would make it a little more even."

OHFA SESSION *cont. A7*



(FROM LEFT) SASHA BLACKFOX-QUALLS, LISA ROBISON HALL AND CODEY POINDEXTER, were elected Saturday, July 9, 2023, to represent Districts 1, 3 and 8 on the Cherokee Nation Tribal Council. PHOTO NONDOC

# New Members Elected To Cherokee Nation Tribal Council

CHEROKEE NATION ELECTION from A1

The Cherokee Nation runoff election Saturday saw three new faces elected to the Tribal Council. Sasha Blackfox-Qualls, Lisa Robison Hall and Codey Poindexter won their respective races to represent District 1, 3 and 8, respectively, according to unofficial results.

The Cherokee Nation Tribal Council is a 17-member legislative body whose sole responsibility is to establish laws and conduct business to "further the interests of the Cherokee Nation and its citizens." All Tribal Council members are elected to four-year terms.

Of the 8,315 registered voters within Districts 1, 3 and 8, Saturday's runoff election saw 2,829 people participate. About 52 percent of voters cast their ballots absentee, while nearly 35 percent voted the day of the election.

In the June 3 general election, Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. and Deputy Chief Bryan Warner were reelected for a second term. They were joined by incumbent Tribal

Councilors Daryl Legg of District 6, Dora Patzkowski of District 12, Joe Deere of District 13 and Julia Coates, at-large. Another new member, Kevin Easley Jr. was also elected as the newest District 14 representative on the Tribal Council.

Owing to term limits, all reelected candidates will be ineligible to run for their current positions again until 2031.

The unofficial results do not include "disputed" ballots. The Cherokee Nation runoff results will be considered official after they are certified by the tribe's Election Commission.

Defeated candidates have until Wednesday, July 12, to request recounts and until Monday, July 17, to challenge the Cherokee Nation runoff results. In 2021, one result was challenged unsuccessfully. Elected officials are expected to be sworn in on Aug. 14.

## Tribal Council District 1

For Tribal Council District 1, Blackfox-Qualls

received 753 votes (56.15 percent), defeating her opponent, Dale Lee Glory, who obtained 588 votes (43.85 percent).

A registered nurse who previously worked at the W.W. Hastings Hospital in Tahlequah, Blackfox-Qualls also serves on the Hilbert Public Schools Board. During her campaign, she expressed a desire to address the "rising mental health crisis."

"My number one goal is to be responsive and provide resources and solutions in a timely manner. I plan to be available and active on day one," she said during her campaign.

## Tribal Council District 3

Hall won the race for Tribal Council District 3, receiving 508 votes (62.10 percent). Sara Drywater-Barnett received 310 votes (37.90 percent).

Hall is a trust accounts administrator at the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration's Cherokee Agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior.

"I will advocate for housing for elders and

families, transportation for cancer and diabetic patients living in the rural area, and donated food delivery service for elders who do not have transportation to pick up their monthly groceries," she said during her campaign.

## Tribal Council District 8

With 413 votes (61.64 percent), Poindexter won the race for Tribal Council District 8, defeating Jillian Decker, who received 257 votes (38.36 percent).

Poindexter is a youth pastor at GracePoint Outreach Center in Baron. He is also an artist and a freelance graphic designer.

During his campaign, Poindexter identified tribal housing and water quality as top priorities.

"The only thing I'll promise is that I'll do my best," he said during the campaign. "I really want to focus on our Cherokee speakers and our elders as a whole and give them the best quality care that we have."



CONSTRUCTION PROGRESSES ON THE FAIRGROUND FLATS APARTMENT COMPLEX being built on North May Avenue near the State Fairgrounds in Oklahoma City on Wednesday, May 17, 2023.

PHOTO JOE TOMLINSON

*Let me say that I believe home ownership is a way that people are able to build a very nice nest egg for themselves, that they can use later in life.*

RON NANCE,  
Lawton-based builder

Retired homebuilder David Richey questioned whether homes could be built for the \$140 per square foot in rural areas and \$160 per square foot in urban areas as outlined in OHFA's initial guidelines, though those are subject to change.

"I've got news for you, when you buy lumber and you want it delivered to Jones, Oklahoma, they're not going to give you a break in price because you're building in a rural area," Richey told OHFA officials. "They're going to charge you more. Just because you do it in the country doesn't mean it's cheaper. That's not the way it comes out. Most of the stuff we're seeing built on standard-spec houses is anything from \$180 to \$200 per foot."

Lawton-based builder Ron Nance told OHFA officials there is a great need for rental property across Oklahoma.

"Let me say that I believe home ownership is a way that people are able to build a very nice nest egg for themselves that they can use later in life, but my concern is with interest rates the way they are now, there aren't going to be as many moderate house payments as there have

been in the past," he said. "This program will help people buy houses, but what we see is a lot of people who cannot afford to make a payment, so they rent. It's a necessity that they rent. I would have a hard time predicting in our market, and the rest of the state, that a 50-50 split from buying and renting is the way the customers come. What I'm trying to say is to leave some flexibility for what the market dictates. I would hope that we see a lot of home buyers, but we are likely to have more renters."

Gary Jones, the government affairs director for the OKC Metro Association of REALTORS, urged OHFA to administer the program as efficiently as possible so that more money can be allocated by the Legislature in the future to help continue to build more homes across the state.

"There is one thing that our membership has in common is that the amount of money in this legislation is not enough to address the overall needs in the state of Oklahoma," Jones said. "That is why it is important that you are as successful in this as you possibly can be so that we can show the Legislature this is a good investment."

CAIR Oklahoma advocacy coordinator Nicole Baumann questioned the decision of OHFA to allocate most of the \$215 million

to assist rural communities with housing. Baumann also works with an area housing coalition. Under current OHFA guidelines, 75 percent of the money will go to rural areas, with just 25 percent allocated to urban areas. Rural Oklahoma has seen its population decline as the state's population continues to grow overall.

"I know you said the rural-urban split was fairly non-negotiable, and I acknowledge the spirit of the bill, but I've been wondering if that is a needs-based assessment?" she asked Beavers.

Beavers said the split is how the OHFA interpreted the wishes of the Legislature when it crafted the bill.

"It's pretty clear the legislation was intended to help rural areas the most," Beavers said. "The 75-25 isn't based on empirical data. It's based on what we perceive, and that is 75 percent of the money should go to rural areas."

OKC-based real estate agent and developer Nick Singer also questioned the split.

"The rural areas are depopulating," he said. "While they do have a need for housing, the urban areas are growing much faster. Oklahoma as a whole grew 5.5 percent in the 2010 to 2020 census and rural areas didn't follow that trend. It doesn't make sense to build a bunch of housing where people don't want to live."



# Oklahoma Cities, Counties Navigate Uncertainty of New Oil and Gas Law

By PAUL MONIES, OKLAHOMA WATCH

NEW OIL AND GAS LAW from A2

## CITIES

and counties in Oklahoma are getting conflicting information about whether a new law forbidding the state

from doing business with banks perceived as hostile to oil and gas applies to their pension funds, bond sales or bank loans.

The uncertainty has frozen a project in Stillwater and led to discussions about taking unilateral action against banks on a list of restricted financial companies at the retirement system for Tulsa County.

State Treasurer Todd Russ released the list of banned companies in early May. The 13 companies include BlackRock Inc., JP Morgan Chase & Co., Wells Fargo & Co., Bank of America and State Street Corp. The list came out of the Oklahoma Energy Discrimination Elimination Act, which lawmakers passed in 2022.

Dozens of states now have laws forbidding business with financial institutions who have pledged to reduce their exposure to oil and gas companies or plans to reduce their carbon footprints. That backlash has been supported by a constellation of conservative groups who have provided model legislation to lawmakers and talking points to state treasurers and other financial officials, including those in Oklahoma.

Stillwater wants to replace aging heating and cooling equipment and replace streetlights with LED lights. But

the energy efficiency upgrade project is stalled because of uncertainty over the law.

Stillwater Mayor Will Joyce said Bank of America wants additional assurance a pending loan for the project won't be affected by the bank's appearance on the state treasurer's list. The situation is further exacerbated by rising interest rates and higher materials costs, Joyce said.

"We are completely in limbo," Joyce said. "We've got a contractor who's ready to move on some of these projects. We are forced to hang around and wait until someone can give us a definitive answer one way or the other that the bank will feel comfortable accepting. They don't want to be the first one to stick their neck out."

Alternatively, Joyce said the city could go with a bank that has a higher interest rate than the one offered on the term sheet.

"Our options are to wait to spend more money or try to find a way to fund it out of our city budget," he said. "I certainly understand the concern that some legislators might have in supporting the oil and gas industry in our state, which is an extremely important part of the economy. But for whatever reason, this law just was not given the time it needed to be vetted and to be fully understood by everybody involved."

## State Pension Systems Affected

The state's seven pension systems combined manage more than \$47 billion in assets. The Oklahoma Public Employees Retirement System, or OPERS, has the largest exposure to companies on the treasurer's restricted financial companies list. More than 60% of its assets are managed by companies on the list.

OPERS trustees are expected to decide soon whether to exercise an exemption in the law that would forgo that pension system from divesting almost \$6.9 billion in assets managed by BlackRock and JP Morgan Chase. OPERS total asset portfolio is worth \$10.2 billion. The system's trustees are expected to discuss the law at their monthly meeting on Thursday.

Legal opinions from other city and county officials describe how the state law only applies to "state government entities" that are pension systems. The pension systems run by Tulsa and Oklahoma counties and the systems run by Oklahoma City and Tulsa aren't covered under the Oklahoma Energy Discrimination Elimination Act.

Other counties across the state have their retirement assets managed by OPERS, said Chris Schroder, executive director of the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma.

"From everything I've read, it doesn't apply to the counties directly in their financial realms," Schroder said. "It's the (state) retirement systems and anything dealing with the state treasurer."

Tulsa County Treasurer John Fothergill said trustees of the Tulsa County Employees Retirement System discussed the law at a recent meeting. They got advice from their investment advisor and the Tulsa County district attorney's office that it didn't apply to the county's pension system, which has \$320 million in assets.

Fothergill said the county's pension system does contract with State Street, which is on the state treasurer's list of restricted financial companies. He said he expected Russ's office to update its list to remove State Street, which didn't respond to the state treasurer's letter earlier this year.

"We talked as a retirement board as to whether we wanted to take a stance as well because both Tulsa as a city and as a county are very reliant on oil and gas revenue," said Fothergill, a Republican who took office in 2020. "We talked about it, even if it's symbolic in nature, to do something as a retirement board."

"When it was all said and done, we didn't know how effective it would be or if it would create change with such a small investment (portfolio) in the big scheme of things. We just decided as long as State Street was alright and we weren't invested with those other 12, that would be enough."

Meanwhile, officials with the city of Oklahoma City watched with interest as the Legislature took up another bill earlier this year that would put further restrictions on doing business with banks or financial firms perceived to be boycotting oil and gas. The Oklahoma City Employee Retirement System has \$816 million in assets. It counted State Street and Wells Fargo, which are on the state treasurer's list, among its investment managers in 2022.

Rep. Terry O'Donnell, R-Catoosa, authored House Bill 2547, which would prohibit state pension systems from relying on voting guidance from financial firms on the treasurer's restricted company list in shareholder proxy elections. The bill passed the House but didn't get a hearing in the Senate.

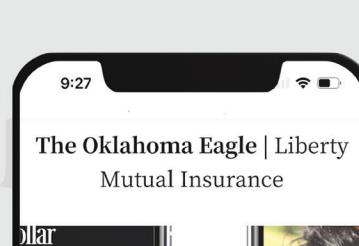
"We don't think this bill would impact municipal pension systems," Oklahoma City municipal attorney Richard Mahoney said in a March email to colleagues. "There have been past proposals that would impact municipal pension systems, so we need to be alert for amendments to this bill."

However, a separate section of the law includes political subdivisions and forbids contracts of more than \$100,000 if the contractor is deemed to be boycotting oil and gas companies.

"We have heard from municipalities that are concerned about increased costs, and we will continue to work with municipalities and their municipal attorneys to ensure compliance with the act," said Mike Fina, executive director of the Oklahoma Municipal League. "We have met with the state treasurer and will continue to consult with him as we move forward."

State trust funds like the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust or the one run by the Commissioners of the Land Office aren't covered by the oil and gas discrimination law. Despite that, Gov. Kevin Stitt and two other members of the five-person CLO board voted to stop contracting with BlackRock and JPMorgan Chase at the board's June 7 meeting. Together, those two firms manage more than \$300 million in assets for the \$2.5 billion school land trust.

The Land Office sent letters June 30 to BlackRock and JPMorgan Chase informing them it wasn't renewing the investment manager contracts. The agency has more than a dozen other financial companies managing assets in its portfolio.





The Oklahoma Eagle

## NOTICE

Published in The Oklahoma Eagle:  
July 7 and 14, 2023.

NOTICE TO BIDDERS  
SEALED BIDS FOR  
PROJECT NO. 104266 CONTRACT 2

Notice is hereby given that pursuant to an order by the Mayor of the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma, sealed bids will be received in Room 260 of the Office of the City Clerk, City of Tulsa, 175 E. 2nd Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74103 until 8:30 a.m. the 4th day of August, 2023 for furnishing all tools, materials and labor and performing the work necessary to be done in the construction of the following:

PROJECT NO. 140266 CONTRACT 2 TMUA-W 15-13, 2036N2065Z TMUA-W 20-13 NON-ARTERIAL STREET REHABILITATION MAINTENANCE ZONES 2065Z, 2065C

The entire cost of the improvement shall be paid from Account No. 2036N2065Z.Streets. NArtRhb.4281.42813122-541106; 2 0 3 6 N 2 0 6 5 Z . S t r e e t s . NArtRhb.4283.42833122-541106; 2 3 3 1 W 0 0 0 1 4 . W a t e r D i s t . Water.7400.74003122-541101; 2 2 3 1 F 0 0 0 3 . S t r m S e w e r . Flood.5600.56003122-541101

A MANDATORY Pre-Bid Conference is scheduled for Tuesday, July 18, 2023 at 9:00 a.m. and will be held through video conferencing with Microsoft Teams, invitation presented on the City of Tulsa's website at this link: <https://www.cityoftulsa.org/government/departments/engineering-services/construction-bids/>

Attendance at the Pre-Bid Conference is MANDATORY. Bids will not be received from contractors who did not attend the Pre-Bid Conference.

Bids will be accepted by the City Clerk from the holders of valid pre-qualifications certificates from the City of Tulsa in one or more of the following classifications: A or C.

Drawings, specifications and contract documents for construction of said public improvements of the said project have been adopted by the Mayor of said City. Copies of same may be obtained at the Office of the Director of Engineering Services at the City of Tulsa Engineering Services, 2317 South Jackson, Room 103, North Building, for a non-refundable fee in the amount of \$50.00 made payable to the City of Tulsa by check or money order.

Contract requirements shall include compliance as required by law pertaining to the practice of non-discrimination in employment.

The overall aspirational Small Business Enterprise utilization goal for this project is ten (10) percent.

Attention is called to Resolution No. 18145 of August 23, 1988, requiring bidders to commit to the goal of employing on the project at least fifty percent bona fide residents of the City of Tulsa and/or MSA in each employment classification.

Attention is called to Resolution 7404 of November 8, 2006, requiring bidders, their subcontractors and their lower-tier subcontractors to hire only citizens of the United States.

The City of Tulsa itself is exempt from the payment of any sales or use taxes, and pursuant to Title 68 O.S. Section 1356(10), direct vendors to the City are also exempt from those taxes. A bidder may exclude from his bid appropriate sales taxes, which he will not have to pay while acting for and on behalf of the City of Tulsa.

A Certified or Cashier's Check or Bidders Surety Bond, in the sum of 5% of the amount of the bid will be required from each bidder to be retained as liquidated damages in the event the successful bidder fails, neglects or refuses to enter into said contract for the construction of said public improvements for said project and furnish the necessary bonds within thirty days from and after the date the award is made.

The bidder to whom a contract is awarded will be required to furnish public liability and workmen's compensation insurance; Performance, Statutory, and Maintenance bonds acceptable to the City of Tulsa, in conformity with the requirements of the proposed contract documents. The Performance, Statutory, and Maintenance bonds shall be for one hundred percent (100%) of the contract price.

All bids will be opened and considered by the Bid Committee of said City at a meeting of said Committee to be held in the City Council Room of City Hall in said City at 9:00 a.m. on the 4th day of August 2023.

Dated at Tulsa, Oklahoma, this 7th day of July 2023.

(SEAL)  
Christina Chappell  
City Clerk

## NOTICE

Published in The Oklahoma Eagle:  
July 7 and 14, 2023.

NOTICE TO BIDDERS  
SEALED BIDS FOR  
PROJECT NO. CS 23-003

Notice is hereby given that pursuant to an order by the Mayor of the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma, sealed bids will be received in Room 260 of the Office of the City Clerk, City of Tulsa, 175 E. 2nd Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74103 until 8:30 a.m. the 4th day of August, 2023 for furnishing all tools, materials and labor and performing the work necessary to be done in the construction of the following:

PROJECT NO. CS 23-003 CITYWIDE ARTERIAL CRACK SEALING

The entire cost of the improvement shall be paid from Account No. 2036N2065Z.Streets. CWARP4281.42813243-541106; 2 0 3 6 A 1 0 0 0 Z . S t r e e t s . CWARP4282.42823243-541106; 2 0 3 6 A 1 0 0 0 Z . S t r e e t s . CWARP4283.42833243-541106

A MANDATORY Pre-Bid Conference is scheduled for Tuesday, July 18, 2023 at 9:30 a.m. and will be held through video conferencing with Microsoft Teams, invitation presented on the City of Tulsa's website at this link: <https://www.cityoftulsa.org/government/departments/engineering-services/construction-bids/>

Attendance at the Pre-Bid Conference is MANDATORY. Bids will not be received from contractors who did not attend the Pre-Bid Conference.

Bids will be accepted by the City Clerk from the holders of valid pre-qualifications certificates from the City of Tulsa in one or more of the following classifications: A or C.

Drawings, specifications and contract documents for construction of said public improvements of the said project have been adopted by the Mayor of said City. Copies of same may be obtained at the Office of the Director of Engineering Services at the City of Tulsa Engineering Services, 2317 South Jackson, Room 103, North Building, for a non-refundable fee in the amount of \$50.00 made payable to the City of Tulsa by check or money order.

Contract requirements shall include compliance as required by law pertaining to the practice of non-discrimination in employment.

The overall aspirational Small Business Enterprise utilization goal for this project is ten (10) percent.

Attention is called to Resolution No. 18145 of August 23, 1988, requiring bidders to commit to the goal of employing on the project at least fifty percent bona fide residents of the City of Tulsa and/or MSA in each employment classification.

Attention is called to Resolution 7404 of November 8, 2006, requiring bidders, their subcontractors and their lower-tier subcontractors to hire only citizens of the United States.

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All bids will be opened and considered by the Bid Committee of said City at a meeting of said Committee to be held in the City Council Room of City Hall in said City at 9:00 a.m. on the 4th day of August 2023.

(SEAL)  
Christina Chappell  
City Clerk

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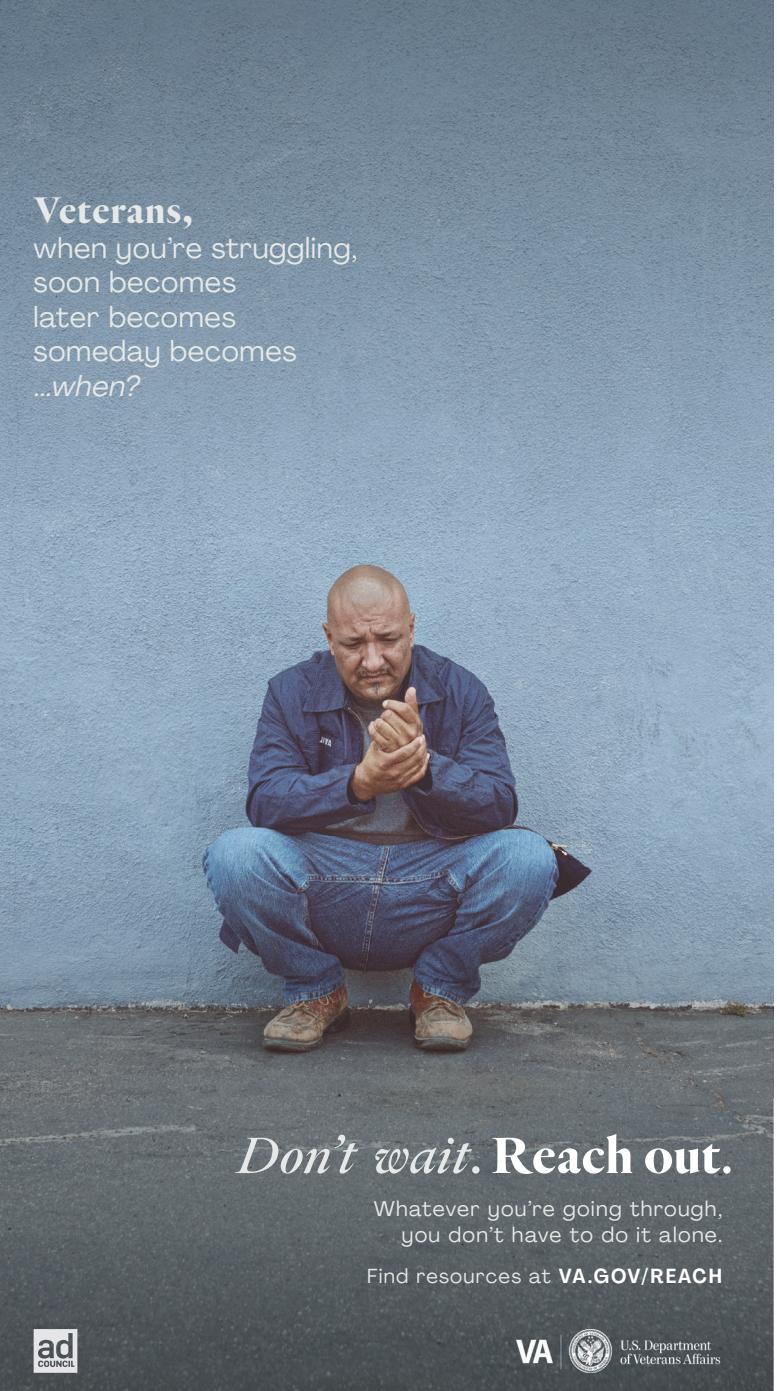
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### ACADEMIC TUTORING

The Alliance for Multicultural Services' Kijana Youth Program is making a profound impact. A11

### DROUGHT HITS BLACK FARMERS

Black people, in the United States of America, don't always have access to clean water. A12



# Les Twins Are on a Mission to Improve Student Mental Health

When they're not on stage with Beyoncé the brothers work with Kids Write Network to build youth emotional resilience through dance.

By AZIAH SHID, WORD IN BLACK

LES TWINS

If you've been lucky enough to score tickets to Beyoncé's Renaissance World Tour, you know Queen B is on stage dancing with Larry and Laurent Bourgeois — better known as Les Twins.

The 35-year-old identical twin brothers are known for their distinctive hairstyles (afros, braids, or twists) as well as their ability to pop, lock, and effortlessly groove in a variety of dance styles. But while the two Frenchmen shine on stage, their life growing up in the projects just north of Paris wasn't always so glamourous.

"I would share my meal with nine kids. When you're used to that, you're not looking for more food —you're just looking for everybody to have their own meal," Laurent tells Word in Black. "So, ask me, where I was feeling free? I felt pretty free when I was dancing because it took me away from everything."

That's why since the end of May, Les Twins have brought their ability to use dance to improve well-being to the Rise for Mental Health tour. The tour is the result of a partnership with the Kids Write Network, an organization that works to boost student literacy.

"They have changed lives, they have saved lives, they have shifted the way children feel," Helen Georgaklis, the founder of KWN, says about the impact of Les Twins.

Literacy is crucial, Georgaklis says, but so is the well-being of youth. The recent increase in mental health challenges and teen suicide rates made KWN and Les Twins want to do something to help.

Indeed, the effort is called the Rise Mental Health tour because "we want people to figuratively and literally rise to the occasion of doing something when it comes to speaking about mental health," Georgaklis says.

"To be able to destigmatize the whole thing with mental health and to be able to really connect in a way with the youth and with adults like that — we're rising and standing up for something that we believe in very strongly," she explains.

The need for the tour is certainly there. In the

United States, the suicide rate among Black youth has skyrocketed. Data shows that suicide is the leading cause of death for Black girls aged 12-14.

Given the rise of teen mental health challenges — both during and post-pandemic —educators, parents, and community organizers are all looking for solutions.

To foster emotional resilience and boost student confidence, KWN's six-step program combines positive psychology with neuroscience. The program empowers students with communication skills and helps them navigate adverse situations.

"Some people, when they're mad, when they're not appreciated, not content, or anything, they overstimulate," Laurent says. "If they don't know what to do with their emotions, they might beat up someone else, scream in the pillow, or actually cry."

Once a school registers to participate, teachers are trained to help students regulate their emotions, develop coping skills, and build a positive mindset. Teachers also prepare students for participating in a workshop with Les Twins.

During the workshop, Les Twins show students how to use movement and dance to express themselves through words they may not be able to say, write, or draw. They also talk to them about self-love and acceptance.

"We've had teachers come up to us and say [Les Twins] have done in two hours, what teachers have not been able to do in the entire year of school," Georgaklis says. She says a teacher recently told them that a week before participating in Les Twins' workshop, a student was contemplating suicide — "and today he wants to live."

Ultimately, the goal of the tour is to shift the narrative around mental health and create a safe space for youth to express their emotions through art.

"It can be designing, it can be dancing, it can be sports, it can be running, it can be anything — but at least this is the right thing to actually express themselves," Laurent says.



LES TWINS during a shoot with photographer Shawn Welling. PHOTO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

# Kijana Youth Program Empowers Refugees, Immigrants

By LAURA ONYENEHO, WORD IN BLACK

KIJANA YOUTH PROGRAM

The Alliance for Multicultural Services' Kijana Youth Program is making a profound impact on the lives of refugees and immigrants in Houston. Dedicated to enriching the educational journey and cultural identity of these young individuals, the program serves as a vital resource for empowerment and support.

Each year, the program's dedicated tutors offer academic tutoring, math/science labs, and computer lessons to over 280 students in the Gulfton area of Southwest Houston. Beyond academic support, Kijana tutors engage students in various cultural, team-building, and leadership activities such as physical recreation, art projects, music and dance, field trips, and volunteer projects.

This month, the Kijana Youth Program received a \$14,000 grant from the Center for Afterschool,

Summer, and Enrichment for Kids, a division of the Harris County Department of Education, to cater to the needs of youth during the summer.

The funding will enable the program to offer activities for youth grades 8 to 12 encompassing career exploration, guest speakers from various industries reflecting the communities served, financial literacy workshops, college exploration, job readiness activities, and assistance with job applications and resume creation. Additionally, younger participants will engage in cultural activities, arts and crafts, book clubs, music lessons, and field trips.

The Defender spoke with Marilyn Ventura, education programs senior manager on the impact this program has on refugees and immigrants in the city.

**Defender:** The Youth Program received a \$14k grant award. What needs do you attend to address with the funding?

**Ventura:** With the \$14,000 we've got from the Harris County Department of Education for the County Connections Initiative. We will be able to take the kids on field trips. So far we've taken them on four and we also plan to expand hours for youth counselors, so they won't be limited to certain hours throughout the day.

**Defender:** In what ways does the program foster a sense of community and belonging for the youth it serves?

**Ventura:** The Alliance Youth Program is very diverse. We have a large Hispanic and African/African-American community. I believe that working with the kids day in and day

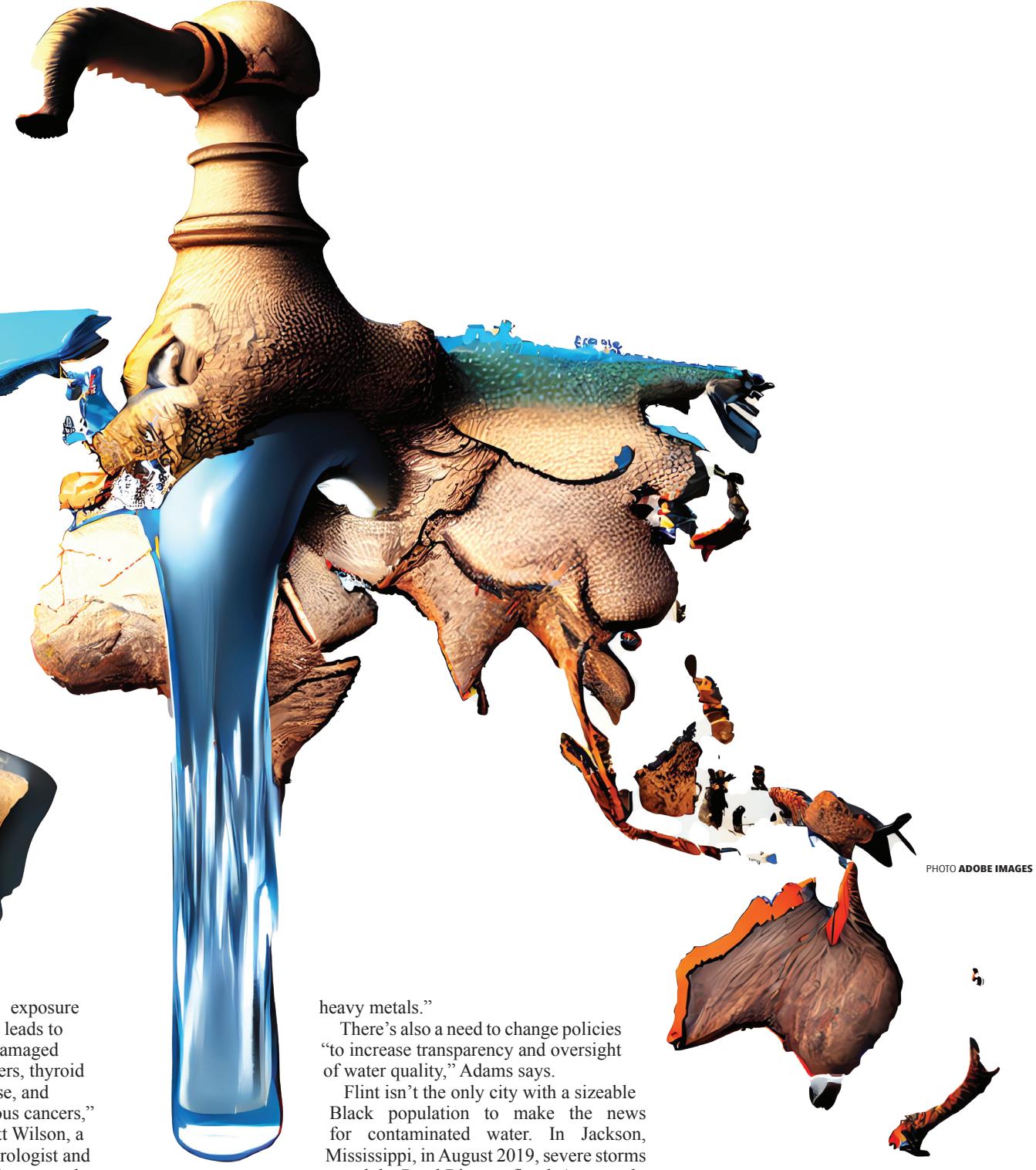
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# Black Folks Worldwide Don't Have Clean Water

By MAYA RICHARD-CRAVEN, WORD IN BLACK

DROUGHT from AII

*Clean H<sub>2</sub>O is getting scarce in Sub-Saharan Africa, but what comes out of the tap in African American communities is often contaminated too.*



Clean water is a right, not a privilege. Tell that to the more than 2 billion people globally who don't have access to clean, safe drinking water.

And, according to a recent report published in the July 17 edition of the journal "Nature Water," sub-Saharan Africa is one of the regions with the least access to clean water — a problem researchers predict will get worse by the year 2100.

Although the report focuses on the African continent, the reality is Black people right here in the United States don't always have clean water either.

Data from the Environmental Protection Agency reveals that public water systems that do not follow the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act are 40% more likely to be in communities of color. The act was meant to ensure that Americans have clean water. However, that hasn't been and still isn't the case — especially for Black people.

A May 2023 study from researchers at Harvard University revealed that Black and Latino people are more likely to come in contact with dangerous levels of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as PFAS.

This is because there are more environmental hazards, like landfills and water treatment plants, in communities of color. PFAS are manufactured chemicals that have been used since the 1940s, and they are a threat to the health and wellness of Black folks.

"Current studies show that long-term PFAS

exposure leads to damaged livers, thyroid disease, and various cancers," Matt Wilson, a hydrologist and environmental consultant based in Blue Springs, Missouri, tells Word In Black.

"The bigger issue is that we've been seriously polluting the water for over a century but only been looking at ways to clean it up for around 50 years."

#### A National Water Crisis

In recent years, there have been boil-down orders and mandates to heat water to kill bacteria across the United States, but the phrase "water crisis" might make you think of what happened in Flint, Michigan, or Jackson, Mississippi.

The Flint Water Crisis infamously started in April 2014 when the impoverished city switched Flint's water source from Detroit's to the heavily polluted Flint River to save \$5 million over two years. As a result, 99,000 residents were exposed to lead-contaminated water.

Black Millennials 4 Flint founder LaTricea Adams has been advocating for water rights ever since.

She's learned first-hand that communities need consistent education on clean water as well as "healthy, frequent water filter replacement and quality of water filters that best filter out

heavy metals."

There's also a need to change policies "to increase transparency and oversight of water quality," Adams says.

Flint isn't the only city with a sizeable Black population to make the news for contaminated water. In Jackson, Mississippi, in August 2019, severe storms caused the Pearl River to flood. As a result, 300 billion gallons of sewage were released into the river. To this day, many residents in Jackson refuse to drink the water.

Houston residents are also familiar with contaminated water-related restrictions.

The city was under boil-down orders in 2020 and 2022. In November 2022, water pressure decreased due to a power outage in the city's main water system. The water was so dirty that some residents chose to get bottled water instead.

Similarly, Black communities in Philadelphia are grappling with the effects of water pollution. In 2021, more than 60% of Black residents in Philadelphia said they mostly drank bottled water. According to research from the PennPIRG Education Fund, almost all of the schools in the Philadelphia School District had at least one source of water that tested positive for lead.

"Our new study, which is based on self-reported data by the Philadelphia School District, shows lead in 61% of drinking outlets tested across the district," Emma Horst-Martz, a former PennPIRG Education Fund advocate, told CBS News.

#### Decreasing Exposure to Contaminated Water

Despite the severity of the issue, Wilson says there are ways to decrease exposure to contaminated water, but it won't be easy. Two main methods are used to clean groundwater: extraction wells and cleaning or disposing of the water, and pulling water through the contaminated ground until it comes out clean.

For rivers and lakes, chemical additives are often used to disinfect water. Some cities create reservoirs, which allow contaminants to settle gradually at the bottom. But climate justice activists say fighting water pollution extends far beyond repairing or replacing water systems.

Meanwhile, Adams believes replacing Flint's water infrastructure has taken too long.

"They have a deadline of August of 2023. They should have been done a long time ago. It's really been disheartening to see how long it has taken," she tells Word In Black. "We don't trust the replacements will be done by the end of August 2023."

But Adams isn't giving up her advocacy for clean water. "I'm not hopeful, but that does not deter me from continuing to fight," she says.

Academic tutoring, math/science labs, and computer training

#### KIJANA YOUTH PROGRAM from AII

out with peers of different backgrounds helps them understand other cultures. The counselors come from different backgrounds. The team lead is from Ethiopia, [and] one of the longest tenured youth counselors we have is from El Salvador... So they get to know us as part of the community. They are in a very special position in the kids' lives.

**Defender:** How have these programs positively impacted their lives, both academically and personally?

**Ventura:** I was born in El Salvador and when I came here, I had to learn a lot of things on my own. The team lead for the after-school program, when he came from Africa, he also had

to learn a lot of things on his own. I believe we know the experiences of the kids. We know what they're going through, their frustrations, their successes. We are pulling from our experiences and helping them figure things out. We know what will be expected of them at certain points in their lives. We try to prepare the kids as they go, instead of having something thrown at them and they are unprepared. We don't want [them] to feel alone.

**Defender:** How does the Kijana Youth Program involve parents and families in the educational journey of their children?

**Ventura:** We have a really good relationship with the kid's parents. They have to enroll them in the program. We have an open-door policy for parents to come and express any concerns

that they have or they can come talk to us about their kids. We also have parent engagement activities with them once a month so they can talk with the counselors, program manager, or director.

**Defender:** How does the Kijana Youth Program support students beyond high school graduation to ensure their continued success in higher education or career pathways?

**Ventura:** We do keep in touch with as many as we can. Once they've exited the program, and graduate from high school, they usually come back and talk to us. It's really fantastic that the kids come back and keep us informed.

The Oklahoma Eagle

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

