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By BRIA OVERS, WORD IN BLACK

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DECEMBER 15, 2023 - DECEMBER 21, 2023

Tulsa Public Schools PROMOTES EBONY JOHNSON TO SUPERINTENDENT

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John Neal, The Oklahoma Eagle



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THESE OKLAHOMANS NEEDED MENTAL
HEALTH CARE. INSTEAD, THEY DIED IN JAIL

Five days into her jail stay, on July 15, Lena Corona
hanged herself in a cell. A8

AFTER SLOW START, OPIOID SETTLEMENT
MONEY EXPECTED TO FLOW TO CITIES

Money from legal settlements against opioid manufacturers,
distributors & retailers will finally start to trickle out in 2024. A5



EBONY JOHNSON, Tulsa Public Schools, Superintendent. PHOTO TULSASCHOOLS.ORG

Approved
by a 4-2 vote

Ebony Johnson from A1

The Tulsa Public Schools Board of Education voted to approve interim superintendent Ebony Johnson as permanent superintendent in a 4-2 vote on Dec. 11. Johnson was named to the interim superintendent position in September 2023 to replace Deborah Gist, who resigned under heavy criticism from State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters.

Johnson, who has served for over three decades in various roles at TPS, is the first African-American woman to hold the permanent superintendent position. Her election came following a heated board meeting. Two African Americans on the board, including Jennettie Marshall (District 3) and E-Lena Ashley (District 4), voted against the motion. Jerry Griffin (District 6) abstained, citing a “personal conflict,” but said he supported the action. Griffin later announced his resignation from the board effective Jan. 2.

The four board members who approved the appointment were Stacey Woolley (District 1), Diamond Marshall (District 2), John Croisant (District 5), and Susan Lamkin (District 7).

The crowd, gathered in the meeting room at the Charles C. Mason Education Service Center, where the Board of Education held its meeting, broke into applause following the announcement of the vote. Later, Johnson circulated the room and shook hands with supporters.

“I call it an honor to be named at a time such as this when we really need strong leadership,” Johnson told the media in a press statement.

“We need consistency, and the students need to know that things are moving in the right direction. They deserve that.”

Johnson’s employment contract terms as superintendent were not immediately made public. However, after the executive session deliberation, the board amended the end date to June 30, 2026.

Process controversy

The path to approving Johnson’s employment status was far from smooth. The TPS board debated the question in a Nov. 30 meeting but could not obtain a consensus and declined to act.

To take action on Johnson’s employment in the December meeting, the board posted an agenda item to suspend its policy rules and deem the action an “emergency.” During the meeting, circumventing ordinary board policy was the subject of heated back and forth among board members and some public speakers.

The TPS Board Policy Manual calls for “advertising [and] soliciting

applicants for the position” and a selection process only “after a thorough consideration of qualified applicants.” If approved, the agenda item waived the selection process rule and dispensed with the requirement of posting the rule’s suspension for two consecutive public meetings. It also required the district board to declare an “emergency.”

Board member Griffin questioned why this agenda measure was necessary. Legal counsel Bo Rainey of Rosenstein, Fist, and Ringold, who serves as legal counsel to the board, said that the Tulsa school district had received a credible legal threat if a national search were not undertaken as stipulated in the Policy Manual selection process. Rainey

also explained to board members that waiving the rule would “insulate the board” so they could proceed with the appointment if desired.

Marshall moved to table the rule waiver, joining Griffin in objecting to the process. In voicing her objections, Marshall laid out a long chronology of previous board events that allegedly violated board selection policies in various ways.

Marshall accused the “board leadership of deception and manipulation.” She added that the malicious “efforts were intentional and cast a cloud of darkness over the process.” Marshall’s motion to table the rule waiver failed. The board waived its rules and moved into executive session to consider an employment contract for Ebony Johnson as the new superintendent. An hour and one-half later, the board emerged from the executive session, briefly discussed, and approved

Johnson’s contract.

Walters’ objects

State Superintendent Walters voiced his objection to Johnson’s appointment through social media. In a posting on Meta (formerly known as Facebook) Walters posited his disapproval in the form of a “Memo” to Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum and the TPS board. He wrote, “[T]here should be an aggressive national search” to fill the position. He used the posting to list a series of actions the “next superintendent” should take. He also leveled direct criticism at Johnson, although he did not mention her by name. He wrote that the TPS leadership should “Stop playing around the edges with programs that do not work and schools that continue to fail.”

Walters has leveled a drumbeat of criticisms against TPS in the past few months. He sought to sanction the district for poor academic performance and alleged financial mismanagement. Gist’s resignation in August temporarily thwarted Walters’ efforts to have the Oklahoma State

Ebony Johnson cont. A5

Rentiesville: An Historic Oklahoma All-Black Town

By LARRY O'DELL , THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



Rentiesville, founded in 1903 and developed on twenty acres owned by William Rentie and twenty acres owned by Phoebe McIntosh, is located in McIntosh County five miles north of Checotah. The community is one of more than fifty All-Black towns in Oklahoma and one of thirteen still existing. Rev. N. A. Robinson, I. J. Foster, W. D. Robinson, and Rentie organized the townsite company with Robinson serving as president. J. J. Hudson opened the first mercantile business and became the first postmaster when the post office opened on May 11, 1904. B. C. Franklin followed Hudson as postmaster. By this time, as a flag stop on

the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway, the town had five businesses along Main Street, and eighty-one children were enrolled in the school. In 1905 the community elected F. P. Brinson as the first mayor, and Robinson succeeded Brinson in 1909. William Rentie, the town’s only lawman, arrested Garfield Walker for drunkenness and disorderly conduct in 1908. Walker later shot and killed Rentie for revenge, taking away not only the marshal but also a principal founder and namesake. The town recovered and prospered for a time, boasting a lumber store, cotton gin, and many thriving businesses. The Great Depression and lure of opportunities in urban centers caused an exodus of citizens from

Rentiesville. By the late 1930s the population dwindled to 154, and the 1990 census reported 66 residents. A population boom occurred, with 102 residents by 2000 and 128 by 2010. The site of the Civil War Battle of Honey Springs is only a half-mile east of town. A noted attraction is the Down Home Blues Club of nationally famed Blues artist D. C. Minner. Every Labor Day weekend Minner hosts the Dusk ‘til Dawn Blues Festival in the town. Rentiesville is also the birthplace of Dr. John Hope Franklin, dean of African American historians and author of the award-winning book From Slavery to Freedom.

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.

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN’S OLD HOME in Rentiesville (21446.TO.M184.51.1.9, Larry O’Dell Collection, OHS).

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PHOTO ADOBE IAMGES

Frustrated by lack of action

Money from legal settlements against opioid manufacturers, distributors and retailers will finally start to trickle out to Oklahoma cities and counties in 2024, almost four years after lawmakers set up a board to administer the funds.

Opioid Settlement from A1

More than 250 local governments told the Oklahoma Opioid Abatement Board they were interested in applying for the grants. The money is supposed to go toward treatment and recovery programs and opioid abuse education and prevention.

The Opioid Abatement Board has about \$27 million available for local communities, school districts and public trusts. The Legislature controls another \$37.6 million sitting in the Opioid Lawsuit Settlement Fund. Additional funds are expected in coming years since some settlements call for multi-year payouts.

Attorney General Gentner Drummond, who chairs the nine-member board, said he’s been frustrated with the lack of action in getting money to local communities. Board turnover has also been a problem, with at least five members resigning at various times in the past year alone.

“I’ve been a large critic of the management of these funds from previous AGs, and there’s just absolutely no excuse,” Drummond said in an interview. “I’m glad that I have disciplined professionals that slow me down because I would like this money deployed immediately, but we need to be careful with these public funds and we need to be impactful.”

More than 1,700 Oklahomans died as a

result of prescription opioid overdose from 2016 to 2021, according to the Oklahoma Board of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. Prescription opioid overdose deaths accounted for 33% of all drug overdose deaths during that same period.

States, tribes, cities, and counties pursued the lawsuits to compensate for the large sums of money spent addressing the opioid crisis in health care and law enforcement. Most of the settlements stemmed from multistate actions.

As he campaigned for attorney general in both 2018 and 2022, Drummond criticized his predecessors for the large attorney fees awarded to outside counsel in the state’s lawsuits against opioid-related companies.

More than \$123 million went to private attorneys across various settlements. Almost half of those fees came from the state’s \$270 million settlement with Purdue Pharma. Purdue later filed for bankruptcy reorganization, but that didn’t affect Oklahoma’s settlement with the company.

“I’m very frustrated with the liberality of friends and families of previous AGs,” Drummond said. “We have enriched people that we shouldn’t have, in excess of \$100 million. That’s way more than should have been awarded.”

The state is expected to have \$308 million in settlement funds from lawsuits related

Opioid Settlement cont. A10

Ebony Johnson from A3

Board of Education (OSBE) “take over” the local elected school board responsibilities.

Yet, Walters’ OSBE staff became openly critical of TPS leadership at the board’s Nov. 30 meeting, reporting that the school leadership lacked cooperation and ambition in making necessary reforms.

Immediately following the state staff presentation, at Walters’ urging, the state board mandated new academic performance benchmarks and other measures for Tulsa Public Schools to achieve “by the end of the school year.”

Johnson responds

Interim Superintendent Johnson issued a scathing written response to Walters’ social media posting and a rebuttal to the criticism made of TPS and the superintendent’s leadership at the Nov. 30 meeting. The response was issued to the press just hours before the December district board meeting and Johnson’s subsequent promotion from interim status.

In her statement, Johnson expressed dismay that Walters had questioned Johnson’s “commitment, competency, and level of concern.” She accused Walters of making “statements in the social media post that were misleading or completely false.” She then issued a point-by-point recitation of initiatives and accomplishments made under her leadership.

Johnson doubled down on her rebuttal to Walters in her remarks during the board meeting. Appearing angry at Walters’ criticism, in a shaking voice, she expressed exasperation and “gratitude that educators have not walked out on us.” Her presentation was repeatedly interrupted by thunderous applause from the overflow audience in the meeting room.

Local support for Johnson

Days following the state education board meeting imposing new standards on TPS, Bynum urged the local board to name Johnson the permanent superintendent. In



THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE Oct. 13, 2023 edition cover, featuring Ebony Johnson, Tulsa Public Schools, Superintendent
PHOTO THEOKEAGLE.COM

a letter to the Tulsa education board, Bynum said, “While national searches have normally been conducted when this job was vacant in the past, this is not a normal time.”

While acknowledging TPS needed improvement, Bynum noted interim Superintendent Ebony Johnson “is laser-focused on delivering better outcomes” and “has dramatically enhanced collaboration with the State of Oklahoma.”

Following Bynum’s letter, over 200 community leaders sent another letter endorsing Johnson’s candidacy. This endorsement included north Tulsa City Councilor Vanessa Hall-Harper and Oklahoma State Representative Monroe Nichols. Nichols is a candidate to replace Bynum as mayor in the August 2024 election. Bynum’s term expires in December of that year, and the two-term mayor is not seeking reelection.

Johnson: Career at TPS

Ebony Johnson, Ed.D, started her professional career as a classroom teacher at Monroe Middle School in 1999. After serving as a principal in several schools, she rapidly progressed through leadership positions in TPS, becoming executive director of Student and Family Support Services in 2017 and overseeing several key initiatives. In 2020, she ascended to the TPS Chief Academic Officer role before becoming interim superintendent in September of this year.

Johnson is a Tulsa Public Schools graduate, mother of a Rogers High School graduate, and aspiring Booker T. Washington graduate. She has been married for 23 years to Marcal Johnson, a Central High School counselor.

Bynum issued the following statement following TPS board action. “A leader can’t recruit and retain a great team if that leader has no job stability. This vote was a big step forward for all who want to see a rapid improvement in outcomes for Tulsa Public Schools. I am so grateful for the wisdom of the locally elected board members who have now empowered Dr. Ebony Johnson to build the team she needs around her to achieve the excellence so many expect.”

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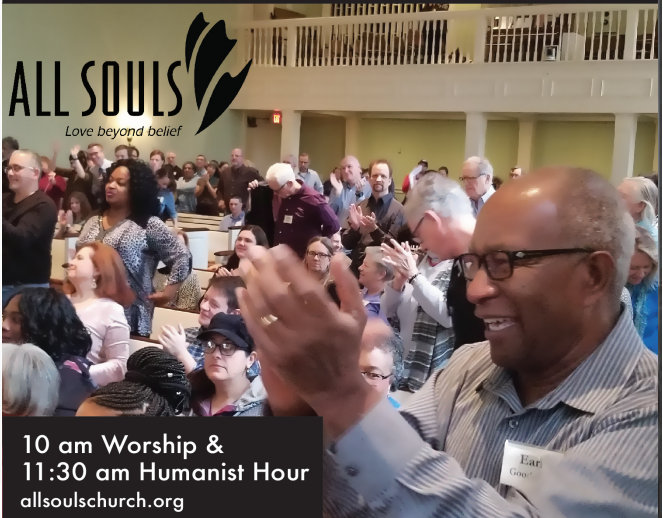
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SHAWNA NORMALI held up her favorite photo of her daughter, Lena Corona. PHOTO WHITNEY BRYEN/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Five days into her jail stay, on July 15, Lena Corona hanged herself in a cell.

Died In Jail from A1

Lena Corona was sitting on the porch of her Seminole home, blood dripping from her hand, when police arrived at 2:45 a.m. Her dad stood behind her, pressing a T-shirt over the wound on his chest where Corona had plunged a shard of glass.

When he called 911 on July 10, Freddy Corona hoped police would take his teenage daughter to the hospital as they had done fewer than 24 hours earlier when she threatened him with a metal rod while in psychosis. But over her dad’s objections, the police arrested the 18-year-old for assault and battery with a deadly weapon.

At St. Anthony Hospital, officers sought medical care for the cut on Lena Corona’s hand. Corona told emergency room nurses that she was defending herself from dark spirits, according to Cpl. Melissa Sharp’s incident report. After medical staff cleared Corona, Sharp drove her to the Seminole County jail where she was admitted while still in psychosis, a symptom of her diagnosed mental illness.

Hours after Corona was booked into jail, her sister called and told a jailer that Corona had been prescribed medication for her bipolar 1 disorder the last time she was hospitalized

28

Last year, 28 jail detainees died from untreated mental health or substance use conditions, accounting for more than half of the state’s 53 jail deaths, an Oklahoma Watch investigation found.

but had stopped taking it triggering psychosis. She asked the jailer to make sure her sister received treatment. She responded by telling her Corona’s bail was \$7,500, money the family didn’t have.

Across the state and country, families like the Coronas can’t access sufficient health care for their loved ones and turn to for help from police in a crisis. With law enforcement involved, emergency situations can escalate quickly, leading to arrests and incarceration in jails where detention officers with minimal training are responsible for the health and safety of detainees, which can have fatal consequences.

“I thought a couple of days in there would be OK,” Freddy Corona said. “At least she’d be safe in there for a few days until we could figure everything out. Instead, she just got worse and worse and no one did anything to help her.”

Five days into her jail stay, on July 15, Lena Corona hanged herself in a cell.

State laws guiding mental health and addiction care in jails are vague, leaving it up to jail officials to decide how often to check on sick or suicidal detainees, or when to seek emergency treatment. Behind bars, presumed-innocent people with mental health conditions often face neglect, abuse, or even death.

Last year, 28 jail detainees died from untreated mental health or substance use

conditions, accounting for more than half of the state’s 53 jail deaths, an Oklahoma Watch investigation found.

Accountability for the mistreatment and deaths of detainees is minimal in Oklahoma. The state agency that inspects jails has limited enforcement power under the law. A recent Oklahoma Watch investigation found that local oversight can be lax without a central entity ensuring care for or tracking vulnerable detainees.

State and federal laws require jails to report detainee deaths and suicide attempts, but not every jail complies. A recent Oklahoma Watch investigation found that the Pottawatomie County jail failed to report at least six deaths to the State Health Department since 2017 with no consequences for jail officials. Last month, trustees promoted the jail’s second in command, who is responsible for investigating deaths and is married to the jail director.

The State Medical Examiner’s Office also tracks jail deaths, but employees are inconsistent in how they label those deaths, resulting in incomplete data.

The District Attorney’s Council reports jail deaths submitted by the health department and the medical examiner to the Department of Justice. It reported 26 deaths. Oklahoma Watch

Died In Jail cont. A9

More than **one in four Oklahomans** 18 and older **experienced mental illness** in the past year



BELLA ROSE'S fireplace mantel is covered in family photos, artwork and urns that hold the ashes of her sister, Lena Corona. PHOTO WHITNEY BRYEN/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Died In Jail from A8

identified 53.

This year, Oklahoma Watch launched an investigation to determine who died in Oklahoma jails in 2022, how they ended up there in the first place and what killed them. Knowing how many people died and what happened to them is vital to preventing future deaths, said Jeff Dismukes, who retired this year from the state Department of Mental Health and runs the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, a group that supports people with mood disorders.

“No one cares enough about this issue to ensure that we have those records,” Dismukes said. “We clearly have the entities in place to do that kind of tracking and it could give us some answers if someone cared enough to advocate for these people.”

Triage, Not Treatment

The prevalence of mental illness and substance abuse is widespread in Oklahoma, with some of the nation’s highest rates of childhood trauma, domestic violence and incarceration contributing.

More than one in four Oklahomans 18 and older experienced mental illness in the past year and one in six reported having a substance use disorder, according to the 2023 State of Mental Health in America report.

Long waits and high prices for treatment mean many Oklahomans, especially those who are low-income and reliant on social services, often don’t receive help until they’re in crisis, triggering a response from police that can lead to incarceration instead of care.

Nearly everyone locked up in Oklahoma’s county jails need mental health or addiction treatment that jailers aren’t qualified to provide, said Ray McNair, director of the Oklahoma Sheriff’s Association.

“A county jail’s purpose is to maintain someone’s health, to keep them at the level they’re at and prevent them from getting worse while they work through the court system, not to treat them,” McNair said. “What jails are doing is triage until we can get them out.”

Without treatment, there isn’t a Band-Aid big enough to stop the deterioration of detainees with serious mental illness or addiction issues, McNair said.

For Crisis Response, Cops Are The Default

Oklahoma police departments have reported a growing number of emergency calls from panicked families and concerned observers. Last year, Oklahoma City police responded to more than 18,700 mental health calls. Employees at the Tulsa, Edmond and Stillwater police departments said they don’t track mental health calls but officers respond to mental health emergencies daily.

The state Mental Health Department offers specialized crisis intervention training to help law enforcement identify signs of mental illness and addiction and teach officers to employ patience and compassion to avoid arresting people who would be better served at a treatment

State and federal laws require jails to report detainee deaths and suicide attempts, but not every jail complies.

center. The training is voluntary, however, and certified officers are not always available to respond to crisis calls.

Co-response programs deployed by the Oklahoma City and Tulsa police departments are part of a growing, national trend to send mental health professionals on crisis calls with officers to de-escalate tense situations and reduce unnecessary arrests. But they can’t keep up with the volume of calls.

Tulsa’s Community Response Team was busy with another call when police requested assistance for a 70-year-old, great-grandmother who locked herself in a bathroom during a bipolar episode, according to an Oklahoma Watch investigation. Officers kicked in the door and tackled the woman, bloodying her face, and arrested her.

While the 988 crisis hotline launched last year provides an alternative to 911, the number is new and law enforcement remains the go-to for mental health emergencies.

Nowhere Else Will Take Them

After responding to a crisis call, police can take someone who is hallucinating, suicidal or experiencing drug or alcohol withdrawals to crisis centers or emergency rooms for treatment. But police and healthcare workers can’t force the person to stay in a medical facility unless they convince a judge to order an emergency detention. Without the order, police have two options: let them go or take them to jail.

“Neither is a good option, but jails have to take them so that’s why they end up here a lot of times, just to get them off the streets,” Payne County jail director Reese Lane said. “We need another place to take them but that doesn’t exist right now.”

Arrest records showed a few of the people who died in jail last year were taken first to an emergency room where they received medical attention before being transported to jail by police. Most were taken straight to jail. Two were arrested at a hospital where they were being treated while in crisis.

Renee Houston was already in handcuffs when Oklahoma City police arrived at Integris Hospital on Aug. 29, 2022. While yelling incoherently, the 57-year-old threw medical supplies, broke a computer behind the nurses’ station and pushed a nurse, according to an officer’s incident report. A hospital security guard threatened to shock her with a Taser before placing her in handcuffs.

Houston was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 9 and wrote a book about her experience to help others cope with mental illness, according to a video posted online by her pastor. After nearly three months at the Oklahoma County jail, Houston died of hypertensive heart disease, according to a medical examiner’s report.

Waiting for Care Can Be Deadly

Once at a jail, state law requires staff to survey detainees noting signs of mental distress, drug use or withdrawal. Detention officers’ ability to

detect symptoms, and the candor of detainees, determines who receives medical or mental health care, increased supervision or is housed alone.

When Corona was booked into the Seminole County jail, she refused to answer questions from jailers, was agitated and would not cooperate with staff, according to her booking report. Jail staff were unable to take her mugshots or fingerprints or remove the necklace she was wearing.

Even when jail staff do identify a mental health need, care isn’t always accessible.

Few Oklahoma jails have counselors, psychologists or psychiatrists on staff so they rely on state-funded treatment centers. Rural jails are least likely to have mental health practitioners on staff or have nearby providers to call on for help. Nearly 40% of providers surveyed by Healthy Minds Policy Initiative reported having weeks- or months-long waits for appointments, which could be the difference between life and death for people behind bars.

In December 2022, hours before an evaluation from Griffin Memorial Hospital, Norman mother and baker Shannon Hanchett died at the Cleveland County jail where she was taken during a mental health crisis. Less than two weeks later, Noble grandmother Kathryn Milano died waiting for a court-ordered competency assessment at the same jail, which contracts with Turn Key Health Clinic to provide medical and mental health care to detainees.

Many jails statewide are housing Oklahomans deemed incompetent to stand trial who are waiting for a bed to become available at a state facility. In March, the Oklahoma Disability Law Center filed a federal class-action lawsuit against mental-health officials on behalf of Oklahomans who are languishing in county jails while awaiting court-ordered care.

The state Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is providing medication, counseling, therapy and education to 231 detainees in 60 county jails instead of moving them to a state hospital, department spokeswoman Bonnie Campo said.

Tulsa County jail is one of the holdouts. Sheriff Vic Regalado won’t allow competency treatment in his jail, despite having a wing dedicated to detainees with mental illness and staff trained in crisis intervention.

“It has been well established that jails are not the place to treat our mentally ill,” Regalado said. “These people are languishing in jails, often for a year or more, while the state is passing the buck to counties instead of spending money on short-, medium- and long-term facilities to alleviate the problem. I think this opens the door for widespread litigation and we’re not going to be a part of that.”

‘These Are People, Too’

Jailers regularly have feces thrown at them by detainees who are in mental distress. They’re berated and threatened daily. It’s common for officers to become desensitized over time

Died In Jail cont. A10

‘What would I want if this was my family member?’

Died In Jail from A9

and employ coping mechanisms that can seem animalistic. That makes training critical, said Jennifer Sullivan, who teaches jailers best practices for keeping people with trauma or mental illness safe.

State law requires detention officers responsible for the lives of detainees to receive 24 hours of basic training. Most county jails provide new hires with a 32- or 40-hour course developed by the Sheriff’s Association. Mental illness and addiction is part of every session, but three hours are dedicated to mental health and seven to substance abuse and detoxification.

Sullivan provides more in-depth training on how to communicate with detainees in crisis through classes offered by Mental Health Association Oklahoma. In the past five years, the nonprofit has trained 155 detention officers across the state in crisis intervention, trauma response and suicide prevention. Sullivan said jails have been resistant to the training, partly because high turnover leaves jails starting over with new trainees every few months.

In Oklahoma, jailers’ pay is about \$14 per hour, causing the highest turnover rates McNair has seen in his 20 years at the Sheriff’s Association, which trains and advocates for jail staff and the sheriffs who oversee them.

“I’ve had sheriffs tell me when a new Casey’s moves into town, they lose people to the convenience store, which pays more money and there’s no abuse from detainees,” McNair said. “And they’re taking a big risk at the jail that if someone is injured or dies they could be held liable, so that on top of the low pay is really tough.”

Ronald Given, a 42-year-old member of the Kiowa Tribe, resisted when detention officers attempted to restrain him during a mental health crisis at the Pottawatomie County jail 30 miles east of Oklahoma City. He died in 2019 from injuries sustained during the six-minute struggle, according to an autopsy report that ruled his death a homicide. State law enforcement investigated his death and friends and family are calling for accountability. The local district attorney reopened the case this year. So far, no one has been prosecuted.

Amid the challenging working conditions, jailers need to be reminded that the detainees in their care are someone’s parent, child or sibling, Sullivan said.

“We’re asking them to stop and think, ‘What would I want if this was my family member?’” Sullivan said. “Sometimes, they just need to be reminded that these are people too.”

Seeking Alternatives

A Payne County jailer held Kesha Carter’s head up for her mugshot when she was booked into the jail an hour west of Tulsa in 2012.



Carter was under emergency detention for mental health treatment at Stillwater Medical Center when police arrested her for attempting to kick a doctor while she was handcuffed to a gurney, according to a police incident report.

Seven hours after she was booked into jail, Carter died by suicide.

“My light came on over Kesha,” jail director Reese Lane said. “She needed help and we knew it. And we knew it would be weeks or months or even years before she got the treatment she really needed, if ever. I knew we could do more for these people and that’s what we did.”

For more than a decade, Lane has been building a team of mental health professionals and training his staff at the Payne County jail to go beyond the required assessments and supervision.

Linda Evans, a licensed psychologist and marriage and family therapist who works for the jail’s healthcare provider, Turn Key Health, treats mentally ill detainees and ensures they have swift access to their medications. Therapy is provided twice a week by a counselor and Oklahoma State University students studying to be counselors. A program specialist helps detainees study for their GED and teaches them about addiction, self-esteem, parenting, job skills and teamwork. And a peer support specialist from Grand Mental Health visits the jail daily, assisting detainees in court and making plans for care after they’re released.

Partnering with other county agencies, law enforcement, mental health centers and other community resources, like the university, costs the jail little to no money, Lane said.

Sometimes, though, people still fall through the cracks. Michael King, a 49-year-old father and handyman, died by suicide on Nov. 18,

155

In the past five years, the nonprofit Mental Health Association Oklahoma has trained 155 detention officers across the state in crisis intervention, trauma response and suicide prevention

2022, two days after being booked into the Payne County jail, according to a health department incident report. Jail spokesman Rockford Brown said King was not identified as a suicide risk when he was booked into the jail.

For families who have lost loved ones, questions linger about what more could have been done. Some are turning to the courts for help.

Corona’s parents said they will file a lawsuit against the Seminole County jail before the end of the year. They hope a judge will ensure better care for people like their daughter and the 28 people who died in Oklahoma jails last year waiting for treatment.

“Every jail in the country could be better regardless of funding or their rural nature,” Lane said. “Every jail has a mental health provider somewhere in their area that they could be partnering with. They’re going to have to get honest with themselves and decide whether they’re willing to do the work to help these people.”

Oklahoma Watch is part of the Mental Health Parity Collaborative, a group of newsrooms that are covering stories on mental health care access and inequities in the U.S. The partners on this project include The Carter Center, The Center for Public Integrity, and newsrooms in select states across the country.

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NAOMI WILSON, program coordinator at Payne County Jail, taught a parenting class to women detained at the jail. PHOTO PROVIDED

Almost \$700 million in settlements

Opioid Settlement from A5

to three distributors – McKesson, AmerisourceBergen Corp. and Cardinal Health – accused of flooding the market with opioid painkillers. The state gets 75% of that money, with the remaining 25% allocated to cities and counties.

Jessica Hawkins, director of community and systems initiatives with Tulsa-based Healthy Minds Policy Initiative, told abatement board members Oklahoma is in the fourth wave of opioid addiction. Prescription opioids marked the first wave, which was followed by heroin, fentanyl and now methamphetamine. Many times, those illicit drugs are being combined with prescription opioids.

“We have a tremendous amount of co-use happening in Oklahoma, with concurrent use of opioids with stimulants, mainly methamphetamine,” Hawkins said at a Dec. 6 board meeting. “This is a nuance that we want communities to understand and the abatement board to hear and think about.”

Hawkins said the board should give local communities adequate time to develop their abatement plans under grant funding. She urged a “go slow to go fast” strategy that would put most of the work in the next few months for the first round of grant awards by summer 2024.

“You’ll want to make sure they are selecting evidence-based strategies,” Hawkins said. “In the field of behavioral health and mental health, we do not need to burden local communities that they need to

\$52B

Nationwide, more than \$52 billion will be paid to states over the next 18 years from settlements with opioid manufacturers, distributors and retailers

develop their own programs or come up with their own ideas. There are a plethora of best practices that are available out there for the choosing as long as you know what your community’s problems are that need to be abated.”

Board members discussed hiring Healthy Minds to help with the grant application process and provide educational outreach to local governments. The attorney general’s office, which provides administrative support for the board, is interviewing candidates for a grant coordinator position.

Drummond said his office is working with lawmakers to earmark a percentage of settlement funds for the abatement board as it considers grant applications from local governments in the coming years.

Settlement frustrations

Oklahoma lawmakers set up the opioid abatement board in 2020 and seeded it with a \$10.22 million appropriation. They set up the board after being frustrated over settlement terms with Purdue negotiated in 2019 by former Attorney General Mike Hunter. Many lawmakers thought they should have had a say in how the Purdue settlement money was distributed.

Just 5% of the Purdue settlement will go to local governments for opioid abatement. Most of it went to Oklahoma State University’s National Center for Wellness and Recovery, which was established in 2017. The center received \$102.5 million from the Purdue settlement in a lump sum.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Another \$75 million is being paid over three years, and it got \$20 million in the form of buprenorphine and naloxone, known under the brand name Suboxone. The medication is used to treat opioid-use disorder or withdrawal symptoms.

Neile Jones, communications manager for the National Center for Wellness and Recovery, said the center is tackling the drug crisis through research, outreach and treatment. Its Addiction and Recovery Clinic in Tulsa helps families and individuals fighting addiction.

“We have begun design and construction on important research facilities in Tulsa,” Jones said in an email. “We have recruited a team of highly skilled neurobiologists, chemists and Ph.D. students to advance our research efforts and anticipate continued growth. Our collaboration with the University of Arizona includes several vital research projects, including stronger treatments to reverse fentanyl overdose.”

The distributor and Purdue settlements are just parts of the almost \$700 million in settlements

Oklahoma reached from opioid-related litigation. Others include:

- Teva Pharmaceuticals: \$85 million
- McKinsey & Co.: \$8.9 million
- Endo Pharmaceuticals: \$8.75 million
- Mallinckrodt: \$5.1 million

Missing from those totals is the \$465 million judgment against Johnson & Johnson that Hunter and outside attorneys won at trial in 2019. The Oklahoma Supreme Court overturned that on appeal in November 2021. Nationwide, more than \$52 billion will be paid to states over the next 18 years from settlements with opioid manufacturers, distributors and retailers.

Low participation leaves Latinos underrepresented in elected offices across Oklahoma

Latino Vote from A1

Latino legislators, business owners and community members are playing politics in Oklahoma with the long game in mind. The strategy is to establish greater Latino political influence by educating the voter base and generate a pipeline of young Latinos who will one day run for office at local and state levels. The hope is to engage more Latinos in the electoral process overall.

Even though Latinos are the second-largest and fastest-growing demographic in the state, census data shows they register and vote the least compared to other racial and ethnic groups.

Latino registration and turnout rates are higher during presidential election years, data shows. In 2020, 42.8% of Latino voting-age citizens in Oklahoma registered to vote, or about 106, 000 of a potential 248,000. The next-highest registration rate was of eligible Black Oklahomans at 56.4%, or 123,000 of a possible 218,000. Demographic comparisons of registration and turnout rates for the 2022 election show similar trends.

Low participation leaves Latinos underrepresented in elected offices across Oklahoma compared to their share of the state’s population.

Oklahoma City Democrat Sen. Michael Brooks is one of five Latino state lawmakers in Oklahoma. He said more Latino representation is important because it would mean greater support for proposed laws like his SB 669, which would have permitted state taxpayers to obtain Oklahoma driver’s licenses using their Individual Taxpayer Identification Number. Introduced last year, the bill would have allowed people living in the U.S. without legal permission to lawfully drive on the state’s roads as long as they pay their taxes here.

Failing to energize Latinos to vote also means bills that hurt the community are more likely to pass, such as 2007’s HB 1804, Brooks said. The bill explicitly restricted the provision of public benefits to U.S. citizens, including driving and occupational licenses, food stamps, and Sooner Care.

“That anti-immigrant bill affected a lot of families, including those with U.S. citizens,” Brooks said. “I think sometimes things like that have happened because the Latinos in Oklahoma failed to use their voice.”

Latinos in Oklahoma don’t fit neatly into either of the major political parties, according to the results of a recent survey by Unidos US, a Washington, D.C.-based Latino civil rights advocacy organization. Those who do vote tend to choose candidates who stay away from extremism, work across the aisle, and focus on the rising cost of living, job stability and healthcare access as their primary issues, the survey shows.

Efforts to increase the civic engagement of Latinos in Oklahoma have been underway for more than a decade, however, and are starting to gain momentum.

Latino elected officials are organizing a political action committee that will support and mentor young Latinos with political aspirations. Other stakeholders in the community, such as the organizers of the

HB 1804
“OKLAHOMA TAXPAYER AND CITIZEN PROTECTION ACT OF 2007”

Explicitly restricted the provision of public benefits to U.S. citizens, including driving and occupational licenses, food stamps, and Sooner Care available.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Oklahoma Hispanic Institute and Building Bridges USA, are focused on educating Latinos about civic participation and highlighting the economic and cultural contributions of Latinos in the state.

The goal is the same: raise the volume of the Latino voice in Oklahoma.

Brooks chairs the Oklahoma Latino Legislative Caucus, which includes two more Democrats in the House and one Senate Republican. He said when the caucus first organized in 2021, its mission was to amplify Latino voices at the Capitol by getting more of them elected, regardless of their party. The PAC is an important step to work toward that goal, Brooks said.

“People on both sides of the political spectrum can see the increase in the Latino population and where demographics are headed,” he said. “And both sides think that their platforms dovetail with Latinos.”

A November National Survey of Latino Voters by Unidos US showed no strong leaning toward either party. While most responses about party trust and preference slightly favored Democrats, neither party secured a 50% approval rating on any issue.

The Latino population’s growth and moderate

In 2020, 42.8% of Latino voting-age citizens in Oklahoma registered to vote.

views, Brooks said, allows Latinos who run for office to campaign across party lines and issues and better address the needs of their constituents.

He said the PAC will consist of two nonprofits: One that offers scholarships and fellowships for college students interested in one day running for office, and another that provides voter registration help, campaign volunteer opportunities and financial support to candidates.

He said young first-year legislators such as Democratic Reps. Annie Menz from Norman and Arturo Alonso-Sandoval from south Oklahoma City are early examples of the kind of people the caucus hopes to foster.

Among the line-up of fresh Latino candidates for local and state elected office are Sam Wargin Grimaldo, Senate District 46; Jessica Emily Cifuentes, Oklahoma City Public Schools Board District 3 and Scotty Hernandez, who is running for OKCPS District 4 Board seat. All of these candidates are from Oklahoma City and have volunteered in the campaigns of Latinos who’ve run for office in the past.

As a legislative assistant for Brooks, Menz founded the annual Hispanic Day at the Capitol in 2017. By 2022, she was the first Latina elected to the Oklahoma House and the second elected to the state legislature. Sen. Jessica Garvin, R-Duncan, was the first Latina in the Capitol when she won Senate District 43 in 2020.

Menz said Latinos should see themselves serving on school boards, in city and county governments, and at the Capitol.

“Having candidates, not just issues to rally around, but actual people to be excited about really does matter,” she said. “It does energize people when they see somebody who looks like them or believes the same things they do.”

Menz said supporting candidates from both parties will make it easier to pass bills addressing the issues potential Latino voters care about. In Oklahoma, one of those bills includes allowing state taxpayers to receive state driver’s licenses, including those who live in the U.S. without permanent residency or citizenship.

She offered the Democratic primary election for House District 89 in June 2022 as her own example of a promising future. That was the night Alonso-Sandoval defeated a fellow Oklahoma City southsider Cristian Zapata for the House seat.

“There were two young Latinos running against each other,” Menz said, “They were duking it out. And so it’s like, this is interesting. We have to pay attention now. We’ve got to pick one.

“I mean, It’s opportunity,” she said. “That’s what drives the participation.”

For the Latinos in Oklahoma’s legislature to proportionally represent Latinos in the state, there would need to be more than a dozen elected in 2024.

With Latino voter registration rates in Oklahoma below 45% in 2022, the kind of competition Menz described among young Latino candidates is not yet widespread. Turnout was low that summer night. State election data shows 735 votes were cast in a majority Latino district with 9,737 registered voters.

“There are few opportunities for Latinos to enter elected positions, but also a lack of interest in voting,” Menz said.

That lack of interest is caused by multiple factors, according to Menz, community members in Oklahoma City, and the results of the latest Unidos US survey. Among them are prioritizing work or school over voting, distrust of government institutions, apathy because they don’t think their vote matters and a lack of education about how to participate in elections.

Camilo Ulloa is an Oklahoma County Republican Party community representative. He helps the GOP engage potential Latino voters by sharing information with them about Republican candidates and elected representatives. He said for many of the Latino families he has spoken to, right behind concerns about the rate of inflation and job security, are worries of corruption and the elimination of nuance in political discourse.

Ulloa pointed out there is a generational gap between potential Latino voters in Oklahoma, not just when it comes to age but also time in the United States. Some families have been here for more than a century, and have many members who are citizens. Others may have arrived in the U.S. recently and may have one naturalized member who has never voted.

Those worries are consistent with the findings by Unidos US in the organization’s latest survey. Latino voters prefer moderate candidates who are able to cut through extreme rhetoric on both sides.

Nationally, the survey shows 16% of Latinos will be voting in their first federal election and 22% in their first presidential election.

Francis “Pancho” Hobbes and his wife, Lera, are the founders of Building Bridges USA, an eight-month-old organization aimed at melding the history of Latinos and immigrants in Oklahoma to the History of America through socialization and online civic education resources. They are aware of how many new Latino voters enter the electorate each year.

The couple is using its decades of ministry in Guatemala, California and Oklahoma City to help connect with new immigrants and point them to the resources on their website.

“The website is still young,” Pancho said. “But our work in ministry taught us to always be where the people are, and when we asked around some of the churches in town, we realized people are online.”

The site will grow with resources on how to begin the naturalization process and how to register to vote, he said. It will also feature testimonials called “Nuestras Voces” to highlight experiences of Oklahoma immigrants who have made a life in the U.S.

Clarissa Martinez De Castro is the vice president of the Latino Vote Initiative at Unidos US. Part of Martinez De Castro’s work involves analyzing Latino voter registration and participation rates in census data and overseeing surveys of the American Latino electorate before, during and after elections.

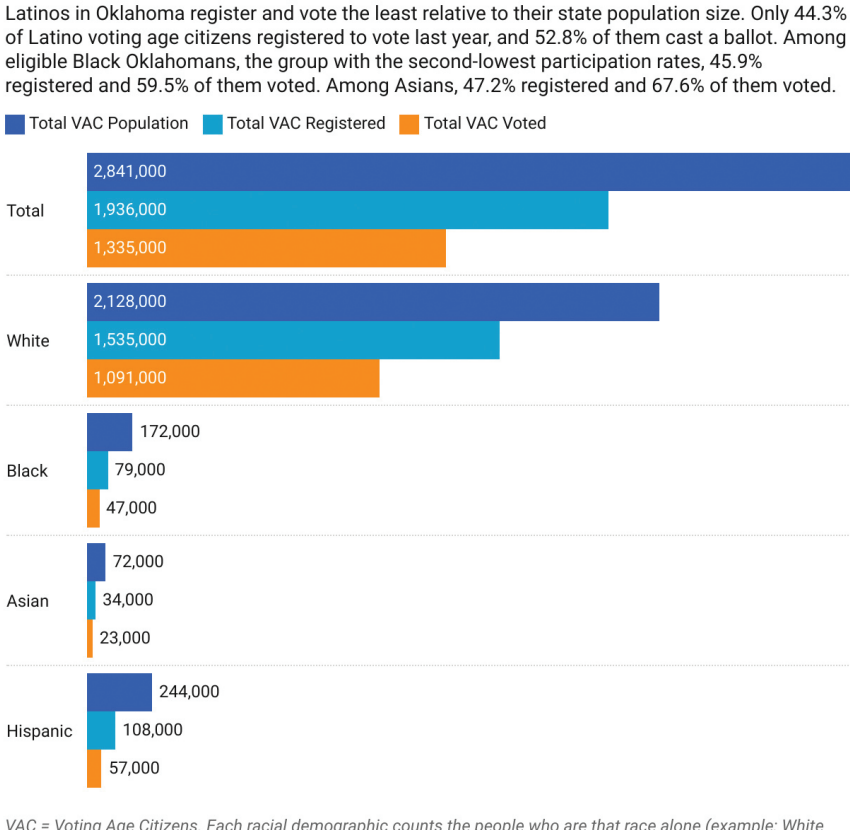
Census data shows that Latino voter turnout is much higher for presidential elections than for midterms, and that most Latinos registered to vote in presidential years do cast a ballot. Nationally, 87% of registered Latinos voted in the 2020 election. In Oklahoma, it was 71%.

“The registration gap is the one that needs to be closed if community organizers want to increase participation,” Martinez De Castro said. She said bipartisan and nonpartisan organizations focused on increasing the number of Latino voters sounds promising for the community in Oklahoma.

Ultimately, Brooks said, the issues that affect Latinos in Oklahoma are the same ones that affect the rest of the state, Latinos just haven’t been sucked into hyper-partisan news outlets pandering misinformation.

“I think the unifying characteristic of Latinos in the State of Oklahoma is that we come here to work,” Brooks said. “Regardless of how we feel about whatever the latest social hot-button issue is. To be free of political misinformation and instead make good policy to ensure Oklahoma governs and provides for us well, that’s the most important thing.”

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. Follow him on Twitter at @LionelRamos...



3 ORGS WORKING TO STOP THE SPREAD
OF HIV IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Despite Advancements In HIV Prevention, Black Adults Contract And Die
From The Virus More Than Other Groups. A14

PAVING THE PATH TO JUSTICE:
HARNESSING DATA FOR EMPOWERMENT

A power of a people-first approach drives authentic community engagement
while citing statistical data, addressing climatet. A14

Black Wealth Is Rising

Black net worths are on the rise — for now. A recent report from the Federal Reserve found that in the last three years, between 2019 and 2022, Black wealth rose by 61%. It’s the largest growth of any other racial group. Despite this increase, it does not reflect the broader reality of the persisting racial wealth gap.

Bria Overs, Word In Black



**Black
Median
Wealth
\$28,000
In 2019**

“That 61% increase seems so large because the actual wealth that Black families had in 2019 was so small compared to white households,” Michelle Holder, associate professor of economics at John Jay College in the City University of New York (CUNY), says. “When you’re starting with a smaller base, increases can get magnified.”

Median Black wealth was around \$28,000 in 2019 and moved closer to \$45,000 in 2022. At the same time, white wealth increased by 31%, growing from \$218,000 to \$285,000. Holder says this comparison should not take away from the progress, but looking at the percentage alone can be “a little misleading.”

“I’d say the numbers are a kind of mask,” she tells Word in Black. “The Black community didn’t really experience true wealth building that the numbers might suggest it did. I think what they experienced was a rise in the value of an asset that almost half of Black families have compared to about 75% of white families.”

What’s Driving Black Net Worth Growth

One of the most significant contributors to wealth growth for Black households was increases in homeownership and housing equity or the home’s value. In the second quarter of 2020, Black homeownership hit 47%, a rate the community has not reached since the 2008 housing market crash. By the end of 2022, it dipped slightly to around 45%, similar to what it was in 2011.

The rate is far below that of other groups but still higher than in the last 10 years.

A subfactor was home values, which, for Black homeowners specifically, increased by 60% for a net value of \$123,000. But Black families were not alone in this. The

**Black
Median
Wealth
\$45,000
In 2022**

Federal Reserve found that “amid rising house prices, home equity for homeowners moved up sharply for families of all races and ethnicities.”

Business ownership was also a wealth-building tool. 11% of Black people are now business owners, and an estimated 3 million Black-owned businesses are in the United States. A report from the Urban Institute on what pushes Black women into entrepreneurship points to discrimination in the workplace, including racism and sexism.

The increase in business ownership is impressive, but their value has significantly declined across racial groups.

“We saw a rise in businesses, but they were not of the variety that generated large amounts of employees, revenue, and wealth overall,” Andre M. Perry, senior fellow at Brookings Metro, says. “It remains to be seen if those businesses will ultimately scale, increase their size, and increase their number of employees so their overall value will increase as well.”

Perry adds that in the future, there may be a decline in the number of businesses

Michelle Holder

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF
ECONOMICS AT JOHN JAY
COLLEGE IN THE CITY UNIVERSITY
OF NEW YORK (CUNY)

if owners cannot grow and sustain themselves. As a result, business values will also decline.

Moving the Needle on the Racial Wealth Gap

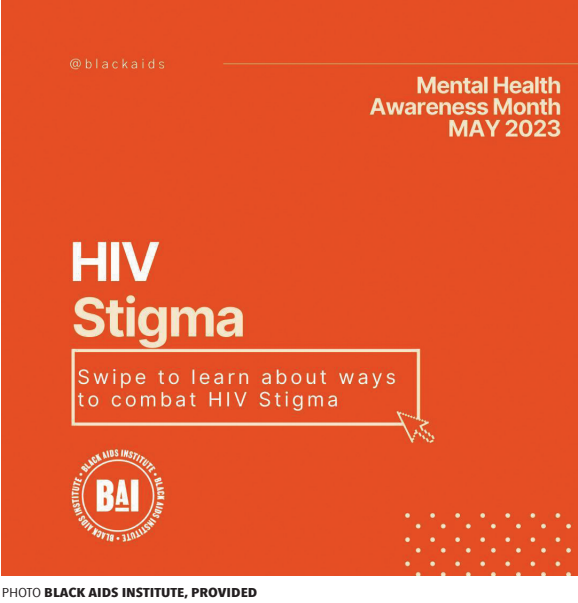
There are differences of opinion on exactly how many years it will take to close the racial wealth gap, but all agree it will take several centuries to do so. With the goalpost moving every year, it will take significant changes to move closer to closure.

“Wealth begets wealth,” Perry says. “The more you have, the more you accrue.”

Investments in the stock market largely grew white wealth in the last three years. Fortunately, Black stock ownership rose over the previous 15 years, but not at the same levels as other groups with higher stock values.

With most Black wealth residing in homeownership, Holder and Perry believe a more diversified investment portfolio would be more impactful for the Black community. But it can’t stop there. Black people need more growth in their wages and salaries, an area they saw the least movement in because they were unchanged, according to the Federal Reserve.

“The sad thing is that even with gains like this, the racial wealth gap in this country pretty much remains the same by all of the different metrics,” Holder says. “I think that’s really unfortunate.”



3 Organizations Working to Stop the Spread of HIV in the Black Community

Stop the Spread of HIV from A13

Despite advancements in HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) prevention, Black adults in America suffer at disproportionate rates. As of 2020, Black women and men contracted the virus at 7.8 times the rate of white adults. Consequently, Black adults die from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), the last stage of HIV, at higher rates than other groups.

Since the first cases of HIV and AIDS were reported in June 1981, the federal government has researched and funded prevention methods. The United States Food and Drug Administration approved PrEP in 2012, a medicine that reduces a person’s chance of contracting HIV from sex or injection drug use. As recently as December 2022, the Biden administration released a five-year plan to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic by 2030.

Yet, the infection and death toll remains high in the Black community. For that reason, Black leaders in HIV prevention and care commit to ending the HIV/ AIDS epidemic on a grassroots level. Here are three organizations that offer free HIV health care and education in their cities:

1. Black AIDS Institute

The Black AIDS Institute (BAI) is an “unapologetically Black HIV think and do tank” based in Los Angeles. Founded by a Black gay man living with HIV and a Black lesbian doctor in 1999, the organization’s original vision was to mobilize and educate Black Americans about HIV/ AIDS treatment and care.

Nearly 25 years later, BAI does that through its local and national campaigns, issue reports, and virtual or in-person events. Its research covers strategies to end HIV, improve HIV testing rates, and increase access to PrEP in the Black community.

Black Angelenos can access free, culturally-affirming HIV services through the Institute’s clinic, “A Clinic For Us,” by visiting the Los Angeles office.

2. BlaqOut

BlaqOut is a “disruptive innovator in the field of HIV testing and prevention, telehealth, and PrEP/PEP access.” Serving the Black LGBTQ+ community in Kansas City, Missouri, the nonprofit offers five free programs: peer-driven recruitment for HIV testing, home testing kits, vaccine equity and awareness, and leadership development.

In partnership with Q Care Plus, BlaqOut offers virtual provider visits, at-home or in-person lab testing, and PrEP home delivery in Kansas City.

The organization also addresses the gap in culturally competent care through its Sexual Wellness and Growth (SWAG) curriculum. SWAG educates health professionals on intimate partner violence, health care stigma, and health literacy among Black gay males.

3. Us Helping Us

Us Helping Us is celebrating 35 years of combatting the HIV epidemic among Black gay men in Washington, D.C. The organization was founded in 1985, four years after the first AIDS case was announced. Since then, it’s opened two clinics that offer HIV primary care, PrEP prescriptions, case management, and other services for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

One of its flagship programs, “The DENIM Collection,” provides culturally appropriate clinical, behavioral, and social services for young Black men who have sex with men and transgender women ages 13-34. The initiative offers access to healthy and nutritious foods, mental health care, and other services. Us Helping Us also conducts studies. Its current research projects examine hepatitis C and PrEP initiation among Black gay men.



DR. TONYA CALHOUN speaking at the 2023 Data Day in Milwaukee. PHOTO PROVIDED

Paving the Path to Justice: Harnessing Data for Community Empowerment

A power of a people-first approach drives authentic community engagement while citing statistical data as a key pillar in addressing climate.

Tonya Calhoun Word In Black

Milwaukee is witnessing a transformation — a journey fueled by data, collaboration, and a fervent commitment to justice.

Playing a crucial role in this endeavor is Data You Can Use, a diverse coalition of local professionals committed to providing accessible data for addressing community concerns. For instance, Walnut Way, a local community-based organization, serves as an exemplary community organization harnessing data for empowerment and showcasing the tangible impact of leveraging information for positive change.

Milwaukee’s recent 9th Annual Data Day, themed ‘Journey to Justice,’ resonated with the collective desire to dismantle silos, democratize data, and catalyze systemic change. This convergence of minds, comprising residents, professionals, government officials, and academics, marked a pivotal moment in the pursuit of equitable solutions.

As the director of the Office of Community Collaboration and Engagement at Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), I was delighted to be at the core of this journey, igniting discussions on climate injustice. My goal for the event was to illuminate the power of a people-first approach in driving authentic community engagement while citing statistical data as a key pillar in addressing climate inequity.

Walnut Way’s community work is a testament to the marriage of data-driven strategies and grassroots climate action. Their work aims to reduce disparities among African Americans, increase community wealth, enhance residents’ well-being, and create a resilient, self-sustaining neighborhood. Their collaboration with institutions like the Northwestern Mutual Data Science Institute underscores the potency of

data in shaping environmental justice initiatives.

Their approach to community-led, comprehensive development allows residents to lead important initiatives that support the unique needs of their community, fostering economic mobility, supporting small businesses, and advocating for issues like energy burden, the portion of your total household income that goes specifically toward paying for energy-related expenses like electricity, heating, and other similar costs, broadband access, and water rights.

Broad-based collaboration is core to Walnut Way’s efforts to create healthier community environments. To help residents, policymakers, and businesses make informed decisions related to protecting the health and well-being of communities, Walnut Way collaborates with MKE FreshAir Collection, a local non-profit air quality monitoring and advocacy organization.

With support from Walnut Way, MKE FreshAir Collective relies on the Air Visual App by IQAir as a primary platform for helping residents receive real-time, neighborhood-level air quality notifications, empowering them to make informed decisions about their well-being. Their meticulous deployment of air quality sensors, guided by health data, not only educates nearly 10,000 Milwaukeeans, but also serves as a blaring call for policy reforms.

The tapestry of these initiatives spotlights the critical role of the historic Inflation Reduction Act in fostering sustainable infrastructure and incentivizing climate projects, like Walnut Way’s community bioswales and healthy home projects, which leverage tax incentives on construction and sustainable supplies for affordable homeownership projects. It’s a testament to how informed funding propels impactful community-driven solutions.

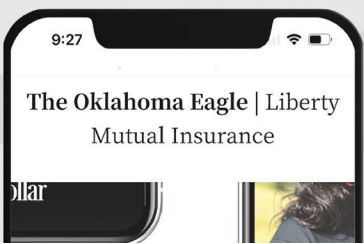
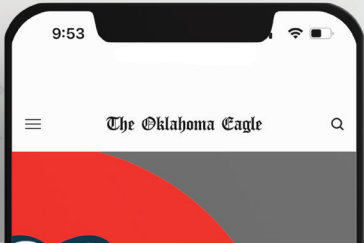
The real marvel lies in the potential—a potential propelled by tools like EDF’s Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI). This instrument isn’t just a map; it’s a compass guiding investments and empowering Black communities to confront climate risks head-on.

The CVI presents the opportunity for local governments to leverage the tool as a resource to not only show where the risks lie, but to help steer new investment in solutions. Supporting groups like Walnut Way — and ensuring the right investments flow to the right places for the biggest impact — is critical to the advancement of climate progress.

Walnut Way’s unwavering commitment to fostering economic and climate equity within Milwaukee’s historically marginalized communities stands as a testament to their dedication in redefining the parameters of success. Their efforts serve as an exceptional model for other communities seeking to address similar challenges by using data to inspire action. And utilizing tools like the CVI that doesn’t just showcase climate risks — but offers a roadmap for equitable investments, leveraging the IRA’s transformative funding — can add to this momentum.

Milwaukee stands at the cusp of a transformative era, armed with data as a catalyst for justice. Let their journey, while ongoing, exemplify the potency of collaborative efforts, data-driven strategies, and equitable funding in sculpting a future where justice isn’t a distant dream but a tangible reality.

Together, we champion a call to leverage data for community empowerment, a journey where justice isn’t a destination but a path we pave together.



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AUTHUR THOMPSON, former Tulsan and famed musician, publishes new book, “The Lion in the Mason Jar.” It is a children’s book including topics on intrapersonal and interpersonal themes. PHOTO PROVIDED

Thompson Authors New Book, ‘The Lion in the Mason Jar’

Dr. Jerry Goodwin The Oklahoma Eagle

Author Thompson, Grammy nominated musician and former drummer for the late Wayman Tisdale, has released a book entitled “The Lion in the Mason Jar.” During his career, Thompson served more than 20 years as an elementary and middle school teacher and band director. The book is a story of a young Black family in Tulsa, Okla. The family finds success through education and entrepreneurship. The themes of the book include a story of love, trust, hardship, change, forgiveness, and growth. The backdrop of the book captures the imbalances and incongruities of race and geography that separate people in Tulsa. Blacks have predominantly lived in north Tulsa. Their origins from when their ancestors moved to Tulsa for a better life. They built their livelihoods in the Greenwood area, known as “Black Wall Street.” In 1921, Blacks were victims of one of the nation’s most notorious race massacres from whites in south Tulsa. The community is continuing to rebuild itself today.

In addition to being a teacher, Thompson, a native Tulsan who recently relocated to Nashville from Los Angeles, is a drummer, percussionist, singer, songwriter, producer, author, designer, and entrepreneur. On top of working with Tisdale, he has collaborated and performed with other entertainers, including Mindi Abair, Toby Keith, Dave Koz, Marcus Miller, and The Boneshakers. He is also the developer of a curriculum named Math and Music ©. According to Thompson, the program “helps make learning addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division fun for all children.” The materials provide information on basic mathematical concepts with musical notes and scales incorporating repetitive auditory memorization skills. In addition to offering the STEM program nationally, he has delivered the course to children in Uganda, Africa, and Nicaragua. For more information, visit arthurthompsondrums.com.



“KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON” ACTRESS LILY GLADSTONE (C) VISITS WITH REBECCA MARKS-JIMERSON (R) AND JARICA WALSH, attending an Intertribal Circle of Elders event. PHOTO PROVIDED

Killers of the Flower Moon Actress Lily Gladstone

Dr. Jerry Goodwin The Oklahoma Eagle

Lily Gladstone has been nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture. She portrayed the heroine in “Killers of the Flower Moon,” co-starring with Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro. The film, produced in Osage County, Oklahoma, was directed by Martin Scorsese. She is also being considered as a nominee for an Academy Award for Lead Actress for her performance as Mollie Kyle. The character is based on Mollie Burkhart, an Osage native whose family members were victims of a reign of terror that took the lives of Osages and other Native Americans in the early part of the 20th century.

Events 2023

DEC
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is hosting its monthly support group for family members, significant others, and friends of people with mental health conditions at St. Augustine Catholic Church, Education Center, 1720 E. Apache St., 6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. The meetings are held on the fourth Monday of each month. (Because the fourth Monday is Christmas Day, call (918) 587-2965 or contact staugustineparishtulsaok@yahoo.com for more information.)

DEC 15
Third Annual “A Greenwood Christmas” to be held at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave., from 6p.m.-8p.m. The program is sponsored by Art 4orms Foundation. For more information, visit www.art4orms.org.

DEC 15 - 16
Signature Symphony and Tulsa Opera Signature Chorale will be performing “Christmas in Tulsa” at Tulsa Community College at the VanTrease PACE, 10300 E. 81st St., on Dec. 15 and 16 at 7:30 p.m. For ticket information, call (918) 595-7777.

2024
JAN 15
Martin Luther King Holiday

FEB 17, 18 & 24
Theatre North’s “Topdog/Underdog” performance at Tulsa Performing Arts Center, 110 E. 2nd St. For ticket information, call (918) 596-7111.

MAR 13
2024 Women’s Summit at the Doubletree Warren Place, 6110 S. Yale Ave. The program is sponsored by the Greenwood Women’s Business Center, 102 N. Greenwood Ave., Suite 201. For more information, contact info@greenwood-wbc.com or gbcwomensummit.com.

APR 12-13
National Association of Black Journalists Region III conference, Tulsa, Okla. Eleven states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, will be represented. For more information, contact Eva Coleman, Region III director, at evacolemannabj@gmail.com.

‘Fall into Finances’ Women’s Event Held

Dr. Jerry Goodwin The Oklahoma Eagle

Bamboo Financial Partners offered a session on how women can take control of their finances. The name of the program was “Fall into Finances: A Women’s Finance Event.” The description of the program on the website said, “This event will have a bit of education, a little wine, and a lot of fun!” The workshop presented topics on the specific complexities women face when it comes to saving, investing, and preparing for retirement. It included a presentation on the topics followed by a question-and-answer session. “We (women)...live longer, make less income, and are more likely

to encounter career interruptions,” said Jasmine Renae Ball, founder of Bamboo Financial Partners, and who is the only African American Certified Financial Planner in Oklahoma. A bonus session was given on how to make wreaths for the fall season after the workshop. Ball said she is available to visit with other groups. Bamboo Financial Partners is a financial services firm that specializes in investments, financial planning, and insurance products. For more information, contact Ball at jasmine@bamboofinancialpartners.com or (918) 324-2625.



BAMBOO FINANCIAL PARTNERS hosted its first “Fall into Finances” women’s program. More than 20 participants enrolled in the evening event. PHOTO PROVIDED