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VOL. 103 NO. 42

October 18, 2024 - October 24, 2024

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## A study in hypocrisy

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## Low-income Renters Have Little Recourse Against Bad Landlords

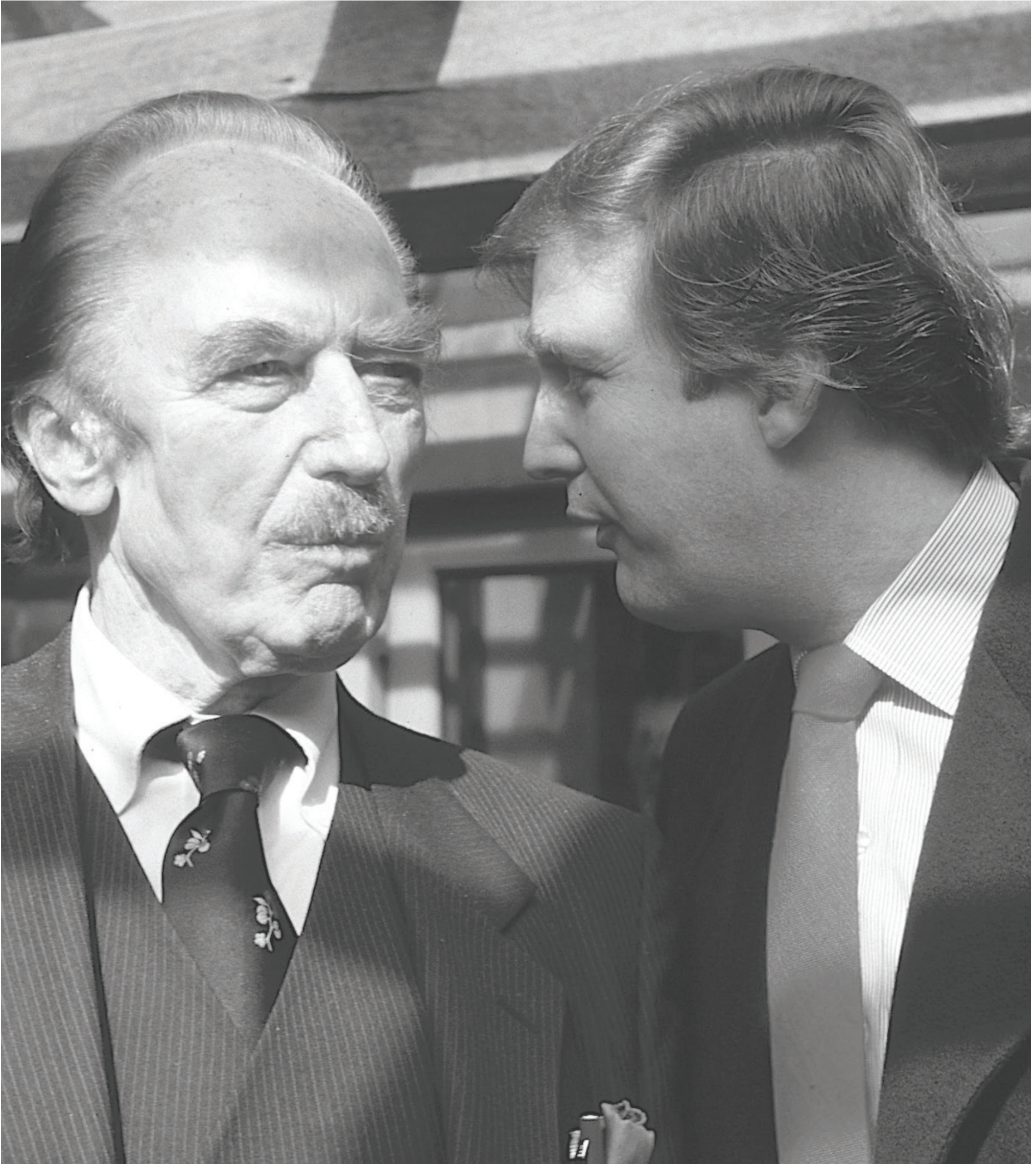
For many Oklahomans, a fight for a habitable residence is often fraught with a risk of eviction  
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## Grand Jury: State's Handling of GEER Programs Troubling, But Not Criminal

GEER, A11



Fred and Donald Trump at Wollman Rink in Central Park, apparently during a November 1986 celebration of the rink's restoration.

PHOTO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

### Trump, Immigrants

# Trump's immigration stances: A study in hypocrisy

MILTON COLEMAN  
The Oklahoma Eagle

**Rules for others don't apply to the Trumps.** One of the best ways to know what it is about immigrants today that Donald J. Trump says would be bad for America is to compare those things to what has been good for his own immigrant family. So much that benefitted his own, he now wants to deny to others.

Cont. A6, Trump, Immigrants



The Oklahoma Eagle

# Leona Pearl Mitchell: Iconic Opera Singer

By **Kitty Pittman**, The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture



Opera singer Leona Mitchell was born October 13, 1949, in Enid, Oklahoma, to Rev. Hulon and Pearl Olive Leatherman Mitchell. Tenth of fifteen children, Leona Mitchell began her musical journey by singing in her father's church choir. She received a scholarship from Oklahoma City University, in 1971 earning a bachelor's degree in music. Her alma mater later conferred upon her an honorary doctorate in music.

Mitchell debuted with the San Francisco Spring Opera Theater in 1972 and received an Opera America grant, which allowed her to study with Ernest St. John Metz in Los Angeles. On December 15, 1975, she made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Micaela in Bizet's Carmen,

the same role she had sung at her debut. This marked the beginning of her many performances in opera houses all over the world, including Geneva, Paris, Madrid, and Sydney. Mitchell performed for eighteen consecutive seasons at the Metropolitan, a testament to her voice and professionalism.

Well known for her performances in operas by Puccini and Verdi, she also sang Bess in the London Records recording of the George Gershwin classic Porgy and Bess, with the Cleveland Orchestra. She has made television as well as film appearances. Her first solo operatic album was Presenting Leona Mitchell with Kurt Herbert Adler: An Operatic Partnership,

recorded in 1979.

Mitchell received numerous Oklahoma awards, including induction into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame in 2001 and the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 2004. She was given an Outstanding Oklahoman citation in 1975 and was named "Ambassador of Enid" that same year. She was also honored by a joint session of the Oklahoma Legislature in 1985. She has performed for two presidents and at the inauguration of Charles Bradford Henry as governor of Oklahoma in 2003. She married Elmer Bush III and had one son, Elmer Bush IV. At the end of the twentieth century she resided in Houston, Texas.

**Leona Pearl Mitchell** (2012.201.B0399.0254, by J. Miller, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

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### Founded in 1921

- James O. Goodwin**  
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- Robert K. Goodwin**  
Publisher 1972-1980
- Edward L. Goodwin, Jr.**  
Co-Publisher 1980-2014
- Edward L. Goodwin, Sr.**  
Publisher 1936-1972
- Theodore B. Baughman**  
Publisher 1921-1936

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Mayor's Race: A Faceoff Between Two Brands of Democrats



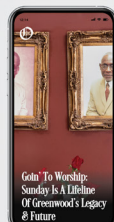
Sexual abuse settlement inflates Ninnekah property taxes, infuriates residents.



Trump's Campaign Against Immigrants Echoes Earlier White Supremacist Tirades

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The Oklahoma Eagle | Founded in 1921 | Vol. CIII No. 42

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

Mail Subscriber Rates: Single copy \$1 | Yearly \$52 | 2 Years \$100

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# KAMALA HARRIS

## Has a Plan for Black Men *Trump Never Did*

“Black Vote, Black Power,” a collaboration between Keith Boykin and Word In Black, examines the issues, the candidates, and what’s at stake for Black America in the 2024 presidential election.

On Monday Kamala Harris unveiled a new agenda for Black men. The plan is extensive, but I want to highlight 10 specific steps she would take as president that would empower Black men with the tools we need to build wealth, provide for our families, and lead our communities.

Number 1. Business Loans. Black Americans are twice as likely to be denied credit by banks, so Harris would provide 1 million fully forgivable loans of up to \$20,000 to Black entrepreneurs and others who have historically faced barriers to starting a new business or growing an existing one.

Number 2. More Jobs Without College Degrees. Harris would eliminate unnecessary degree requirements and promote pathways for those without college degrees for 500,000 federal jobs.

Number 3. More Black Male Teachers. As a former high school English and social studies teacher, I know it’s important for young Black males to see Black men in front of the classroom as role models and mentors. Only 1% of public school teachers are Black men, so Harris would create pathways for more Black men to become teachers, including apprenticeship programs and loan forgiveness.

Number 4. Health Care. My uncle, who had sickle cell disease, died last year, and I know several Black men my age who have been recently diagnosed with prostate cancer. And don’t get me started on the mental health needs of the Black men in my family and community. I see it every day. We’ve been traumatized by an unfair criminal justice system and a world that demonizes us instead of understanding us. Fortunately, Harris would launch a National Health Equity Initiative focused on Black men that addresses sickle cell disease, diabetes, mental health, and prostate cancer.

Number 5. Weed Equity. Black men have been disproportionately arrested and incarcerated for marijuana-related charges. Now that cannabis is becoming more socially acceptable and profitable, it’s only fair that we benefit from the changing system that hurt us. Vice President Harris not only wants to legalize recreational marijuana but also create opportunities for Black Americans to succeed in this new industry.

Number 6. Ban the Box. I have a law degree, and yet when I lived in Harlem, I was still stopped on the street, arrested, and locked up in jail. I know Black men have been targeted by a racist criminal justice system. Harris would work with Congress to require businesses to limit the unnecessary use of criminal arrest histories, convictions, and credit scores in employment decisions.

Number 7. Mentorship Programs. Harris would expand funding for community mentorship programs with a proven track record of helping young Black men succeed. She will also support programs like My Brother’s Keeper.

Number 8. Support Black Farmers. Harris would continue to support Black farmers and ranchers who have been denied access to capital. As vice president, she already distributed funding to thousands of Black farmers and ranchers in a \$2 billion relief package.

Number 9. Relieve Medical Debt. My stepfather passed away in April 2020, with a mountain of medical debt. Vice President Harris plans to work with states to relieve medical debt, which is the leading cause of bankruptcy in America, and disproportionately hurts Black Americans.

And Number 10. Crypto Protection. More than 20% of Black Americans, including me, have owned cryptocurrency assets. I lost money in crypto, but the high-risk, high-reward crypto markets provide opportunities outside of the existing stock market for many Black men. A Harris administration would support a regulatory framework for cryptocurrency and other digital assets to protect Black men who invest in these assets.

**VP Harris wants to help Black men build wealth, provide for our families, and lead our communities. Trump wants to use us as political pawns.**

So, let me answer a few questions I’ve already seen from critics.

**Question 1.** Why didn’t she do this in the last four years? Because she’s not the president. She’s the vice president. Trump was actually a president, and he did none of these things in his four years in office.

**Question 2.** But why do some of these policies say Black men “and others”? Why aren’t they all Black-specific? Well, because Trump’s Supreme Court Justices and federal judges keep striking down programs that focus on Black people? Trump’s Supreme Court ended race-specific affirmative action in college admissions. A Trump-appointed federal judge forced the Minority Business Development Agency to help white people. Another Trump-appointed federal judge blocked a disaster relief program for Black farmers. And two Trump-appointed federal judges in Georgia blocked a private program by the Fearless Fund to help Black women in business.

If Trump’s judges won’t allow a private group of Black women to help each other, do you think they’re going to let a government program that only helps Black men and excludes others? No. But this is what happens when we don’t vote. So we have to create clever ways to get around the Trump MAGA Republican bans on helping Black people.

**Question 3.** Yeah, but why does it feel like Democrats only care about Black women? Yes, Joe Biden elevated two very prominent Black women in the past four years: VP Kamala Harris and Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. But the Democratic Party is filled with Black men in positions of power and leadership. The highest-ranking Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives is Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, who will become the first Black Speaker if Democrats win the House in November. The highest ranking leader in the military is Lloyd Austin, the first Black Secretary of Defense. Two of the three Democratic Black U.S. senators — Raphael Warnock and Cory Booker — are Black men. The Democratic governor of Maryland, Wes Moore, is a Black man. The mayors of New York City, Chicago, and Atlanta are all Black men in the Democratic Party. And the only Black person ever elected president, Barack Obama, is also a Black man.

**And Question 4:** But isn’t Trump better for Black men? Was he better for Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise — the Exonerated Five teenagers who went to prison when Trump led a lynch mob against them for a rape they did not commit, and then refused to apologize after they were exonerated by DNA evidence? Was he better for the Black casino workers who sued him for racial discrimination? Was he better for Colin Kapernick and the NFL players he attacked for taking a knee? Was he better for Eugene Goodman, the Capitol Police Officer who had to fend off a mob of angry white Trump supporters who tried to take over the Capitol on January 6? Was he better for the Haitian American Black men in Springfield, Ohio, who were subjected to death threats because of Trump’s lies about them eating dogs and cats? Was he better for Marcellus Williams, the Black man who was executed by the State of Missouri last month because Donald Trump’s three Supreme Court Justices refused to agree with the Democratic Justices to stop the execution? Was he better for the Black farmers denied relief by his judges? Was he better for the Black men who died while he mismanaged the COVID pandemic? And will he be better for the Black youth who will be harassed by the police when he brings back stop and frisk?

Kamala Harris wants to help Black men build wealth, provide for our families, and lead our communities. Trump wants to use us as political pawns in his angry MAGA campaign. Those are the choices. Choose wisely.



# Changing the immigration narrative



ABOVE **Elisabeth and Friedrich Trump**  
This image is believed to be of Elisabeth and Friedrich Trump, who emigrated to the United States and would become Donald Trump's grandparents. They are pictured here in 1902.  
PHOTO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

LEFT **Frederick (Friedrich) Trump.**  
This image is believed to be of Friedrich Trump, who emigrated to the United States and would become Donald Trump's grandparents.  
PHOTO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

## Trump, Immigrants

From A3

**R**ules for thee, but not for me, seems to be his adage. Such hypocrisy is woven throughout the public record of the former president's words and actions.

Campaigning for a return to power in the White House, Trump has intensified his trademark demonization of immigrants of color as people who should not be in America. He has pledged to deport millions of them in mass if elected again.

There are continuing comparisons of the tactical and legal similarities in the Trump-inspired insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, the White supremacist coup d'état in Wilmington, N.C. on November 10, 1898, and Trump's record in office from 2017-2021.

Another way to look at it is to consider that the largest group of people migrating into U.S. citizenship in the time of Wilmington was some four million formerly enslaved ethnic Africans, coming into America, so to speak—at the very same time that Trump's paternal grandfather and the patriarch of the modern Trump family came, as well.

### Changing the Immigration Narrative

Then as now, favorably opening the door of U.S. residency and subsequent citizenship to family members of immigrants already here was a standing principle of immigration policy and practice, generally referred to as "family unification" or "family reunification."

In the last 60 years, however, as people from nations outside of Europe have come to dominate those migrating to the United States, many politicians have denigrated family unification as undesirable "chain migration." Trump is chief among the detractors.

"CHAIN MIGRATION must end now! Some people come in, and they bring their whole family with them, who can be truly evil. NOT ACCEPTABLE!" then President Trump said on social media in November of 2018.

Yet, the immigration chronicle of his own family began with chain migration and continued during his time in the White House.

His paternal grandfather, Friedrich Trump, born in Bavaria in southeastern Germany, first came to America in 1885 to live with an older sister, Katharina, who'd

**The former president's grandfather, Friedrich Trump, was a 16-year-old unaccompanied minor when he arrived at the Immigrant Landing Depot in New York City on October 19, 1885. He is said to have spoken little English, a criticism that his grandson has made of many immigrants, including the Haitians in Springfield that Trump has falsely accused of eating cats and dogs.**

migrated a few years earlier, and married. And just a few months before then President Trump dubbed such migration unacceptable, the mother of Melania Trump, his current wife, was being granted U.S. citizenship through chain migration, having moved here from Slovenia to join her daughter, who'd come in 1996.

As president, Trump imposed a "zero tolerance" policy toward those crossing the Southern border. Underage migrants, known in immigration parlance as "unaccompanied minors," were among the most harshly affected.

A record number were detained at the border and many were exported much more rapidly than in earlier years. Critics termed some of the actions unlawful and unnecessarily cruel, and characteristic of Trumpian policies in which cruelty itself was the point.

### The Trump Chain Migration

The former president's grandfather, Friedrich Trump, was a 16-year-old unaccompanied minor when he arrived at the Immigrant Landing Depot in New York City on October 19, 1885.

He is said to have spoken little English, a criticism that his grandson has made of many immigrants, including the Haitians in Springfield that Trump has falsely accused of eating cats and dogs.

"He didn't know English...," Gwenda Blair, author of "The Trumps: Three Generations that Built an Empire," told the Washington Post of the grandfather. "He was literate, but in German."

That, it turned out, worked to his advantage. Fresh off the boat, Friedrich was hired by a local German-speaking barber with an opening in his shop, Blair wrote. Young Trump began work the very next day, apparently with no work permit required. His grandson now repeatedly complains about immigrants unfairly taking jobs from Americans.

Some of Donald Trump's most consistent and recently most vitriolic anti-immigrant rhetoric has been the allegation that many of those coming to America have been criminals in their native nations, including some who have murder "in their genes."

Yet the former president's family patriarch was a felon-to-be on the run when he arrived here, having exited the land of his birth in order to avoid mandatory conscription in

the Imperial German Army. While in the U.S., he married a Bavarian woman who became deeply homesick. They returned to their homeland hoping to settle there, but the government revoked his citizenship and deported him because dodging the draft was against the law.

Fortunately, by that time he had gained U.S. citizenship, and was able to spend the rest of his life as an American, somewhat by default.

Donald Trump's father, Fred C. Trump, was born in New York City. However, his wife and Donald's mother, Mary Anne MacLeod Trump, also came to America through chain migration. She arrived from Scotland in 1930 to join siblings who had migrated earlier and became a U.S. citizen 12 years later.

It was around that time that Donald's father began espousing what would become an apparently financially favorable falsehood about his own father, the family patriarch.

### False Claims of Swedish Roots

"From World War II until the 1980s, Mr. Trump [Donald's father] would tell friends and acquaintances that he [the grandfather] was of Swedish origin, although both his parents were born in Germany," the New York Times reported in its June 26, 1999 obituary of the father. He had built thousands of apartments in the city.

"John Walter, his nephew and the family historian, explained, 'He [Donald's father] had a lot of Jewish tenants, and it wasn't a good thing to be German in those days'."

Donald himself repeated that line, embellished with two added inaccuracies, in "Trump: The Art of the Deal," published in 1987:

"Fred Trump was born in New Jersey in 1905. His father, who came here from Sweden as a child, owned a moderately successful restaurant, but was also a hard liver and a hard drinker, and he died when my father was eleven years old."

Fred Trump, of course, had been born in New York, not New Jersey; and Friedrich Trump, the patriarch, died May 30, 1918, when his son Fred would have been six months short of 13 years old, not 11.

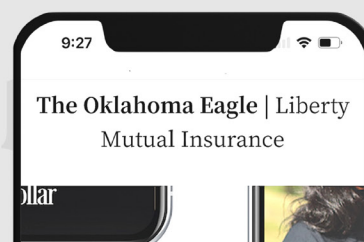
Donald Trump ultimately abandoned the born-in-Sweden falsehood, but as President, in an apparent effort to buttress his standing to criticize members of NATO and the European Union, claimed several times that

Cont. A7, Trump, Immigrants

The Oklahoma Eagle

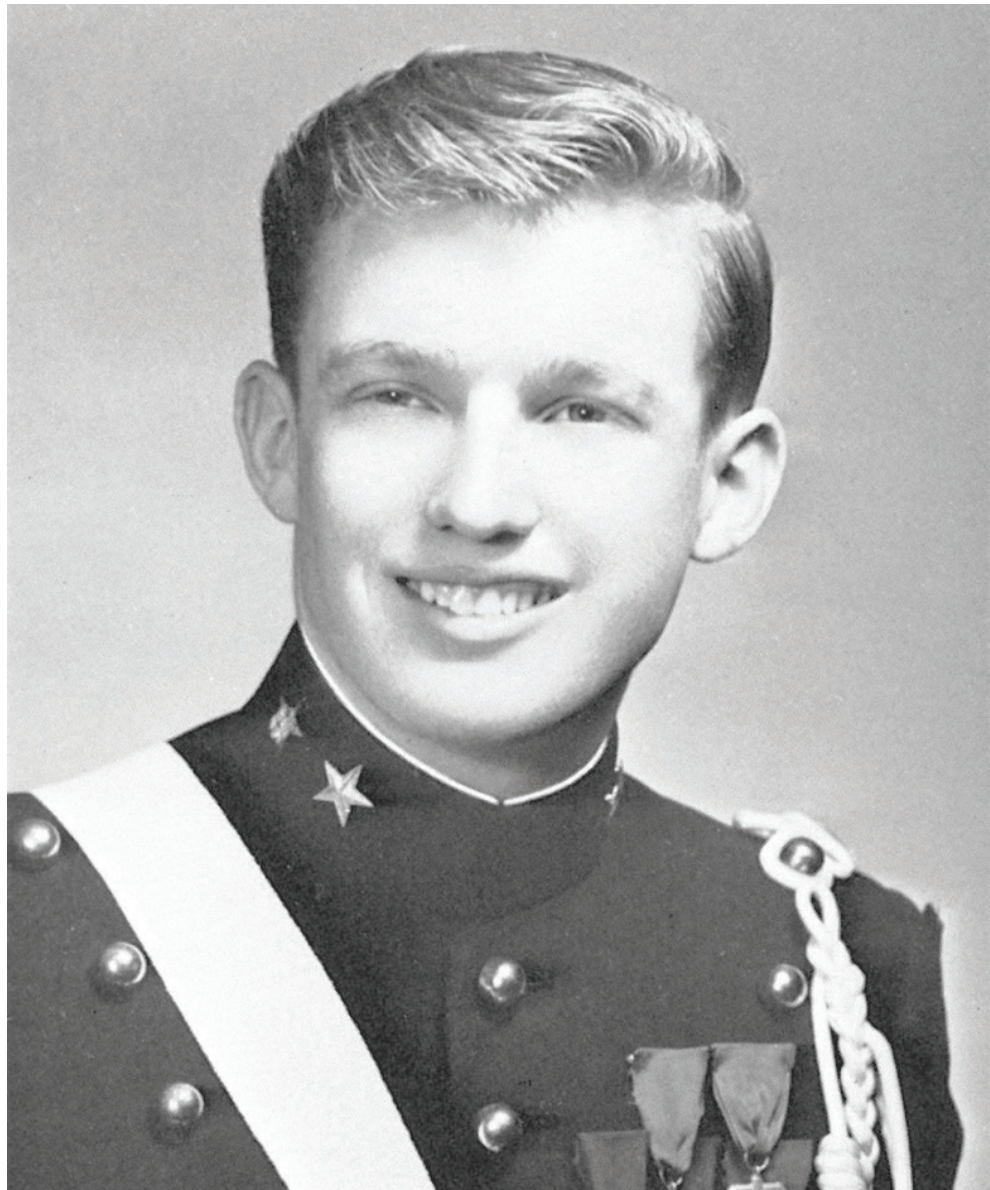
## Our Mission

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





## “I didn’t know she was Black until a number of years ago.”



FROM LEFT: **Mary Anne MacLeod Trump**, mother of U.S. president Donald Trump. **Donald John Trump**, pictured on page 107 of his 1964 New York Military Academy yearbook. Full yearbook: <http://www.classmates.com/yearbooks/New-York-Military-Academy/32008> (No copyright notice apparently included although website says “These are reprints from previously owned yearbooks so handwriting or effects of aging may be present, and pages, images, or other content may be missing or obscured.”) PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

### Trump, Immigrants

From A6

his father had been born in Germany.

“My father is German. Right. Was German. And born in a wonderful place in Germany and so I have a great feeling for Germany,” he told reporters at a press conference with NATO secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in April of 2019.

One of the starkest dichotomies of Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant narrative involves birthright citizenship, a provision of the 14th Amendment, enacted in 1870 during Reconstruction, nearly three decades before the coup in Wilmington.

It grants citizenship at birth to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” as were the vast majority of the African Americans formerly enslaved in Confederate states at the end of the Civil War.

Trump built much of his political prominence on “Birtherism,” the lie that his Presidential predecessor, Barack Obama, was not born in the United States, and thereby did not meet the Constitutional requirement that in order to be President, one must be “a natural born U.S. citizen.”

Barack Hussein Obama II definitively is one such American, born in Honolulu, Hawaii August 4, 1961, of an American mother and an African immigrant father. Trump, a native New Yorker and the son of an American father and a Scottish immigrant mother, is another--no less, no more.

The former president has repeatedly said he would end birthright citizenship by executive order, but ending it, many scholars have said, could be done only through an amendment to the Constitution.

There is one other commonality: Obama’s birthright citizenship is no different than that of all three of Trump’s oldest children--Donald John Trump, Jr., Ivana Marie “Ivanka” Trump, and Eric Frederick Trump.

Their mother and their dad’s first wife, Ivana Marie Zelnickova, Ivanka’s namesake, was born in Czechoslovakia on February 20, 1949. In 1971, she married an Austrian ski instructor, which allowed her to obtain an Austrian passport without effectively losing her Czechoslovakian citizenship. She and the ski instructor divorced a short time later.

Ivanka met Donald in New York in 1976, and they married a year later, the same year that Don Jr. was born. Ivanka was born the next year, and Eric in 1984. Ivanka became a U.S. citizen in 1988. She and the children’s father divorced two years later.

#### Questioning Harris’s heritage

Speaking at the National Association of Black Journalists conference in Chicago in July, Trump accused Vice President Kamala Devi Harris, the native-born American daughter of an Indian mother and a Jamaican father, of manipulating her ethnic heritage for political gain.

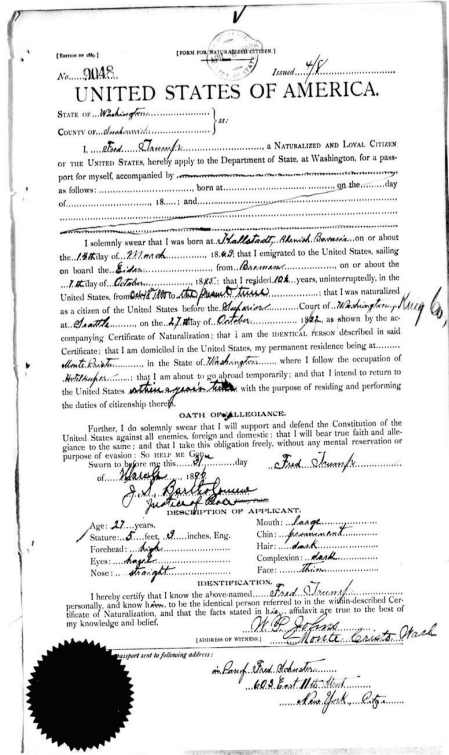


PHOTO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS  
U.S. Passport application filed by Fred Trump of Monte Cristo, Snohomish County, WA.

“I didn’t know she was Black until a number of years ago, when she happened to turn Black, and now she wants to be known as Black. So, I don’t know, is she Indian or is she Black?” he said.

“I respect either one, but she obviously doesn’t because she was Indian all the way and then all of a sudden, she made a turn and she went, she became a Black person.” Politifact called it out as “blatant mischaracterization of Harris’ heritage and how she has spoken about it, and has identified with, her racial background and ethnicity.”

The Vice President, it said, “has long identified as a Black woman who grew up in a multicultural household. She attended a historically Black university, pledged to a historically Black sorority, and has given interviews and written about her experience embracing her Indian culture while living as a Black woman.”

The site has a “Truth-O-Meter” to rank the degree of falsehood in the statements it fact-checks. Those Trump remarks about Harris earned the highest possible grade for falsehoods--a “Pants on Fire!” lie.

This is the second article in a three-part series. The writer, Milton Coleman, is a former Deputy Managing Editor at The Washington Post. He is an occasional contributor to The Oklahoma Eagle.



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Shanon Van Gordon looks out a window in an unusable upstairs bedroom where rainwater and snow pour in the unsealed windows and gaping holes in walls go unfixed.

PHOTO HEATHER WARLICK/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Renters

# LOW-INCOME RENTERS

## *Have Little Recourse Against Bad Landlords*

HEATHER WARLICK  
Oklahoma Watch

Harold Morris was tired of living with rats.

He complained to Oklahoma City Code Enforcement and the Department of Health about the overwhelming infestation and seriously dilapidated conditions in the home he rents from Virginia Oldham.

The city inspected on September 13 and handed Oldham a stack of code violations. Days earlier, Oldham had served Morris a 30-day notice to vacate. Morris, a disabled veteran, was still living in his rental home on Oct. 7, the last day of his 30-day period.

Oldham engaged contractors to address the many issues she was cited for, but Morris said the home is so run down he thinks it could be condemned.

Some repairs Oldham contracted were hastily done, such as the plank being nailed up on the porch overhang to stabilize it. The wood blocks the front door from opening fully. The city twice rejected for unsafe conditions a new water heater the landlord's contractors installed.

Such subpar fixes were evident throughout the house when Oklahoma

Watch visited; unsightly thick yellow spray foam is an apparent favorite of the workers who used it to fix holes in interior and exterior walls, under sinks, inside cabinets, and seal windows and doors inside and out.

But nothing was done to seal up the dozens of holes in the walls and ceiling through which rats entered the house, Morris said.

Morris said he plans to fight to stay in his rental despite the home's extreme disrepair.

"I was a good tenant," Morris said. "I overlooked a lot of things. I'm not overlooking anything now."

### Oklahoma Landlords Can Legally Retaliate

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, Oklahoma has more than 4 million people; 34.9%, or 1.23 million, live in rentals. In 2023, about 92,200 Oklahomans, or 41,000 households, lived in housing subsidized by Section 8 vouchers. That means more than 92% of tenants pay 100% of their rent.

While most rental units conform to health and building codes, many of Oklahoma's most vulnerable renters, like Morris, risk retaliatory measures, including eviction, if they report extreme disrepair to city officials.

Morris can't afford to move. His disability check covers his bills, and he doesn't receive any assistance, such as a Section 8 subsidy. Like many Oklahomans in similar situations, Morris would likely have trouble finding another affordable apartment with Oklahoma's lack of low-income housing options. He wants Oldham to fix the house and allow him to stay.

Oldham, who owns at least eight Oklahoma City homes, declined to speak to Oklahoma Watch aside from saying she doesn't know why Morris is making "a big case out of this."

Oklahoma is one of only six states in the nation where it is legal for landlords like Oldham to retaliate against tenants who complain about uninhabitable conditions.

"Anti-retaliation protections would ensure that tenants can request repairs for issues that affect their health and safety and hold bad actor landlords accountable without risking eviction, harassment, or fees," said Sabine Brown, a senior policy analyst at the Oklahoma Policy Institute.

Brown said that adding anti-retaliation protections would bring Oklahoma in line with the rest of the country and wouldn't affect the majority of responsible landlords.

People who receive Section 8 housing vouchers are protected under federal law against retaliation. But those who pay for their rentals without federal subsidies have no such protection without state anti-retaliation laws in place.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development also requires scheduled inspections of federally subsidized homes. Those inspections are required every three years — more often if properties fail. These inspections are geared to protect the public's investment of tax dollars in low-income housing.

Private landlords are not required to perform inspections under Oklahoma or federal law.

### Some Landlords Let Fixes Go

Shanon Van Gordon felt trapped in the substandard townhome she rented from Oklahoma City landlord Michael Raff. She had lived there for 21 years and though the unit was in disrepair, Van Gordon loved living near her sisters and liked that she was near her doctors, pharmacy and shopping.

Van Gordon and her two sisters, also in their 70s, have endured difficult rental conditions for nearly as long as they lived there. Though they did not have a lease,



Renters

# Okla. legislature declined to advance Anti-retaliation provisions

From A8

the ORLTA protects their rights insofar as it requires landlords to perform upkeep of the most basic housing necessities such as heat in the winter, running hot water, electricity, and plumbing.

At Raff's townhome buildings, rainwater and snow poured into leaky, rotting windows and doors. Holes in walls and ceilings went unfixed, pipes are corroded, rodents and even birds have infested fireplaces and roaches have taken up residence alongside the Van Gordon sisters.

For years, the back door of Shanon Van Gordon's townhouse was held in place by duct tape and propped up by a heavy tool chest on the outside to keep it from falling through the rotted frame. Even if the door had been functional, it was still obstructed by an oversized refrigerator, blocking Van Gordon in. In response to a code violation from months earlier, Raff fixed all the units' doors just days before the hearing. Van Gordon's refrigerator still blocked her backdoor.

According to the Oklahoma County Assessor records, Raff operates Panic Properties LLC and owns about 40 Oklahoma City residential properties and commercial rentals.

The sisters meticulously documented their years-long journey dealing with Raff, saving every text and email message and taking copious photos. Raff often portrayed himself as a victim in his correspondence and made increasingly hostile comments.

When Raff raised the rent for Van Gordon and one of her sisters but not the other (with whom he expressed sympathy) in November 2023, he said in an email that he thought raising the rent from \$575 and \$600 to \$800 per month was "more courteous than a 30-day notice to vacate, but once again it will never be seen through my glasses, like missing an opportunity to lease the apartments for MUCH more monthly, but I am the evil, greedy guy that won't fix anything."

At one point, Van Gordon said, Raff told her by phone that he had a gun. Van Gordon said that the



FROM LEFT Saundra, Shanon and Stephanie Van Gordon pose in front of the townhouse building they rent units in. The buildings have been cited for numerous city code violations.

PHOTO HEATHER WARLICK/OKLAHOMA WATCH

statement was out of context and felt like a threat.

In another email sent in September, Raff wrote that he thought that in return for his keeping their rent low, the sisters should have taken care of the "small items," such as spraying for bugs.

"I have figured out that it is impossible to run the place correctly and keep everyone happy charging low rents," Raff wrote. "Either way, I am the bad guy so that is going to have to change to get things done."

After repeated attempts and calls to Mayor David Holt and City Councilman James Cooper, Van Gordon said she finally got Code Enforcement's full attention in the spring.

Raff was slapped with a stack of violations. In the fall, Van Gordon

finally lost patience with Raff's stream of excuses for dragging his feet on fixing the violations, so she contacted Legal Aid Services Oklahoma. With the counsel of Legal Aid attorney Andrew Case, Van Gordon filed a lawsuit against Raff.

Days later, Raff served Van Gordon a 30-day notice to vacate.

"I think Ms. Van Gordon had faith that maybe there was a moral compass there for her landlord and that she could get the repairs needed to stay," Case said.

Raff did not settle the case before a scheduled hearing on Oct. 2, forcing Van Gordon to move to a new apartment. She moved to southwest Oklahoma City, where she found an affordable unit, but she said she regrets being so far from her sisters, doctors, pharmacy, and all the other

services within walking distance for the 21 years she lived in the townhouse.

Panic Properties' code violations case for the townhome buildings was closed just days before Van Gordon's court date, officials at the department confirmed.

At the Oct. 2 hearing, Judge Trent Pipes required Van Gordon and Raff, along with their attorneys, to participate in mediation, and Raff agreed to pay Van Gordon \$1,000 for diminution of value.

Raff declined to comment. Van Gordon said it felt like a win just seeing Raff in court, but her two sisters still live in the townhome complex with uninhabitable conditions and are bracing themselves for similar retaliation.

Oklahoma Legislators Ignore

Proposed Anti-Retaliation Laws

The Oklahoma Residential Landlord and Tenant Act specifies that tenants can break a lease by submitting a 30-day written notice of their intention to vacate to landlords who fail to make fixes imperative to the livability of the unit.

The ORLTA was adopted in 1978 and derived from the Uniform Landlord Tenant Act. That model legislation offers protection from landlord retaliation, but those protections were dropped in Oklahoma's version.

Rep. Daniel Pae, R-Lawton, and Sen. John Michael Montgomery, R-Lawton, authored HB 2019, which would outlaw landlord retaliation, but for two sessions in a row, the bill failed to advance.

"The Legislature has declined to include an anti-retaliation provision in Oklahoma's Landlord and Tenant Act," Legal Aid Services Oklahoma Attorney Eric Hallett said. "Such a provision would support habitability by allowing tenants to hold landlords accountable for willfully failing to provide essential services."

Hallett said landlords can ignore the law without an anti-retaliation statute, risking tenant families' health and safety.

The typical language used in anti-retaliatory statutes states that a landlord may not retaliate against a tenant by increasing rent or decreasing services or by bringing or threatening actions against the tenant for complaining to a landlord or government agency about a violation of law.

Anti-retaliation laws also protect tenants against landlords who would retaliate when maintenance failures convince the tenant to legally vacate their rental.

Buyout Charges a Tool For Landlords

Sometimes, landlords assess seemingly retaliatory fees after tenants move out, threatening their credit scores and future ability to rent a home.

Angela Martinez was hit with \$2,000 in lease-buyout fees after she ended her lease early and vacated her pest-ridden unit at Urban Oaks at 51st Apartments in

Cont. A10, Renters

Bibles

# Families and Teachers Ask Supreme Court to Stop Superintendent's Push for Bibles in Public Schools

JENNIFER PALMER  
Oklahoma Watch

A coalition of parents, students, teachers and faith leaders are asking the state's highest court to block the state superintendent's mandate to teach the Bible in public schools and his agency's impending \$3 million purchase of Bibles.

They argued that the Bible mandate violates constitutional protections of religious freedom and that the Department of Education doesn't have the authority to spend state funds on Bibles or dictate schools' curriculum or textbooks. The Oklahoma Department of Education is soliciting bids to purchase 55,000 King James Version Bibles. Additional specifications appeared to point to one Bible: Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." Bible, endorsed by former President Donald Trump, for which he receives a fee.

The coalition asks the court for an injunction to stop the state from further implementing the Bible mandate, including buying Bibles, and for the mandate and request for proposals to be withdrawn. They are represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, the Freedom From Religion Coalition, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and the Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice.

The petition was filed Thursday in the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Those suing include three faith leaders, 14 parents of public school students and four public school teachers. Some are Christian; some are nonreligious, atheist or agnostic.

"As parents, my husband and I have sole responsibility to decide how and when our children learn about the Bible and religious teachings," one parent, Erika Wright, said. "We are devout Christians, but different



Reverend Lori Walke, shown here at the Capitol, is among the plaintiffs asking the Oklahoma Supreme Court to stop state Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters from spending millions on classroom Bibles.

PHOTO OKLAHOMA WATCH

Christian denominations have different theological beliefs and practices. It is not the role of any politician or public school official to intervene in these personal matters."

Named as defendants are Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters, the Board of Education, the Office of Management and Enterprise Services and several OMES employees.

Walters issued two memos to public school superintendents this summer, on June 27 and July 24, mandating they incorporate the Bible into schools' curriculum immediately and maintain physical copies of the Bible and Ten Commandments in every classroom.

In September, the Board of Education, which Walters chairs, approved a \$3 million line item to buy Bibles in the fiscal year 2026 agency budget. Walters said that money was to be combined with \$3 million already set aside from the current year's budget to purchase Bibles. Dan Isett, a Department of Education spokesman, told Oklahoma Watch that \$3 million was obtained through personnel and administrative cost savings.

The state issued a request for proposals Sept. 30 to contract with the state for 55,000 Bibles that include the Pledge of Allegiance, U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights and are bound in leather or leather-like material. The RFP requires delivery to each of the state's 546 school districts within two weeks.

The state Office of Management and Enterprise Services modified the proposal to allow multiple vendors to supply the religious text and American historical documents. Bids are due Monday, a one-week extension from the original date.

Jennifer Palmer has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.





Harold Morris discusses the conditions of his falling-apart rental home owned by landlord Virginia Oldham. Oldham evicted Morris after he reported the home's problems to Oklahoma City Code Enforcement.

PHOTO HEATHER WARLICK/OKLAHOMA WATCH

## Renters

# For many Oklahomans, a fight for a habitable residence is often fraught with a risk of eviction

From A9

Tulsa. Represented by Hallett, Martinez filed a lawsuit against LynCo Properties, the company that manages Urban Oaks at 51st Street.

Martinez and her husband, Jordan Martinez, lived in a one-bedroom unit at Urban Oaks for seven years without problems, but when Martinez's mother became sick, the couple moved into a two-bedroom so Martinez could care for her mother during her last months.

That apartment turned out to be a roach-infested nightmare for the Martinez family.

"I've never seen something so disgusting," Martinez said. "They were in my fridge. They were in my Tupperware. They were getting inside of things that they shouldn't have been able to get inside of. I was taking them to work with me. Gosh, it was awful. It was awful."

At night, she would cry herself to sleep, she said.

"It was hard to go to sleep when you could feel things crawling on you," Martinez said.

"I felt a little crazy, because the roaches are nocturnal, so if I had to get up and go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, or if I got up in the morning and it was still dark, and flip on my kitchen lights, and they would scatter like a cartoon. It was scary."

After eight months of living with American roaches more than an inch long – Martinez said she became a reluctant roach expert – and with insufficient service from her complex, she decided to exercise her rights under the Oklahoma Residential Landlord and Tenant Act and give the complex 30 days' notice that she planned to vacate due to the infestation.

Martinez, a librarian, extensively

“**I've never seen something so disgusting," Martinez said. "They were in my fridge. They were in my Tupperware. They were getting inside of things that they shouldn't have been able to get inside of. I was taking them to work with me. Gosh, it was awful. It was awful.**

Angela Martinez, former tenant of Urban Oaks at 51st Apartments in Tulsa.

researched her rights under the ORLTA and handled her lease termination and move-out with precision. She was upset about losing her deposit but furious when she saw the buyout charges.

The Martinezes vacated their apartment on August 31, 2023. Shortly after, Angela Martinez noticed \$2,000 in buyout fees assessed to her Urban Oaks LynCo Properties account. Manager Shirly Gomez told Oklahoma Watch that buyout fees are noted in a clause of the complex's lease and are automatically assessed when a tenant ends a lease early. She said tenants may be able to have the fees removed upon approval.

Lease buyout options can benefit tenants who need to move before a lease terms out. But in this case, the fees seem retaliatory since Martinez moved out under the ORLTA.

Like Van Gordon, Martinez kept meticulous records of her dealings with management and photos of her encounters with roaches. She shared a text message in which Gomez informed Martinez: "We have processed the move out as a normal move out. There will be no fees waived at this time."

"I was living in this absolutely terrible environment, and then on top of that, they tried to charge me a termination fee," Martinez said.

Hallett sent a refund demand letter to Urban Oaks that got no response.

### Fighting the 'Powers That Be'

At first, Martinez just wanted the buyout fees removed from her account and she wanted her deposit back. She became increasingly angry about the complex's

treatment and decided to sue for her total rent for the eight months she lived in the roach-infested two-bedroom.

A hearing for Martinez's case is set for October 16. LynCo has filed a counterclaim, asking the court for \$1,293, the amount Urban Oaks demanded for the lease buyout fee minus Martinez's deposit, Hallett said.

### Inequitable Laws Cause Imbalance of Power

"Oklahomans shouldn't have to risk housing instability or homelessness simply for asking for habitable conditions in their home," Brown said.

Though Van Gordon's \$1,000 settlement didn't even cover her moving costs, Van Gordon said she hopes to shed light on the need for updated laws in Oklahoma and stop landlords from having carte blanche to treat tenants unfairly.

Morris doesn't want to move; he would prefer his landlord repair his rental and allow him to stay.

Angela and Jordan Martinez lost Angela's mother just weeks after moving out of Urban Oaks. The couple had been saving for a downpayment on a mortgage and recently closed on their own home.

Martinez said she grew up living in subsidized housing with her mother, who was often ill. The two felt helpless, she said, to fight the people in positions of power.

"Well, now I have a little bit of power," Martinez said. "Now I have the time."

"I don't have a lot of money, but I've got a little bit of money, so I'm going to pay these court costs. I'm going to fight this," she said. "I'm going to see what I can do to protect myself. Because they shouldn't be allowed to do this."

Heather Warlick is a reporter covering evictions, housing and homelessness. Contact her at (405) 226-1915 or hwarlick@oklahomawatch.org.

## Trump Bible

# Oklahoma amends request for Bibles that initially appeared to match only version backed by Trump

KEN MILLER  
Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahoma has amended its request for 55,000 Bibles to be placed in public schools that initially matched a version of the holy book endorsed by former President Donald Trump.

The request was amended Monday and no longer requires the Bibles to include U.S. historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — requirements that match the "God Bless the USA Bible" that Trump endorsed this year and that are several times more expensive than similar Bibles that don't include the U.S. documents.

The new request says the historical documents may be included together or separately and extends the deadline for offers to supply the items by one week, from Oct. 14 to Oct. 21.

The request is part of State Superintendent Ryan Walters' efforts to require Bibles in public school classrooms, which has been met with resistance by some of Oklahoma's largest school districts.

Walters, in a Monday video on X, said the Bible will be used "because of its historical significance throughout this nation's history," blaming what he called the "fake news media" for lies about the program.

"The left-wing media hates Donald Trump so much, and they hate the Bible so much, they will lie and go to any means necessary

to stop this initiative from happening," Walters said.

The department said in a statement that the changes to the "request for proposal," or RFP, were suggested by the Office of Management and Enterprise Services, which issues the requests and were agreed to by Walters.

"Unfortunately, there have been false reports that have been repeated by numerous, supposedly credible, news organizations that the state's RFP was catered to one specific organization," the statement said, noting that tailoring the request so that only one manufacturer's Bible would qualify would be illegal.

Christa Helfrey, a spokesperson for OMES, said the changes were made to the

request to try to save taxpayer money.

"OMES worked with OSDE to amend the solicitation to provide the listed resources at a much better value to Oklahomans," Helfrey said.

The initial request included requirements that are not commonly found in Bibles but are included in the "God Bless the USA Bible," which Trump urged his supporters to begin buying earlier this year at a website that sells the book for \$59.99.

The Bibles must be bound in "leather or leather-like material for durability," according to the initial request.

Similar Bibles that don't include the Declaration of Independence or Constitution are available online for less than \$20.





Gov. Kevin Stitt greets attendees of a Better Conversations Session on Aug. 14, 2024, at the Oklahoma National Memorial.

PHOTO JAKE RAMSEY/OKLAHOMA WATCH

## GEER

# Grand Jury: State's Handling of GEER Programs Troubling, But Not Criminal

JENNIFER PALMER & PAUL MONIES  
Oklahoma Watch

Oklahoma's governor and his political allies in charge of \$18 million in pandemic relief funds mismanaged the programs meant to help both low-income and privately educated students in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a report released Tuesday by the state's multicounty grand jury.

Grand jurors issued a 31-page report on Oct. 10 after listening to witness testimony in September and October about two programs funded by the federal Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund. The report, directed by Republican Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond, said there were no grounds for criminal indictments or any willful corruption. But it said the handling of federal grant money was "irresponsible, disappointing and indefensible."

The grand jury recommended several improvements to educational spending, including training in grant management, policies for administering grants and training for elected officials, agency employees and others in procurement standards, competitive bidding and conflict of interest.

Gov. Kevin Stitt, through a spokeswoman, said Drummond weaponized a grand jury in his pursuit for a bid for governor in 2026.

"Ultimately, this was an inappropriate and unlawful use of a grand jury, all to pursue a headline in the attorney general's campaign for governor," said Abigail Cave, Stitt's communication director. "Oklahomans can see right through this weaponization of the law."

Spending during the first year of the

**Stitt chose two nonprofits, Every Kid Counts Oklahoma and the American Federation for Children Oklahoma, to manage the programs. The grand jury wrote it was "deeply troubled" by the way the state offloaded its responsibility to oversee the money onto private entities without vetting them.**

pandemic was often chaotic and marked by few guardrails normally in place during non-emergency times. But the report said Oklahoma education officials disregarded guidance from the Trump administration that the governor-directed education relief funds go through established channels.

The report said that decision was grounded partly in politics, with Stitt unwilling to trust that officials at the Oklahoma State Department of Education would support spending federal pandemic money on private schools. The Education Department at the time was led by Joy Hofmeister, and she and Stitt clashed repeatedly on mask mandates and school closures. Hofmeister in 2022 switched parties to run as a Democrat against Stitt in his reelection bid.

Witnesses said at least one person in Stitt's cabinet urged him to award the funds to the Education Department because it made sense logistically and politically. Stitt rebuffed the idea mainly because of policy differences over school choice; he wanted to direct the funding to private-school families.

Stitt chose two nonprofits, Every Kid Counts Oklahoma and the American Federation for Children Oklahoma, to manage the programs. The grand jury wrote it was "deeply troubled" by the way the state offloaded its responsibility to oversee the money onto private entities without vetting them.

The first round of Governor's Emergency Educational Relief funds directed \$8 million to the Bridge the Gap Digital Wallet program to help low-income families buy education supplies. That program was led by Ryan Walters, director of Every Kids Counts Oklahoma, before he was named Stitt's Secretary of Education in the summer of 2020. Walters was elected as state

superintendent in November 2022.

Reporting by Oklahoma Watch and The Frontier revealed pandemic relief funds meant to support student learning was spent on TVs, grills, furniture, Christmas trees and hundreds of other non-educational items. A state audit later tallied non-educational spending at \$1.7 million.

Emails from Walters directed ClassWallet to ignore safeguards against spending on non-educational items and granted blanket approval to purchases made from pre-approved vendors.

In an email Tuesday, Walters' spokesman Dan Isett didn't address that 2020 email or the specifics of the grand jury report. Walters has consistently pointed the finger at the vendor, ClassWallet.

"Superintendent Walters's deep commitment to fiscal responsibility and taxpayer accountability has been borne out during his time as Secretary and now as State Superintendent," said the statement from Isett. "Under his leadership, OSDE has instituted the highest standards to ensure the most efficient use of taxpayer money possible."

In 2020, another \$10 million in GEER funds went to a Stay in School program to provide up to \$6,500 in scholarships to help families affected financially by the pandemic to continue to send their children to private school. That effort was led by Jennifer Carter, who leads the Oklahoma branch of the American Federation for Children, a group founded by former Trump administration Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. The organization has been a longtime proponent of public-funded vouchers for private schools.

The grand jury report said neither

Cont. A12, GEER



GEER

## Failure to protect families' personal data and usage beyond disclosure, cited by grand jury report

From A11

the Bridge the Gap program nor the Stay In School program met federal requirements for pandemic grant funding. It said the programs instead were trial runs for a statewide private school voucher program.

In noting the contract's failure to require families' personal data be protected, the grand jury report said the state auditor received a spreadsheet from Carter with parent and student names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses and schools. Carter had a consulting business, Libertas Consulting, that was involved in the disbursement of funds. That a director of a special interest group obtained this data was concerning, they wrote, and even more concerning was added information including political party registration and voting district.

"This indicates that, unbeknownst to families, their information was being collected and processed for purposes other than that for which it was disclosed," the grand jury wrote.

Applications for the programs were supposed to go live on Aug. 10, 2020, but for about six hours on Aug. 8, 2020, early access was given to families attending a select few private schools, the report said. There's no record of how or why those schools were chosen, though some met certain criteria, including that all students attended tuition-free, the school was for addiction recovery or the school subsidized at least 90% of tuition costs.

More than \$2 million in Stay in School scholarships and \$167,000 in Bridge the Gap grants were awarded to applicants unfairly granted early access, according to the grand jury report.

More than half of the Stay in School scholarships were given to families who wrote in their applications they did not lose income or expect to due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carter could not be reached for comment.

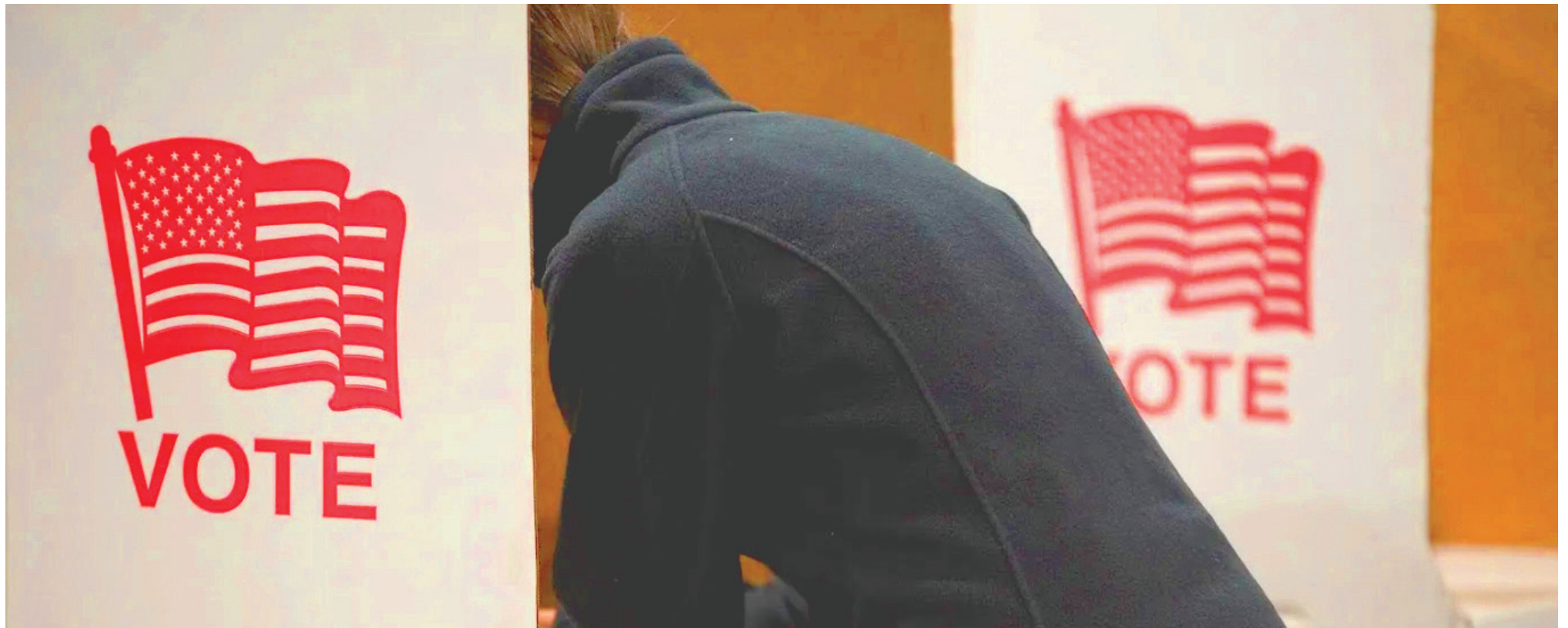


PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

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**Young grade school student.** An Oklahoma grand jury recommended several improvements to educational spending, including training in grant management, policies for administering grants and training for elected officials, agency employees and others in procurement standards, competitive bidding and conflict of interest.



A Voter in Norman casts his ballot in 2023.

PHOTO OKLAHOMA WATCH

SQ 834

## What to Know About State Question 834 and Prohibiting Noncitizens From Voting in Local Elections

**KEATON ROSS**  
Oklahoma Watch

The Oklahoma Legislature wants voters to change one word in the state constitution to explicitly forbid noncitizens from participating in state and local elections.

State Question 834, a legislatively referred constitutional amendment that appears on the Nov. 5 general election ballot, proposes changing the phrase "all" U.S. citizens may vote in Oklahoma elections to "only" U.S. citizens may vote.

Backers of the amendment, which passed on a party-line vote in the Republican-controlled House and Senate in May, say it's necessary to protect Oklahoma against court rulings or other official actions that could open the door for noncitizens to vote in non-federal elections. Opponents contend that the state constitution and law is clear on the issue and the amendment is politically motivated.

A handful of municipalities, including New York City, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., allow noncitizen residents with legal status to vote in local races, such as mayoral and city council elections. No states allow non-citizens to vote in state elections and no municipality in Oklahoma has sought to allow non-citizen participation in their

elections.

Here's a guide to State Question 834 and how it would affect Oklahoma elections:

### Who supports State Question 834, and why?

Several Republican legislators are backing the amendment, arguing that Oklahoma's constitution must be ironclad against noncitizen voting.

At an Oct. 9 press conference of lawmakers and advocates who support SQ834, Rep. John Echols, R-Oklahoma City, posed the hypothetical that the Norman City Council could make a push to accommodate noncitizens in municipal elections.

"I think what we're going to find out in this is that the vast majority of citizens of Oklahoma want this protection inside their constitution," Echols said. "When you look at what's going on nationwide, to act like that trend wouldn't make its way to Oklahoma in my mind defies logic."

The primary group backing State Question 834 is Americans for Citizen Voting, which advocates for similar state-level laws nationwide. The organization touts that it has helped put the noncitizen voting question on the November ballot in eight states.

### Who opposes State Question 834, and why?

Several Democratic members of the Legislature debated against Senate Question 834 in May, arguing that non-citizen voting is not an issue and the resolution is a ploy to prop up Republicans.

"The click-bait, money-making narrative still has bills to pay," said Sen. Mary Boren, D-Norman. "This bill is paying for some political operative out there that stirs people up and sends out mailers and says vote for so and so because they're making sure we only let citizens vote."

### Is noncitizen voting widespread in Oklahoma?

No. Oklahoma's voter registration form asks applicants if they are a U.S. citizen and advises that falsifying the form is a felony offense punishable by up to five years in prison. Successful completion of the application is necessary for anyone wishing to participate in federal, state or local elections.

In 2023, Oklahoma lawmakers passed Senate Bill 377, which adds being excused from jury duty for not being a U.S. citizen to the list of reasons a person's voter registration may be canceled. The law also requires county election officials to report

the person to the local district attorney and U.S. attorney for possible prosecution.

Six people have been removed from the rolls for this reason since the law took effect last November, though none of them had a voting history, State Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriach told NonDoc in a written statement.

### Is anyone spending money to advocate for or against State Question 834?

As of Oct. 14, no organization has spent money to advocate for or against State Question 834, according to Oklahoma Ethics Commission records. The commission's pre-general election report deadline is Oct. 28.

### Have similar ballot questions appeared in other states? How did those elections fare?

Yes. Voters in seven states approved noncitizen voting ballot amendments from 2018 to 2023. In each election, the amendment passed by a margin of 20 points or greater.

**Keaton Ross** covers democracy and criminal justice for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at (405) 831-9753 or [Kross@oklahomawatch.org](mailto:Kross@oklahomawatch.org). Follow him on Twitter at @KeatonRoss.



# THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE CHURCH DIRECTORY



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(918) 584-3206

Minister RJ Smith

Sunday school - 9:30am  
Sunday Worship - 10:45am  
Monday Worship - 6:00pm  
Wednesday Bible Study - 5:00pm

## CAPERNAUM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

1962 N. Sheridan Rd.  
(918) 834-4747

Pastor Ruthie I. Howard



Sunday School 10:00 a.m.  
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Bible Study & Prayer Wednesday 7:00 p.m.  
For Transportation (918) 402-6027

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Rev. Emanuel L. Collier, Sr.  
Pastor

## Gethsemane Baptist Church

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

Dr. W. T. Lauderdale

Sunday School 9:00 a.m.

Church Services 11:00 a.m.

## Zoe' Life Church of Tulsa

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1520 N Hartford Ave.  
Tulsa OK 74106  
(918) 409-4899

Pastor Richard and Cher Lyons

Sunday Worship: 1pm  
Wed- Healing School: 6:30p - 8p

"The Righteous Are As Bold As A Lion." - Prov.28:1a

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123 E. 59th St. North  
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Praise & Worship 11:00 a.m.

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"The Seventh Day Is Still God's Sabbath"

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3101 N. M.L King Jr. Blvd.  
Tulsa OK  
(918) 625-2374

Sunday School - 10 am

Sunday Morning Worship - 10:45

Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm

Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm

Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm

Wednesday worship - 8pm

Rev. John W. Anderson



## VERNON AME CHURCH

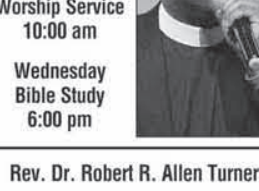
307-311 N. Greenwood Ave.  
P: 918-587-1428  
F: 918-587-0642  
vernonamechurch@sbcglobal.net

Sunday Church School 8:30 am

Worship Service 10:00 am

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Rev. Dr. Robert R. Allen Turner



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Sunday School 9:40 a.m.

Sunday TV Worship 11:00 a.m.

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(918) 425-1071

Warren Blakney, Minister

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Sunday Morning Worship.....10:00 a.m.

Sunday Evening Worship.....6:00 p.m.

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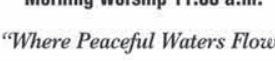
19364 S. S. Mingo Road.  
Bixby, 74008  
Phone: (918) 366-8870

Rev. Robert Givens

Sunday School 9:30 a.m.

Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.

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For Further Information call (918) 835-1525.

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Fax: 918-584-1958  
Prayer Line: 918-584-PRAY  
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Fax: (918) 836-6833

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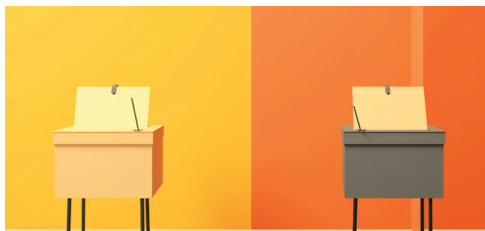


FEATURED

## Unlocking the Power of Michigan Young Voters for Lasting Change

“For young voters especially, our vote will determine the kind of future we will have.”

Voters, A14



FEATURED

## How This Organization Helps Families Advocate for Their Kids

Advocacy for Kids, A16



Voters

## Unlocking the Power of Michigan Young Voters for Lasting Change

“For young voters especially, our vote will determine the kind of future we will have,” says Politics on the Go founder Arabia Simeon.

EBONY J. J. CURRY  
Word In Black

The struggle for young Black voters to understand what is on the ballot and how to vote has never been more apparent. As the 2024 presidential election approaches, this generation finds itself caught between immense political potential and a wave of disillusionment. The issues they care most about—economic inequality, climate change, and the future of democracy—remain at the forefront of political debates. Yet, new studies reveal a fatalistic attitude among young voters, particularly within the Black community, about their ability to influence change. But one woman, Detroit’s own Arabia Simeon, offers a solution to this growing issue, and her work is transforming the voting landscape, especially for the younger generation.

The need for informed voters has never been more critical. According to research by the Berkeley Institute for Young Americans (BIFYA), young voters had a broad and decisive impact on the 2020 presidential election and the 2018 and 2022 congressional elections. But as we approach 2024, concerns over low voter turnout among young people loom large. The institute’s analysis shows that younger voters are often discouraged by the complexity of the voting process. Many lack the knowledge needed to fully understand who is on the ballot and what issues are at stake. This disconnect threatens to undermine their role as a rising force in American politics.

Arabia Simeon, a young Black woman and founder of POGO (Politics on the Go), is directly addressing this problem. She has recognized the barriers that prevent young voters, particularly within the Black community, from feeling fully engaged in the political process. Her solution is simple but powerful: make voting easier and more accessible by providing clear, concise information directly to the voters. “We provide an all-in-one hub to store and track voting decisions for every election,” Simeon shared. “We’re working to make campaigns, messaging, polls, and strategies to reach

Cont. A15, Voters

Polls

## SOULS GUARDING POLLS:

# How Church Volunteers Will Make Voting Safe

REV. DOROTHY S. BOULWARE  
Word In Black

Since the 2020 election, far-right vigilantes have begun appearing at polling places, threatening poll workers and voters, usually in black communities. Coupled with strict voter I.D. laws add criminal penalties for voter fraud, voting can be an uncomfortable experience.

For decades, voting for president every four years was as easy and safe as picking up a loaf of bread from the supermarket: show up to the polls, cast your ballot, and move on with the rest of your day. Then, the 2020 election happened.

There were lies about election fraud and strict voter ID laws some say are racist. Vigilante “poll monitors,” some of them armed, menaced voters and poll workers, often in Black communities. Intimidating new rules that all but declare a blue vote in a red state may not be counted.

It’s enough to make a faithful voter wish for divine intervention. Faiths United to Save Democracy, however, could be the next best thing.

A nonpartisan, multi-racial, interfaith organization, FUSD is an organization

designed to help and protect voters on Election Day. It dispatches trained, non-partisan volunteers — poll chaplains — to help ensure free and unhindered access to the polls for members of vulnerable communities.

### Armed With the Law

Together with “peacekeepers” — lay volunteers trained with the chaplains — they support voters, explain the rules or help them report irregularities, including electioneering, harassment and intimidation. The goal: help people navigate rules that could make it more difficult for Black people, young people, the elderly and differently abled to cast a ballot and have it count.

FUSD’s voter protection campaigns this year will take place in the South, including Alabama, Florida and Texas, along with Ohio and several key swing states: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

The organization was created in the wake of the 2020 election to “protect the sacred freedom to vote of vulnerable citizens” because of “wide acceptance of political violence and the increase in anti-voting laws,” Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, a clergywoman and activist, said

Cont. A15, Polls

With election-fraud lies and new ID laws fueling intimidation at the polls, a volunteer group of clergy and lay people want to make sure voting is safe and hassle-free for Black voters.



Polls

# Vigilance vs Intimidation



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

**Nearly 400 voter restriction measures in 49 states, from ID laws to limited access to mail voting, have been proposed or passed**

Faiths United to Save Democracy (FUSD)

From A14

in a letter to new team members. Amen, says Bishop Reginald T. Jackson, pastor of the Second Episcopal District of the AME Church in Washington, D.C.

“We’re going to watch and pray that there be no intimidation, no obstruction, and no challenges,” he says. “We just want to keep the peace. We are 100% non-partisan in nature.”

With early voting already underway in more than a few states, Faith United to Save Democracy and partner organizations — including the NAACP, Latino Christian National Network, the National Council of Churches, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and the Nation’s Mosque — have dispatched some of the peacekeepers and poll chaplains they’ve trained since summer.

While some right-wing poll watchers show up with loaded guns, the FUSD teams are armed only with knowledge of election rules and laws, nonviolent intervention tactics, a

voting-rights hotline, and, of course, prayer. The need for peacekeepers and poll chaplains is clear, according to an FUSD press release.

### Fighting Chaos with Witness

Since the 2020 election, “voters have faced increasing barriers to exercising their right to vote,” according to the statement. “Nearly 400 voter restriction measures in 49 states, from ID laws to limited access to mail voting, have been proposed or passed. These laws erect barriers that disproportionately limit people of color, the elderly, and the poor from being able to vote.”

At the same time, “increasingly violent rhetoric and events throughout the 2024 election,” including election fraud conspiracies and death threats to poll workers, “has given voters credible concern about violence or intimidation at the polls,” according to the statement.

To counter those developments, “trained poll chaplains and peacekeepers will be deployed to cities and polling sites in areas of

greatest need in this critical time for the future of our democracy,” according to the FUSD statement.

Though trained together, peacekeepers will be inside polling places as helpers while poll chaplains will stand outside to assist voters as needed. The task is simple, says Dr. James Perkins, pastor emeritus of Detroit’s Greater Christ Baptist Church.

“Be on time, let your presence be known, and be helpful as needed,” he says. “And keep the number of the [voter intimidation reporting] hotline handy, just in case it’s needed.”

“The involvement of poll chaplains and Peacekeepers is essential in actively safeguarding the vote in local communities,” says Rev. Moya Harris, director of racial justice at Sojourners, a faith-based social justice nonprofit and FUSD member. “This is integral to our call as people of faith — to combat chaos with love and witness.”

**Rev. Dorothy S. Boulware**  
Experienced Writer, Manager and Editor with a demonstrated history of working in the writing and editing industry. Skilled in WordPress, Radio, Media Relations, Journalism, and Corporate Communications. Strong media and communication professional with a Bachelor's in English/Journalism from Coppin State University and a M.Div. focused in Urban Theology from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C.

Voters

# Building a culture around voting and civic engagement for young people

From A14

young voters aligned and connected to the next generation of politics.”

POGO, Simeon’s civic tech company, is a personalized mobile app designed to simplify civic engagement. Its mission is to empower young voters by giving them the tools they need to make informed decisions. The app functions like a personalized voter guide, allowing users to swipe right on candidates and build their own ballot directly within the app. By streamlining election research and providing easy-to-understand information, POGO is helping young people feel more confident and prepared when they head to the polls.

“Our vision is to build a culture around voting and civic engagement for young people that extends beyond presidential elections,” said Simeon. “We believe that local elections have the most impact on a person’s daily life. Local elections affects what we pay in taxes, how much funding our schools get, resources for our neighborhoods, etc. Voting gives people a voice and the ability to choose a candidate that will represent their interests.”

The need for such a tool is especially important in cities like Detroit, where voter turnout can significantly shape both local and national elections. Young Black voters in Detroit are a critical demographic, but many are unsure of how to navigate the complex world of politics. They care deeply about issues like racial justice, economic opportunity, and environmental sustainability, but they often feel disconnected from the political process. Simeon recognized this frustration and has built POGO to be the bridge between voter confusion and voter empowerment.

Studies from UC Berkeley offer a deeply detailed look at the social values and political behaviors of voters aged 18 to 43.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

These studies show that younger voters are far from apathetic. They are passionate about the issues that affect their futures, but they often lack the resources to fully understand how their vote can make a difference. This is where Arabia’s work becomes essential. By providing a tool that makes the voting process more transparent, she is ensuring that young Black voters are not left behind.

“POGO is intentionally building in geographic locations that are majority Black and Brown,” Simeon shared. “I moved from NYC to Detroit to headquarter my startup here because we believe that POGO will empower disenfranchised

voters to not only vote but make informed decisions that represent themselves and their communities. Our plan is to partner with organizations that provide resources for Black and Brown communities such as D9 fraternities and sororities, the NAACP, Rap Snacks, and Black Girls Vote to get in front of Black voters. We will also focus on immigrant communities and people re-entering society from prison to increase voter turnout and civic education.”

Detroit has long been a city where the Black vote matters, and Simeon’s efforts are reigniting that power for a new generation. Her app, POGO, is not only a solution but it is a movement. It addresses the root of

the issue by meeting young voters where they are, on their smartphones, and giving them the information they need in a format they understand. The app provides a straightforward way to research candidates, compare their platforms, and ultimately, build a ballot with confidence. POGO’s approach is refreshingly simple. By swiping right on candidates that align with their values, voters can easily organize their choices and prepare for election day. It’s an intuitive design that eliminates the need for endless scrolling through candidate websites or trying to decipher dense policy language.

Cont. A16, Voters



## Advocacy for Kids

# How This Organization Helps Families Advocate for Their Kids

AZIAH SIID  
Word In Black

Research shows that when Black families have resources and support, their children perform better both inside and outside the classroom in K-12 schools. Research also shows that the effects of systemic racism — from redlining to segregated schools to the lack of Black teachers — contributes to stubborn academic disparities between Black children and their white counterparts.

Bridging that achievement gap, experts say — and ensuring their kids get the best possible education — often comes down to whether Black parents can advocate on behalf of their children in a public school system that's often stacked against them. It can be a tough ask, though, for households in which one or both parents have substance abuse issues, if violence is commonplace, or if there's just one parent at home, struggling to make ends meet.

That's where Dr. Bahia Overton, executive director of the nonprofit Black Parent Initiative, can help.

"People think that everybody starts from the same place," says Overton, a social worker, facilitator, researcher and expert on the Black family. "Some people think everybody has an equal opportunity just to raise your children well, and unfortunately, it ignores disparities and historical policies, practices, laws, and things that have been discriminatory that put people where they are."

Based in Portland, Oregon, BPI works to support and empower Black families, from pregnancy through their child's school years and beyond, with a simple but effective approach: strengthen parents and children through specific, targeted, "culturally relevant" education and support programs based on the Black American experience.

Founded in 2006, BPI was initially centered around strengthening education in Portland. Overton became executive director in 2020 and since then continues to build Black families up to be the best caregivers they can, from birth all the way to getting your child through

“

**Some people think everybody has an equal opportunity just to raise your children well, and unfortunately, it ignores disparities and historical policies, practices, laws, and things that have been discriminatory that put people where they are.**

Dr. Bahia Overton,  
executive director of the  
nonprofit Black Parent  
Initiative



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

college.

"We believe that the children and families we serve are inherently capable, brilliant and beautiful, though social service systems have historically neglected to center on their strengths, wisdom, promise and expertise," according to the organization's website. "At BPI, we are inspired by our love for our families, and the communities we serve. The key to our success is how effective we are in deepening our relationships with them."

When Black families have to navigate systems and bureaucracies like schools and social service agencies, it's not uncommon for some to lack a clear idea how to push for what their children might need. But that knowledge can be important: studies show educators and school administrators often view Black children negatively — more likely to declare them discipline problems or intellectually disabled — when compared to their white peers.

"I think they're quick to label our children as ADHD," Overton says. "There are a lot of children of color who have fetal alcohol spectrum disorder that is misdiagnosed. (FAS) also mimics the symptoms of ADHD, and so they provide them with ADHD medication" rather than seek out a more detailed medical diagnosis.

Other kids may be struggling with problems at home, like poverty, neglect, living in an unsafe neighborhood or in an unsafe household, Overton says. And if a child's family is not on solid ground, she says, it could be difficult for a parent to effectively go to bat for them at school.

"Families have to be stable in order to come from a place of being able to be advocates," Overton says. "There's so many other factors that go into becoming an effective parent, and then also an effective advocate for their children to thrive in school."

BPI programs can help parents get the skill or knowledge they lack, such as classes to sharpen parenting skills to a template for parents to write an effective

letter to school officials on the best way to interact with their child.

"We created the letter for parents to send to teachers so that they could set the tone for their expectations," Overton says. A simple letter, she says, not only helps educators better understand a child's needs and set realistic expectations but also helps set students up for success.

"Sending a letter to the teachers and cc'ing the principal" gives them insight on a child that they may not get from classroom interactions alone, Overton says. The letter, she says, can include tips like "how your child is to be reminded when they're off-task and how they wouldn't like to be reminded when they're off-task."

The letter, she says, could even serve as a way to divert children from the schools-to-prison pipeline by "identifying that your expectation is that no school resource officer or any other law-enforcement will be engaged with your child without the parents consent or presents," Overton says.

### Building Education Advocates

While the BPI understands that it's common for Black women to head single-parent households, Overton wants to dispel the narratives about absent Black fathers disengaged from their child's education.

"I recognize this organization, and others like it, has historically been very mother-centric as most social service agencies are," Overton says. "We've partnered with three organizations, Black Men in Training, Black Men's Wellness and We Are 4 Fathers" to help Black men become more present, engage with their children's education and advocate for them when necessary.

"Our kind of philosophy is that we have everything that we need to thrive," Overton says. "Except the fact that we have barriers that have been put in front of us."

## Voters

# "Our vote will determine the kind of future we will have"

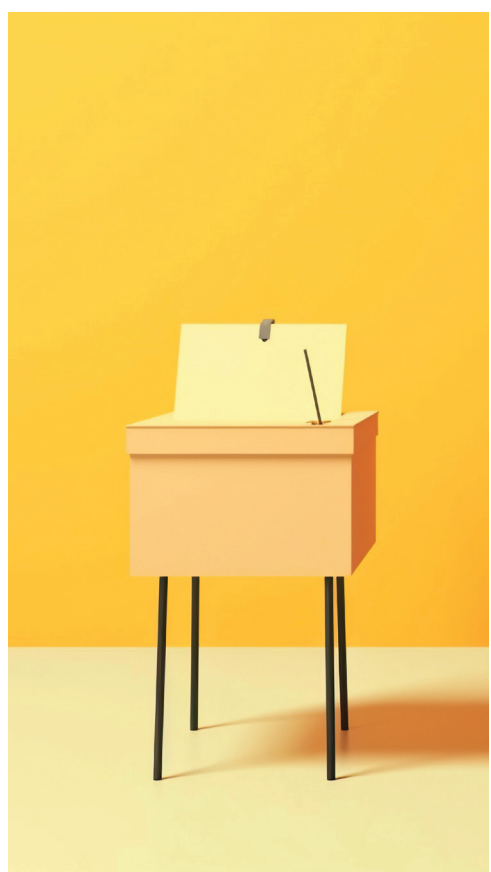


PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

From A15

Arabia has made the process approachable, accessible, and effective, all with the goal of increasing voter turnout among young people, particularly young Black voters in Detroit.

The impact of Simeon's work is already being felt. Young voters, who once felt powerless to affect change, are now using POGO to understand their role in the political system. The app is breaking down barriers to engagement and providing a clear path forward for those who want to participate in democracy but didn't know where to start.

How do we ensure that young Black voters not only understand what's on the ballot but also feel empowered to take part in the political process? While Arabia Simeon's POGO app is a groundbreaking tool in bridging the gap, addressing the deeper issue requires more than just tech solutions. What about the need for robust, culturally relevant civic education in schools or accessible voter registration drives in communities that have been historically disenfranchised? Could mentorship programs, where seasoned voters guide first-time voters, be another part of the solution? It's clear that tackling this issue demands a multi-faceted approach,

combining technology, education, and community engagement to fully empower the next generation of Black voters.

"For young voters especially, our vote will determine the kind of future we will have. Gen Z and Millennials will be the largest voting block by 2036, and the overwhelming feeling is that politics doesn't represent us," Simeon said. "POGO encourages not just civic engagement but also policy innovation. We have to build civic engagement practices now so we reimagine a democracy that looks like us and represents the key policy issues we care about."

As the 2024 election approaches, the importance of informed voting cannot be overstated. The issues at stake—economic inequality, climate change, the future of democracy—are too important to ignore.

The path to getting young voters to the polls requires more than surface-level efforts. It calls for a deep, intentional shift in how we approach voter education and engagement, particularly in communities where disenfranchisement runs deep. We must create spaces where young voters not only learn the mechanics of voting but understand the weight of their decisions. Schools need to embed civic education into everyday learning, connecting the dots between current issues and the power of the vote. Grassroots efforts must rise with

urgency—door-to-door conversations, community-led workshops, and accessible resources that break down every barrier to voting. It's about meeting young people where they are and showing them that their voice, their vote, shapes the future.

But beyond the classroom and community, we need a cultural shift—a movement that makes voting a central part of identity, pride, and power. Churches, families, and local leaders can foster environments that normalize conversations about the vote, not just during election season but all year long. Young voters must see that their vote isn't just a contribution; it's the key to unlocking their collective strength and shaping a democracy that reflects their needs, hopes, and values. The future of our democracy rests in the hands of this generation, and the solution lies in making sure they know it's within their reach to change everything.

"The Black community voting means as a race we're building political power for our communities and future generations," Simeon said. "In order to make progress toward an equitable future we need to build our own table and that what POGO is doing."

This story is part of the Digital Equity Local Voices Fellowship Lab. The Lab initiative is made possible with support from Comcast NBCUniversal.

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