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FEATURED

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Phone Ban, A9



FEATURED

Corporation Commission advances 'huge' PSO, OG&E rate increases

Rate Increases, A10



City of Tulsa Inauguration 2024 - Traditional Hmong Dance by Kaajhuab Dance Team.

PHOTO BASIL CHILDERS, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

Tulsa Mayor

Nichols Makes History As Tulsa's First Black Mayor

KIMBERLY MARSH
The Oklahoma Eagle

With a gifted woolen blanket spun in the colors of fire and sunlight slung over one shoulder, Tulsa's new mayor stood in stoic silence as the Tulsa Indian Club Singers set a drum beat suggestive of the strong, prosperous, and united city that Monroe Nichols IV envisions. The first African American mayor of Tulsa took the oath to serve the citizens of Tulsa along with nine members of the City Council and a new city auditor.

Cont. A5, Tulsa Mayor

Dawes Commission: Historic Allotment Policy

By **KENT CARTER**, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

Dawes Commission camp at Ardmore, Chickasaw Nation, circa 1900, (8470.27, Grant Foreman Collection, OHS).

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Nichols' Priorities: **HOMELESSNESS, AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND CRIME**

From A3

The tribal drum ceremony hearkened back to a time of loss and suffering that tribes and African Americans endured in earlier times. Nichols paid tribute to Mother Lessie Bennington Randle, who survived the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and lived to see Tulsans of all walks of life elect their first Black mayor. Randle, who attended the ceremony, recently celebrated her 110th birthday. She is one of two surviving members of the massacre.

Nichols was sworn into the office of mayor on Dec. 2, along with the new auditor Nathan Pickard, who ran unopposed, and the nine member Tulsa City Council, including three elected to serve their first term, one who previously served on the council, and five returning incumbents.

As the new mayor recounted the number of mayors who came before him - 38 mayors serving in 40 administrations, he acknowledged their time, some serving during times of great hope and prosperity and others in times of peril.

"As I take on the task of serving our city, I do so with humility and respect for the 38 who have come before me, and with a commitment to make this the safest, most vibrant city in America, with economic opportunity for everyone," he said to a ballroom filled with enthusiastic Tulsans.

In his first remarks speaking to issues that challenge Tulsa, Nichols addressed homelessness as the topic that was at the top of most voters' minds when they participated in surveys and answered their doors to speak to canvassers.

"First, we must confront the crisis of homelessness. The data tells us our numbers are up 22 1/2 percent since 2023. Homelessness is a complex challenge. In the coming weeks, we'll be launching a new comprehensive effort, aimed at getting us to a functional zero homelessness by 2030. We'll take immediate action to meet the public safety needs downtown and begin our effort to responsibly decommission camps across the city. We will lead with compassion for those living on the street, but we will also be aggressive in cleaning up our city. Among the homeless population are 3000 individuals currently sitting on the wait list for housing assistance."

Nichols said it is imperative to work tirelessly to make sure that every person in Tulsa has access to safe, affordable housing, always championing housing as a human right.

"Our goal is 6000 new affordable units by 2028," he said. "And the clock to get there starts right now."

To join him in the fight for housing and as well as the fight against crime, Nichols introduced the media to his first six "cabinet" appointments.

“
As I take on the task of serving our city, I do so with humility and respect for the 38 who have come before me.

Monroe Nichols, newly (2024) elected Mayor, Tulsa, Okla.

RIGHT, TOP City of Tulsa Inauguration 2024, City Auditor Nathan Pickard. PHOTO BASIL CHILDERS, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

RIGHT, BOTTOM Gavin Nichols, right, joins his father Mayor Monroe Nichols at the Dec. 2 inauguration, standing in solidarity with the tribal nations as represented by the Tulsa Indian Club Singers. PHOTO BASIL CHILDERS, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE



Emily Hall, Senior Advisor to the Mayor on Homelessness

Hall, a candidate for the Juris Doctorate (J.D.) degree of law at the University of Tulsa, is a legal intern with the Federal Probation Office of the Northern District of Oklahoma. She graduated from William Woods University with a bachelors degree in communications and public relations in 2003 and earned a Master's in Public Administration (MPA) degree from the University of Springfield, Illinois. Prior to law school, Hall was the vice president of Strategy & Innovation at the YMCA of Greater Tulsa. She worked with

Tulsa Public Schools for six years serving in several roles from 2014 to 2020. Hall is a Tulsa native and the daughter of Susan Savage, the first woman to hold the office of Tulsa Mayor, who served from 1992-2002.

Gene Bulmash, Senior Advisor to the Mayor on Housing

Bulmash is currently a Housing Preservation Officer at the DC Department of Housing and Community Development, but will move to Tulsa by January, with his wife, Emily Kaiser of the George Kaiser Family Foundation.

Cont. A6, Tulsa Mayor

OSDE

OSDE says deadlines met in critical federal report, legislators remain concerned

BENNETT BRINKMAN
NonDoc

In a tweet congratulating Linda McMahon on her nomination as U.S. secretary of education by President-elect Donald Trump, Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters urged the former wrestling executive to "get to work dismantling the Department of Education" — the same department that recently identified 32 areas of concern with the way Oklahoma handles federal grants.

Months after the U.S. Department of Education set multiple deadlines for the Oklahoma State Department of Education to make numerous changes to its handling of federal grants, those deadlines have now passed. OSDE officials say they made the requested changes by the deadlines,

and additionally, state-level oversight has spurred more robust communication with the state Legislature.

Still, some officials have expressed concern for the high number of apparent deficiencies that were outlined in the U.S. Department of Education's "Consolidated Performance Review Report."

"It sure doesn't make you very proud to see that many areas that require action," Rep. Dick Lowe (R-Amber) said in an interview Sept. 5. "In all fairness, too, I did go back to the federal website, on the USDE website, and there's several states that haven't had good reports, too. We're not sitting out there by ourselves. But that doesn't change the fact that, if we want to be a top 10-type state, this is not really what we want to do."

Released in July, the USDE report (embedded below) details how OSDE complies with federal formula grant

requirements. Formula grants are automatically appropriated to states based on pre-determined metrics, such as the number of students in a school on free or reduced lunches. Oklahoma receives hundreds of millions of dollars in formula grants each year, and each grant carries its own requirements for how the state should disburse the money and implement programs.

U.S. Department of Education reviewers conducted their in-person performance review of OSDE in December 2023 and issued a report in July. The reviewers examined about a dozen grants OSDE receives and identified 32 areas with "significant compliance and quality concerns" out of 52 specific requirements listed in the report. Those 32 items carried additional reporting requirements. OSDE received commendations for two items in

the report.

Federal reviewers set two deadlines for OSDE officials to demonstrate that they had brought the department into compliance with federal guidelines. The first deadline occurred Sept. 10, and the second arrived Oct. 22.

In email updates Sept. 11 and Oct. 22, OSDE federal programs director Thomas Kirk told NonDoc that the agency sent each of the required materials to the federal education department by both deadlines. Kirk said OSDE received an extension for one report that had been due Sept. 10.

The U.S. Department of Education website appears to have recently undergone an overhaul, but before that, it listed seven other performance reviews for Oklahoma. The first review was conducted in 2006. The state's last performance review

Cont. A6, OSDE



City of Tulsa Inauguration 2024 - Mother Lessie Benningfield Randle, right, with Rev. Joey Crutcher and Terence Crutcher Foundation Director Tiffany Crutcher.

PHOTO BASIL CHILDERS, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

OSDE

Dept. of Education Report re: OSDE Performance, “Not A Good Look”

From A5

was completed in 2017. For that review, federal monitors only looked at OSDE’s implementation of a program set up to advance one part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act meant to help students in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

The U.S. Department of Education said it conducted its 2024 review of OSDE as part of a goal to evaluate all states’ handling of federal dollars.

“This monitoring review was part of the department’s overall plan to periodically evaluate how state educational agencies are doing complying with different programs for which they receive federal funds,” said U.S. Department of Education spokesperson Jo Ann Webb in an Aug. 28 statement. “The department has been conducting approximately four comprehensive, consolidated monitoring reviews of state educational agencies each year.”

OSDE officials noted the expansive nature of the report in an Aug. 21 sit-down interview that included director of communications Dan Isett, chief academic officer Todd Loftin and Kirk, who oversees federal programs as deputy chief academic officer.

“Historically, Oklahoma has never had a review of this intensity,” Isett said.

“

Get to work dismantling the Department of Education.

Ryan Walter, Okla. State Superintendent of Public Instruction, X.

Kirk said he thought the report was mostly fair, and he acknowledged some of the issues in the department he helps oversee.

“It was evident that there were some problems with the way federal programs were being run,” said Kirk, who took on the federal programs role in August 2023, the same month federal officials notified OSDE of their impending review.

Isett said some of the concerns in the report were not a surprise.

“We already knew about some of these things before the feds even looked at any of these things,” Isett said.

But Kirk and Loftin said that although they were aware of some issues, they were hesitant to correct them before the federal report came out.

“We’ve been looking at things in general, like how we do things. But also, we wanted to know what they actually thought about it,” Loftin said.

“We also don’t want to confuse districts because if then we suddenly change something, (and) the feds come back and say, ‘Well, actually, that’s not really what we meant,’ we’re like, ‘OK, well now we gotta kind of backtrack on that.’”

Kirk and Loftin said OSDE was in constant contact with USDE during its review and continues to communicate with the federal agency to ensure compliance with programs.

“For the most part, [the report is] fair, but I’d

like to again characterize this — one of the things that gets on my nerves is when people refer to it as an audit,” Kirk said. “As a performance review, the whole point is, go ahead and look at your systems and processes and then help you improve them. They didn’t tell us to scrap anything that we’re doing. It’s all about doing it better.”

Loftin shared a similar thought.

“[Federal officials] approve our [Every Student Succeeds Act] plan and they approve our ESSA amendment, so there’s a lot of things in this report that you’re like, ‘Well, we’ve kind of already said how we’re doing something, and that’s approved in the ESSA plan,’” Loftin said. “It’s not an audit — it’s a performance review. This is the only time you actually get technical feedback on what we already told them we’re doing in the first place.”

Legislator: ‘Not a good look’

Even though the department said it has corrected all of the identified issues, some observers still found the report to be a cause for concern.

“It’s definitely not a good look,” said Rep. Ronny Johns (R-Ada).

Johns, a former principal who sits on the House Common Education Committee with

Cont. A7, OSDE

Tulsa Mayor

Nichols’ cabinet prepared to take on the new mayor’s priorities from day one

From A5

Prior to joining DC’s Department of Housing and Community Development, Bulmash practiced real estate, municipal and corporate law for over 20 years in Chicago, London, DC and Singapore. He worked for small and large firms, including managing his own firm and represented individuals, small and large corporations and governments. Bulmash received his law degree from The John Marshall Law School in Chicago after receiving his Bachelor of Science in Accounting from the University of Illinois and passing the CPA exam.

Laurel Roberts, Public Safety Commissioner

Laurel Roberts will be a liaison with oversight of the police and fire departments and responsibility to advise the mayor on

matters of public safety. She brings 29 years of experience with the Tulsa Police Department to her new role with the Nichols administration. Roberts retired from the Tulsa Police Department in November 2024, completing her most recent assignment at the Riverside Division. Roberts served at all three of the uniform divisions and also worked in the Narcotics/VICE Unit, Internal Affairs, and Integrity and Compliance, and in administration at the Special Investigation Division and the Special Operations Divisions.

Aron York, Administrative Scheduler

York will be responsible for organizing the mayor’s schedule, which is known as one of the most difficult jobs at City Hall because of the frequency of changes and the large number of requests for mayoral engagement, from everywhere. York is a partner with Little

Giant Consulting, where he built strategic partnerships with suppliers in several states to ensure candidates had the materials and services they needed to run modern, efficient campaigns. He served as field director with Friends of Joy Hoffmeister in her campaign for re-election as Oklahoma State Education Superintendent. For the City of Tulsa, York currently serves on the Human Rights Commission as a 2SLGBTQIA+ Committee Member and is a board member with the Court Advocate Services (CASA) for kids.

Dana Walton, Deputy Chief of Staff

Dana Walton served as Nichols’s campaign manager and now joins his team at the City of Tulsa as deputy chief of staff. Walton, who has proven her resilience with the campaign in times of personal loss of a family member, will become the boss, Nichols said. Walton has managed multiple campaigns and served

as Executive Director of the Caucus for the North Carolina Democratic Party. She has a bachelor’s in Political Science from the University of Wyoming.

Shane Stone, Director of Government Affairs

Stone served most recently with the City of Maricopa Police Department where he was executive administrator and assistant to the city manager. He holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and Masters in Public Administration from the University of Oklahoma. Nichols said Stone will work with state government officials to ensure coordinated efforts with local leadership.

Kimberly Marsh is a contributing writer at the Oklahoma Eagle. She is a native Oklahoman. Public education is one of her passions.

OSDE

A dept. largely dealing with confusion over federal programs



As Oklahoma State Department of Education staff members prepare to answer legislative questions, Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters speaks with Rep. Rick West (R-Heavener) ahead of a Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency Oversight Committee meeting Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2024.

PHOTO TRES SAVAGE

From A6

Lowe, said the report was far from the first hint of issues within OSDE.

“For me, it’s just more evidence that that department is not being run sufficiently,” Johns said.

OSDE officials acknowledged that some federal program staffers have left the department both before and after the 2022 general election, which Ryan Walters won to become state superintendent and leader of the agency.

Johns said that if the department has staffing issues, the Legislature should try to help OSDE address them, although he acknowledged that that might be a challenge.

“Obviously, they have lost a lot of people, a lot of staff. And so, if that’s part of the problem, then we need to make sure they get enough people there, enough staff to be able to run the department efficiently,” Johns said. “A lot of that’s out of our hands. I mean, obviously, we can’t force people to go in there and work for the state department. I’m sure they’re trying to hire staff that they feel that they need, that they’ve lost.”

Johns also acknowledged improvements in OSDE communication with the Legislature.

“Since we sent the letter to the speaker, and since it came out that [the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency] was going to be looking into the State Department of Education on some things, we’re now receiving emails daily from the State Department of Education,” Johns said.

Outgoing House Appropriations and Budget Committee Chairman Kevin Wallace (R-Wellston) authorized LOFT to review Walters’ handling of certain state and federal funding in August. At the time, Walters was facing intense criticism for apparently refusing to disburse appropriated funds.

Released in late October, the latest LOFT report on OSDE also found issues with the agency’s handling of federal money. State reviewers described a department largely dealing with confusion over federal programs and how money flows through the department to local school districts. At a LOFT Committee hearing he called “a waste of time,” Walters panned the report as the result of “lies perpetrated by the media.”

Over the almost two years that Walters has

been in office, Johns has been a sharp critic of the superintendent at times, in part because of Walters’ — and his agency’s — resistance to answering legislative questions without being subpoenaed.

But Walters answered numerous questions at the Oct. 29 LOFT report presentation, and Johns said he assumes the daily emails sent from OSDE to the Legislature are also sent to schools. He also said OSDE also sends a “legislative newsletter” every Friday.

“I just wish it had been going on since January of ’23,” Johns said.

Former House Common Education Committee Chairwoman Rhonda Baker (R-Yukon) and Vice Chairman Mark Vancuren (R-Owasso) both declined to comment on the OSDE federal report. Baker departed the Legislature this week after declining to run for another term, and she is spearheading education advocacy for the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce.

Oklahoma Public School Resource Center executive director April Grace declined to comment in detail about the report, but she echoed comments made by Lowe and Johns.

“Anytime you look at any of those reports like that that have as many flags on it, it can create concerns,” said Grace, a former superintendent of Shawnee Public Schools who ran for state superintendent in 2022 but lost to Walters in the Republican runoff.

Despite their boss’s frequent calls for USDE’s dismantling, Kirk and Loftin said they expected to remain in contact with the federal education department to determine next steps in addressing the issues identified in the report.

“They’ll probably set up meetings if they have questions about what we submitted,” Loftin said. “By the way, this is similar to what we do with districts, too. We talk to districts all the time. That’s one thing we want to get across to you is we talk to districts on a daily basis.”

Bennett Brinkman became NonDoc’s production editor in September 2024 after spending the previous two years as NonDoc’s education reporter. He completed a reporting internship for the organization in Summer 2022 and holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma. He is originally from Edmond.

MY LOVE LANGUAGE is **TRICKS**

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ABOVE State of Oklahoma Capitol building, in Oklahoma City. PHOTO MICHAEL MCNUTT

LEFT During the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation Commission's meeting Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2024, Commissioner Jerry Cason, right, requested a special meeting with an executive session to discuss comments the agency's executive director, Aungela Spurlock, left, made during a recent State Senate interim study. PHOTO MICHAEL MCNUTT

OSBI

'Very unusual': Spurlock suggests OSBI Commission reform, spurs special meeting

MICHAEL MCNUTT
NonDoc

Following a trio of new gubernatorial appointments with connections to Department of Public Safety Commissioner Tim Tipton, the commission overseeing the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation has scheduled a special meeting in January to discuss director Aungela Spurlock's "performance" after she recommended that the Legislature consider restructuring her governing body.

Spurlock provided a PowerPoint presentation for a Sept. 11 Senate Public Safety Committee interim study on boards and commissions of law enforcement agencies. The recommendations included reducing gubernatorial appointments on the OSBI Commission from all seven positions to just one. Spurlock said the change would result in a more robust commission structure.

"Right now, while it is very unusual to have the appointments that we have in the way that we have, I think there's potentially some outside influence in that," Spurlock told lawmakers. "I have no reason to suspect that they aren't there for the right reason, which is to

support us in our mission."

During a Nov. 20 meeting of the OSBI Commission, Commissioner Jerry Cason, a retired Oklahoma Highway Patrol chief who was appointed by Gov. Kevin Stitt in August to the commission, requested a special meeting before the commission's next quarterly meeting in February.

"We need to have a meeting before our next meeting, an executive session meeting, to discuss some issues that may tend to disrupt the commission," Cason said. "I think we all have some issues we would like to discuss in an executive session with the director as it relates to performance. And I think that that meeting needs to occur before the next quarterly meeting."

With two members absent — Chairman Vic Regalado and Vice Chairman Bryan Smith — the commission approved Cason's motion by a vote of 5-0.

Cason's request seemed to blindside Spurlock, although tension at OSBI has simmered for the two years since Spurlock succeeded former director Ricky Adams, a prior Oklahoma Highway Patrol chief who recruited OHP troopers to join OSBI during his tenure.

At their Aug. 21 meeting, OSBI commissioners conducted an employment review of Spurlock, the

agency's first female director, during a lengthy executive session. When the commission returned to open session, Regalado said high employee survey participation indicated that "things are going in the right direction."

But Regalado was absent from the Nov. 20 meeting, and Cason's request for a special meeting included a reference to "performance" amid continued rumors about OSBI employee unrest.

"If one or more of the commissioners has any concerns about the director's performance, those details have not been shared with us," Hunter McKee, OSBI's public information manager, said by email. "We only became aware when the request was made at today's meeting. Director Spurlock looks forward to participating in the performance review process and is confident that whatever the questions or concerns, they can be positively addressed at the next meeting. Until then, OSBI will continue to provide excellence in service for our stakeholders and fulfill our mission of protecting Oklahoma one partnership at a time."

After the meeting, Cason declined to get into specifics about his request, but he said it was spurred by Spurlock's presentation at the Senate interim study. Cason said commissioners want to know whether there is "an issue" and that

"we're all running on the same cylinders."

"There just needs to be some clarification as to what [this is] about," he said. "Where did this come from? Where are we going? That type of thing."

A special OSBI Commission meeting has been announced for 10 a.m. Thursday, Jan. 30, at OSBI headquarters, 6600 N. Harvey Place, in OKC.

Spurlock proposes reducing governor's appointees from 7 to 1

OSBI commissioners are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Senate. Statute says one must be a chief of police, one must be a sheriff, one must be a district attorney and the other four are to be lay members.

During the Senate interim study, Spurlock didn't call for changing the makeup of the OSBI Commission, but she did recommend that each member be appointed by a different entity:

- The police chief member would be appointed by the Oklahoma Association of the Chiefs of Police;
- The sheriff member would be appointed by the Oklahoma Sheriff's Association;



OSBI commissioners listen to a presentation during their quarterly meeting Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2024. PHOTO MICHAEL MCNUTT

OSBI

A series of “unusual” events unfold after a trio of new gubernatorial appointments

From A8

- The district attorney member would be appointed by the District Attorneys Council;
- One lay member would be appointed by the Senate;
- One lay member would be appointed by the House;
- One lay member would be appointed by the Attorney General’s Office; and
- One lay member would be appointed by the governor.

All would have to be confirmed by the Senate.

Spurlock’s PowerPoint presentation was read by OSBI Commissioner Ron Cunningham, whose term expires next year. Cunningham is the only holdover that former Gov. Mary Fallin appointed to the commission.

Currently, commissioners serve staggered terms and can serve more than one term. Usually, the seven-year terms mean commissioners serve a few years together, Cunningham said.

But two commissioners resigned this year, and the term of another commissioner expired. As the member representing police chiefs, Joe Prentice resigned from the commission after he retired as chief of police in Okmulgee. The Village Police Chief Russ Landon was appointed to replace Prentice. Cason was appointed to replace Tim Turner, who resigned after winning the House District 15 seat this election cycle. Stitt appointed Jeff Van Hoose to replace former University of Central Oklahoma President Roger Webb, who served one full term after being appointed to the commission to fill an unexpired term in 2013.

“We have a group of great commissioners since I’ve been on,” Cunningham told the interim study. “But an unusual occurrence that kind of sidestepped the staggered process envisioned by — we believe envisioned

“**An unusual occurrence that kind of sidestepped the staggered process envisioned...**

Ron Cunningham, OSBI Commissioner

by — the legislation was we had three commissioners go off almost at the same time, and so it kind of sidestepped the staggering process. So that’s why we, you know, gave this a little more thought.”

Asked if he thought the OSBI Commission is even necessary since the governor currently appoints all seven members, Cunningham defended how the governing body has worked.

“I think regardless how you’re appointed you have to come together as a group, and I’ve seen it happen as we’ve rotated our commission members. There were people on there when I came on and they did not isolate me because I was a new Mary Fallin appointee,” Cunningham said. “They mentored me, taught me how to be productive, and I see the same thing in the people we have now. I mean, they’re new and there’s questions to be answered, but I haven’t experienced a cliquish-type thing. We work together.”

Pressed further on whether the governor could push a policy through because he appointed all the commissioners, Spurlock interjected.

“That’s always possible,” she said. “Everything’s possible, but at the end of the day, I think what the commissioner referred to is we have seven people that are coming together that have ethics, No. 1, and have the desire to serve the mission of the OSBI because, as others have alluded to, it in some instances becomes a full-time job. It is a heavy lift managing things in the way that needs to be managed, so I think they do provide us that insulation. And I think certainly there’s a potential for there to have been an agenda and appointments or any of those things, but I think we have to trust the process.”

Spurlock said the OSBI Commission’s duties include appointing the OSBI’s director, hearing complaints against the agency or any of its employees, making recommendations to the director of any action necessary as a result of their review of an investigation conducted upon a

complaint received, establishing a program of training for agents, and requiring the director to advise the commission on the progress of pending investigations.

“Me and my staff are entirely responsible for the operational decisions of the organization,” Spurlock said during the interim study. “In fact, that is not my commission’s function.”

The commission was created in 1976 after then-Gov. David Hall — who at the time hired the OSBI leader — fired the agency’s director over its investigation of him. The OSBI Commission provides the director insulation from undue influence, Spurlock said.

“While we may not have those concerns with this administration, we have had some very legitimate and real concerns over our history where directors and agents have lost their jobs for doing their job,” Spurlock said. “And so, I think that insulation does help us just remain steady in what we’re doing, continue to do things without fear of reprisal. So that’s very important and, of course, we’re in a unique situation with all the new appointments, but typically based on that staggered structure, it is a stability for our agency and our organization.”

OHP-OSBI clash within the agency?

Behind the scenes and at the Oklahoma State Capitol, tension between Spurlock and Tipton has become a talking point, with Tipton’s connections to the three new OSBI commissioners raising some eyebrows. Jockeying over the concept of state law enforcement unification has lingered for years, and a bizarre series of events over the past year only fueled allegations that Spurlock plays favorites while leading OSBI, an agency that lacks authority to initiate criminal inquiries on its own.

Concerns about how OSBI can only investigate matters if it is requested to do so by another law enforcement agency or state official resurfaced this summer amid

Cont. A11, OSBI

OSBI commissioners are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Senate. Statute says one must be a chief of police, one must be a sheriff, one must be a district attorney and the other four are to be lay members.

Phone Ban

Lesson Learned: Warner Student Phone Ban Could Be a Statewide Model

JENNIFER PALMER
Oklahoma Watch

Student chatter filled the lunchroom at Warner High School on a recent Wednesday as students downed chicken sandwiches, guzzled chocolate milk and caught up with friends. Outside, middle schoolers tossed around footballs and basketballs. A group of preteen girls gathered around a picnic table; some talked, others drew. There wasn’t a cell phone in sight.

While schools everywhere struggle to wrest students’ attention away from smartphones, Warner Public Schools has held steadfast to its total bell-to-bell ban since 2013.

The year before the ban, Warner’s student test scores were average. Both the elementary and high school received a C on the state school report card, and of all the required state tests, half were at or above the state average.

In 2013, the district hired David Vinson as superintendent. Vinson accepted the job on the condition he could implement a cell phone ban, mirroring a policy they had in Vian, where he was a principal.

“I knew how well it worked,” Vinson said. The next school year, Warner Elementary earned a B- and the high school got an A. On 90% of the state tests, Warner students scored above the state average, according to data provided by the district.

This year, the district expects to notch two As on the school report cards for the fourth year in a row. And they’re above the state average on every test.

Warner’s cell phone policy can’t claim all the credit, but educators in the 800-student district described many benefits. Students had fewer distractions and less drama. When students finished classwork early, they pulled out a library book instead of a smartphone.

But the biggest benefit, said Warner High

School Principal Brian Hummingbird, is that teachers aren’t competing for students’ attention anymore.

“Teachers are here to teach,” Hummingbird said. “They love to teach. They’re passionate. And here, they actually get to.”

Significant Consequences

If a student’s phone is seen or heard, even stowed away in a backpack, it violates Warner’s policy. Some students said they stow their phones in their cars or leave them at home to eliminate the temptation.

Consequences are significant. On a first offense, the student faces a three-day suspension or their phone is confiscated for a week. A subsequent violation results in a five-day suspension or confiscation for two weeks. Beyond that, the student is suspended.

There are no free passes, Vinson said, but across the district, there are no more than 20 violations each year.

“When students realize you’re serious about the policy, they’ll follow it the majority of the time,” he said.

School policies reviewed by Oklahoma Watch found a wide range of consequences. Under Jennings’ policy, phones are confiscated but the student can collect it after school the first time; on a second offense, a parent must pick it up; if there’s a third time the device is kept until the last day of school, unless the student completes Saturday school to earn it back. In Silo, a student receives five days of detention for a first offense, according to the policy, and a parent has to pick up the phone.

National Trend

Across the country, as more studies show cell phones harm student learning and mental health, more schools are moving to restrict the devices during the school day.

Cont. A13, Phone Ban



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Rate Increases

Corporation Commission advances 'huge' PSO, OG&E rate increases

MICHAEL MCNUTT
NonDoc

Despite an Oklahoma Supreme Court decision looming on whether Corporation Commissioner Todd Hiatt may vote on cases involving companies with direct knowledge of his alleged misconduct, he took part in actions Tuesday that allowed large rate increases to proceed for the state's two biggest electric utilities. Both proposals were whittled down in settlement agreements and had been expected to win approval, as administrative law judges in both cases recommended the three-member regulatory panel accept them.

Hiatt and Commission Chairwoman Kim David voted Tuesday afternoon to approve an interim order for Oklahoma Gas & Electric's \$126.6 million proposal.

Earlier in the day, commissioners rejected a request from AARP Oklahoma to cap the increase facing residential customers of Public Service Company of Oklahoma owing to the company's \$119.5 million rate hike. Hiatt and David said they were concerned about PSO's 15 percent increase to residential customers — among the largest in the utility's history — before directing attorneys to draft a final order, for which commissioners will consider granting final approval at a later date.

Although final approval is pending, ratepayers are already paying the higher rates, which can be typical in utility rate approval cases. OG&E residential ratepayers have been paying an additional \$9.58 per month since June. PSO residential customers have been paying an additional \$12 per month since October.

About 45 minutes after the afternoon's 2

“

In almost 36 years at this commission, today's vote is one of the most appalling, brazen assaults on the rule of law I have ever witnessed — and by two elected officials who took an oath to support, obey and defend the constitutions of Oklahoma and the United States.

Bob Anthony, Corporation Commission, Commissioner

to 1 vote, Commissioner Bob Anthony filed a 146-page dissenting opinion with the commission.

“In almost 36 years at this commission, today's vote is one of the most appalling, brazen assaults on the rule of law I have ever witnessed — and by two elected officials who took an oath to support, obey and defend the constitutions of Oklahoma and the United States,” Anthony wrote. “Commissioners Hiatt and David have declared today that they don't care what the court says. Due process rights of OG&E ratepayers and their own oaths of office be damned. They are going to give OG&E its \$127 million rate increase anyway.”

Case against Hiatt continues

Oklahoma House Reps. Kevin West (R-Moore), Tom Gann (R-Inola) and Rick West (R-Heavener) have sought a writ of prohibition from the Oklahoma Supreme Court to ban Hiatt from voting on cases involving companies with direct knowledge of his “alleged criminal conduct.” The justices heard oral arguments Nov. 12, and a ruling could come anytime.

The high court hearing stemmed from allegations of misconduct made against Hiatt this summer. The man whom Hiatt allegedly groped at a June conference in Minnesota reportedly works for a company regulated by the OCC. A pair of Kansas Corporation Commission employees made written reports that an “extensively intoxicated” Hiatt repeatedly rubbed the man's arm and crotch in a group setting. Hiatt has said he has no memory of the incident owing to his struggles with alcohol and that he is pursuing treatment. Since the Minnesota allegation came to light, a report surfaced of misconduct allegations a year earlier at a

party in Oklahoma City.

Since Hiatt's behavior has come under scrutiny, he has “continued to participate and vote in judicial cases involving regulated public utility companies whose employees/agents/representatives have direct knowledge of his alleged criminal conduct,” the legislators wrote in their petition.

Anthony has called for the resignation of Hiatt, who chose instead to relinquish only his chairmanship of the body Aug. 7. The Oklahoma Corporation Commission agency approved an internal investigation, which is being led by attorneys Melvin Hall and Don Bingham of the law firm Riggs Abney. Their findings have not been announced.

In June, OG&E, which serves nearly 900,000 customers, reached an uncontested settlement dropping its original \$332.5 million rate hike request to \$126.6 million. The initial proposal would have raised their customers' average monthly residential bill by \$19.02, while the settlement has about half of that impact for residential customers.

But the settlement did not include how OG&E charges rates to large customers — those using one megawatt of electricity or more — outside of OG&E's service area. The Corporation Commission heard arguments on that issue Sept. 12 and took the matter under advisement. Eric Turner, an attorney representing the Oklahoma Association of Electric Cooperatives, said OG&E is not charging its actual cost to serve the one-megawatt customers, which are mostly oil and gas operations. He cited state law, created by House Bill 2845 in 2023, that requires utilities to establish rates for one-megawatt customers and avoid unfairly shifting costs to residential customers. Bill

Cont. A13, Rate Increases

Redundancy & inefficiency concerns drive commission recommendations



During the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation Commission's meeting Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2024, Commissioner Jerry Cason, right, requested a special meeting with an executive session to discuss comments the agency's executive director, Aungela Spurlock, left, made during a recent State Senate interim study. PHOTO MICHAEL MCNUIT

OSBI

From A9

confusion over whether anyone would look into allegations that Corporation Commissioner Todd Hiatt committed sexual battery against a man at a conference.

Tipton, an OHP captain who had three decades of experience when Stitt appointed him public safety commissioner in 2021, acknowledged in July that he knew all three new OSBI commissioners and recommended them to Stitt.

While he worked with Cason within the Department of Public Safety, Tipton said he also knew Landon because both are in law enforcement and that he met Van Hoose because the house he bought had been built by Van Hoose's son.

"I think the governor utilizes both the Cabinet secretary over public safety, his Cabinet secretary, and me as the governor's public safety expert, I guess, is the way he would look at me," Tipton told NonDoc in July. "I mean, I don't want to claim that I'm the expert, but he utilizes his people that he's either appointed or that he works with on public safety issues to consult with him on anything to do with public safety. And, of course, those commissions fall under public safety."

On the topic of OSBI, Tipton said the concept of bringing all state public safety agencies into one department needs to be pursued — again — because among other things it could reduce duplication of operational and administrative duties.

"There's a lot of redundancies that could be, you know, more streamlined under one state law enforcement agency," he said. "So I think that it makes sense from a taxpayer standpoint and efficiency and government standpoint. I think there's a lot of areas that make sense. I know how problematic it is. I know the downside of it, too, especially when it comes to OSBI and why they were created to have that independent investigatory side. I believe that there's other states that even have more of a unified state law enforcement effort and still have those investigations that can be handled independently."

State survey shows mixed opinions from OSBI, DPS employees

According to the 2024 Oklahoma State Employee Engagement Survey, agency leaders at both OSBI and DPS have detractors in their ranks. Survey responses within both agencies were provided to NonDoc under the Open Records Act.

“

There's a lot of redundancies that could be, you know, more streamlined under one state law enforcement agency... So I think that it makes sense from a taxpayer standpoint and efficiency and government standpoint.

Tim Tipton, Department of Public Safety Commissioner

OSBI's job satisfaction score of 82.6 percent was better than the statewide satisfaction score of 75.8 percent and was one of the highest scores among the 15 agencies grouped together under the governor's Public Safety Cabinet. In comparison, employees of the Department of Public Safety, most of whom are with the Highway Patrol, responded with a 69.7 percent satisfaction rate.

Data for the survey were collected electronically through a web-based survey from March 26 to April 12. The survey contained 53 items. Respondents indicated their agreement with 47 of the items on the following Likert scale.

In a July 15 email obtained by NonDoc that Spurlock sent to OSBI employees, she stated she was pleased with the responses of the 191 people who participated in the survey, roughly 55 percent of the agency's total staff.

"Our score of 83 percent puts us over the average and in what is generally considered to be the very high satisfaction range. This speaks volumes regarding the professionalism and dedication each of you brings to the OSBI," Spurlock wrote. "But we won't stop here! There have been changes over the last two years in expectations, accountability, and processes and I am cognizant that change is rarely easy even when it is necessary. Thanks to each of you for doing your part to ensure we are a premier agency and that we support each other and the state each day. I know with this continued effort our momentum will not slow."

Asked if Spurlock had a formal comment on the survey findings, McKee, the agency's spokesman, said, "We don't have any additional information at this time."

Among the OSBI employees who filled out the survey, open-ended responses varied widely when they referenced Spurlock or morale at the agency. Responses were anonymous, and included:

- "Greatest director ever since I have been employed as an agent."
- "Overall morale is terrible. Very hostile work environment, multiple complaints all reported to supervision in vain."
- "I am happy with the direction OSBI is going. Our leadership impresses teamwork between our divisions. The attitude of the OSBI is better than I've seen in my nearly 30 years."

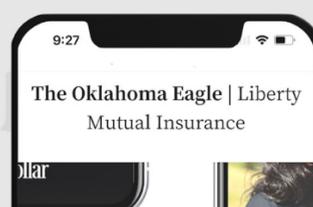
- "The basic drop in morale and accountability is directly related to leadership changes within the recent past. Core values of trust, integrity and respect are lost."
- "They have ran off good employees simply because they did not like them. The director has had several opportunities to motivate and increase morale, but has failed to do so. At a recent awards banquet, the director took the opportunity to complain that she was being compared to previous directors and the only 'shoes' she could fill are her own, rather than lead the agency in a very self-serving 'speech.'"
- "For the past year-year and a half, there has been very little to no communication from the director and/or deputy director to its employees. This has not always been the case. When the previous director (Ricky Adams) served as director, there was communication from the top to the bottom and an open-door policy to the director. This is absolutely not the case at the present time nor has it been the case since the present director entered the director position. The agency's moral is probably at its lowest its (sic) been for that of the past 20 years."
- "I find it quite concerning that this agency still perpetuates the regressive train of thought that having tattoos / non-natural hair colors / piercings means that you can't be professional and competent at your job. It is imperative that the agency update those outdated, regressive policies in order to combat that type of thinking instead of supporting it."
- "Our agency's lower level supervision is great but our agency administration is problematic. Our director and deputy director don't care to listen to alternative ideas or view points. They prefer to hear only the things they want to hear. They also react harshly without first looking into the situation. Resources do not seem to be fairly distributed and training funds were cut from some but extra provided to those that say what administration wanted to hear. Discipline within the agency appears to be unfairly administered or at least inconsistently applied. There has also appeared to be an intentional attack on employees or leadership that was threatening to them. A quick review of

Cont. A12, OSBI

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



Geary Oklahoma

Oklahoma small town police chief and entire police department resign with little explanation

KEN MILLER
Associated Press

The police chief and three officers that make up the entire four-person police department of the town of Geary, Oklahoma, and two of the town's city council members have resigned with little explanation.

Former Police Chief Alicia Ford did not address the specific reasons for the Thursday resignations, but wrote in a social media post that the decision was difficult.

"It is with great sadness that I and the rest of the Geary police officers will no longer be serving this community," Ford wrote, "but it was the right decision for me and the other officers."

Ford, without elaboration, encouraged residents of the town of nearly 1,000 about 50 miles (80 kilometers) northwest of Oklahoma City to become acquainted with the city council "and to be as involved as possible in the city, especially attending the city council meetings."

Ford did not immediately return a phone message for comment on Saturday.

A woman who answered a phone call to a number listed for Mayor Waylan Upchego on Saturday said "not at this time" when a reporter asked to speak with Upchego about the resignations.

The city, in a statement, thanked the former chief and officers while wishing them well and said an interim police chief has been chosen and that the Blaine County and Canadian County sheriffs' offices will assist in patrolling the town.

"We would like to let our citizens know we are conducting business as usual," according to the statement. "If you have



W. Main Street retail shops in Geary, Oklahoma.

PHOTO GOOGLE MAPS

an emergency, please contact 911 like you normally would and an officer will be dispatched to assist you."

City Council members Glen "Rocky" Coleman Jr. and Kristy Miller also announced their resignations, leaving the four-person council with just one member due to a previous vacancy.

Coleman wrote on social media that his values do not match the city's direction and said communication between the administration and council "has been significantly lacking," but offered no further explanation.

"Council members are just about the last to know something," Coleman wrote. "There are often times that I would not know something (is planned) until the meeting started."

Miller did not immediately return a phone call to a number listed for her.

The city did not identify the interim chief, but JJ Stitt — who described himself as a 27-year law enforcement veteran, as a county deputy, a member of a task force investigating internet crimes against children and a distant cousin of Gov. Kevin Stitt — told The Oklahoman that he is the interim chief.

Stitt did not return a phone call to a number listed for him, but told the newspaper that he hopes to add officers in the coming days. He said he has "the ability" to pick up the phone and get experienced officers over to the town to help out.

"I've been in the game a long time," Stitt said.

The resignations come more than a year after the entire police department of the small town of Goodhue, Minnesota, resigned over low pay.

OSBI

OSBI employee morale challenges persist

From A11

recent retirements or resigns would show the amount of experience being lost. Employees are afraid of the current administration and do not trust that they have the agency or its employees in their best interest."

Among the 461 DPS employees who answered the survey, responses also varied widely when discussing Tipton and OHP leaders. In particular, several responses included comments that the Highway Patrol is too focused on its emergency response and tactical teams:

- "The administration in this department is more concerned with the ERT and TAC team than the field troopers. The administration does not care if they take the whole ERT to an event for

10 days in a row and leave only a few troopers to cover multiple counties every day. The ERT and TAC team get preferential treatment over anyone else."

- "I think the agency would likely re-enter ongoing aimlessness and chaos if we were to lose our current commissioner. He should be kept as the head of DPS."
- "Agency lacks moral's (sic) and accountability."
- "Morale in this agency needs a revamp and needs tremendous improvement!"
- "The political environment in [Oklahoma] is not conducive to acting in the best interest of the agency but to meeting political agendas. This is not good business practice."
- "In my 25 years at DPS, I've seen many

commissioners, asst. commissioners and OHP chiefs come and go, and I have to say this is absolutely the best administration I've had in my career. They listen, react and make necessary changes for the betterment."

- "I fully believe I work for one of the best departments in the state of Oklahoma. With that being said, there is some much needed improvement with technology, leadership, communication, and key positions that are insufficient in providing the best service to the citizens of the state."
- "Leadership positions based on good ole boy politics never amounts to a successful outcome historically over the long run...ever!"

Michael McNutt became NonDoc's managing editor in January 2023. He has been a journalist for nearly 40 years, working at The Oklahoman for 30 years, heading up its Enid bureau and serving as night city editor, assistant news editor and State Capitol reporter. An inductee of the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame, he served as communications director for former Gov. Mary Fallin and then for the Office of Juvenile Affairs. Send tips and story ideas to mcnutt@nondoc.com.



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FROM LEFT Oklahoma Corporation Commissioners Kim David and Bob Anthony advanced large electric rate increases for OG&E and PSO on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024. PHOTO MICHAEL MCNUIT

Rate Increases

OG&E uncontested settlement drops original \$332.5 million rate hike request to \$126.6 million

From A10

Humes, an attorney with OG&E, argued that HB 2845 does not apply because it deals with one-megawatt customers seeking service after Nov. 1, 2023, when the measure took effect.

The interim order that commissioners approved Tuesday includes a clause stating it does not resolve the one-megawatt issue, and the ultimate resolution of the issue could result in rates changing. The order states that commissioners have not reached a final decision on the one-megawatt issue and will continue to deliberate on it and issue a final order at a later date.

By the same 2 to 1 vote, commissioners approved a supplemental order that allows the new cost-of-service study to be ordered for OG&E's one-megawatt customers.

Aaron Cooper, manager of corporate communications for OG&E, said revenue from the rate increase will go toward strengthening the grid and improving reliability and customers' experience.

"Other customer benefits include an \$85 annual discount for senior citizens enrolled in the company's SmartHours program, as well as more resources for tree trimming to reduce outages caused by trees and tree limbs in power lines," he said. "OG&E's rates remain the lowest in Oklahoma and we will continue making smart investments like these, with affordability and reliability at the top of mind, to strengthen the energy grid."

'Great concerns about this huge increase'

PSO, which serves nearly 573,000 customers in the Tulsa area and other sections of Oklahoma, originally proposed a \$218 million rate increase. Among other changes, the approved settlement agreement dropped the average monthly increase for residential customers from nearly \$16 to \$12.

"I'm not willing to really mess up the joint stipulation agreement at this time," David said. "I hope everybody takes note of the concern that we're expressing today, because (...) whether we do something with this case or we do something going forward, I want everyone to take note of that concern, because this is a huge increase for the residential ratepayers."

Adam Singer, an attorney representing AARP Oklahoma, said more than 3,000 people had filed public comments indicating how difficult the residential rate increase would be for them.

"This, as far as I can tell, is the single-largest rate increase ever for PSO, and it comes on the heels of several and repeated rate increases," he said. "I understand that if rates are raised on businesses, that the cost of goods may increase for residents generally, but I think the big difference is that residents can choose whether or not they go buy those goods. They don't have any choice whether or not they buy electricity. It's a very important difference."

Deputy Attorney General Chase Snodgrass said a valuable concession for residential ratepayers that PSO made in the settlement was agreeing it would not file another base rate increase before Jan. 1, 2026.

"The settlement that is before you includes a stay-out provision and the only way to obtain a stay-out provision is through a settlement," he said. "This commission cannot order the utility to stay out. The parties cannot otherwise require the utility to stay out. The only way we can get a stay-out provision is if PSO agrees to it through a settlement agreement. PSO has committed to not file another rate case until no earlier

than 2026."

If the utility were to file for a rate increase on the first day of 2026, he said that means there would be no impact on customers until roughly July of 2026 at the earliest.

"So essentially, customers are getting over a year and a half of a guarantee that their base rates will remain the same for a year and a half," Snodgrass said. "Given the trend that we've seen in the utility industry of annual rate case filings, I believe that to be a valuable consideration to have the assurance that their base rates will remain the same."

PSO received approval for a rate increase last year that raised residential bills about \$5 a month, and the company is proposing another increase next year that would raise residential bills about \$7 a month. That rate increase would go toward PSO's plans to purchase a natural gas combined-cycle generation plant in Jenks. If approved by the OCC, the facility would add 795 megawatts of long-term power to PSO's generation mix by June, which primarily includes renewable energy and natural gas, according to the utility.

In addition, PSO is seeking another rate increase next year of \$5 a month for a net operating loss case.

"I just want to note that we have some great concerns about this huge increase that residential ratepayers have paid," David said. "So going forward, I hope you guys take note of that. And the next time you meet to put together an agreement, keep that in mind. I may not feel inclined to go along with it otherwise."

Kenneth Tillotson, an attorney representing PSO, said David's concerns were "definitely noted."

"One of the things that I think is admirable about PSO in working for them as their attorney and the commissioners don't always have insight into this, but in many, many meetings I have with the company, concerns about increases in rates are always at the forefront of the company," Tillotson said. "And you may not see that every time, because you see attorneys and witnesses up here advocating during a rate case for a rate increase based upon the needs of the company and the needs of the customers that are based upon what the company has put into the system. But your concerns are noted, and I think that that is appropriate to address in future cases."

After the hearing, Matt Horeled, PSO vice president of regulatory and finance, said PSO is aware of the impact electric rates have on consumers.

"Affordability is always front of mind for us in trying to find rates that are fair, just and reasonable and meet that crucial need of electricity, because we all know how important it is for all of us to have electricity," he said. "But that comes at a cost, and we're always trying to minimize that cost and the impact to customers as much as possible."

(Editor's note: AARP and PSO are both charitable sponsors of the Sustainable Journalism Foundation.)

Michael McNutt became NonDoc's managing editor in January 2023. He has been a journalist for nearly 40 years, working at The Oklahoman for 30 years, heading up its Enid bureau and serving as night city editor, assistant news editor and State Capitol reporter. An inductee of the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame, he served as communications director for former Gov. Mary Fallin and then for the Office of Juvenile Affairs. Send tips and story ideas to mcnutt@nondoc.com.

Public Service Company of Oklahoma

Public Service Company of Oklahoma (PSO) is a municipal utility that operates in Oklahoma. This page provides a summary of the types of incentives provided by the utility related to alternative fuels and vehicles..



PHOTO RIP STELL/OKLAHOMA WATCH
Warner Middle School students spend their spare time after lunch outside chatting or playing sports. Emila was drawing as Winny looks on.

Phone Bans

Eight states have implemented statewide policies, and Oklahoma may join them next year

From A9

In 2009, 91% of public schools prohibited cell phones during school hours, but by 2015, it had dropped to 66%, according to U.S. Department of Education data. A steady uptick has been underway since.

Eight states have implemented statewide policies, and Oklahoma may join them next year. The Senate Education Committee flagged the issue as a priority for the upcoming legislative session. In September, Gov. Kevin Stitt challenged schools to implement "commonsense, cost-neutral, phone-free classroom policies." Policies will be compiled in a best practices report early next year.

One of the major policy distinctions will be whether to pursue a ban for the entire school day, including passing periods and lunch, or prohibit phones during class time only. What works in a small district might not succeed in a large urban or suburban district.

Bixby, with 8,000 students, is 10 times that of Warner. Before this year, Bixby's practice was to leave phone policies up to each teacher. Some allowed phones, some didn't. Some used phone time as a reward for finishing assignments early or for good behavior.

This year, the district implemented a bell-to-bell ban for all students through 9th grade (the district has a separate school site for 9th graders.) Like in Warner, Bixby students are expected to keep phones off and stowed away throughout the school day, but the school doesn't collect every student's phone. Teachers can call an administrator to handle a cell phone violation.

"Really, all we're trying to do is regain the best possible learning environment for kids and for teachers," Bixby Superintendent Rob Miller said.

Even students at Warner said there are benefits beyond academics.

Warner students Francisco Diaz, Dee Antwine, and Memphis Swimmer agreed phones should be banned from classes, but they were split on whether they should get access during lunch.

"If we had phones during lunch, we wouldn't talk to each other," said Memphis, a sophomore.

In the years after Vinson left Vian, 20 miles from Warner, the district's policy loosened. Students were allowed to have cell phones except during class time. But the devices had again become too much of a distraction, said Superintendent John Brockman. This school year, the district is back to a bell-to-bell ban. A student receives three lunch detentions for a first offense, but they can retrieve confiscated phones at the end of the day.

Three months into the school year, Brockman said he's seen a difference. Students are interacting more, and they are more focused.

"I think it's helped," Brockman said.

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.



Oklahoma Gas & Electric

Oklahoma Gas & Electric Company is a regulated electric utility company that serves over 843,000 customers in Oklahoma and Arkansas, including 1.5 million people in the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area. It is the leading subsidiary of OGE Energy Corp. (NYSE: OGE), with headquarters in downtown Oklahoma City.

Oklahoma Corporation Commission

The Oklahoma Corporation Commission is the public utilities commission of the U.S. state of Oklahoma run by three statewide elected commissioners. Authorized to employ more than 500 employees, it regulates oil and gas drilling, utilities and telephone companies.

The commission was established in 1907 and the First Oklahoma Legislature gave the commission authority to regulate public service corporations.

Railroad, telephone and telegraph companies were the companies first regulated by the commission, which also collected records of the stockholders, officers and directors of corporations chartered or licensed to do business in Oklahoma. Record collection duties were later split; the commission keeping records only for public service companies. The commission added pipelines, water, heat, light and power in early years.

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(918) 584-3206

Minister RJ Smith

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

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(918) 834-4747

Pastor Ruthie I. Howard

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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.

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

Pastor Richard and Cher Lyons

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

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123 E. 59th St. North
Ph: (918) 425-2077

Pastor Rick Bruner

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Praise & Worship 11:00 a.m.
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3101 N. M.L King Jr. Blvd.
Tulsa OK
(918) 625-2374

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Sunday Morning Worship - 10:45

Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm
Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm
Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm
Wednesday worship - 8pm

Rev. John W. Anderson

VERNON AME CHURCH

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

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Worship Service 10:00 am

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"Have Faith In God." Mark 11:22

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Office: 918-584-0510
Fax: 918-584-1958
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PHOTO WORD IN BLACK

Black America Doesn't Have to Shop at Walmart

WALMART MADE BIG PROMISES AFTER GEORGE FLOYD'S MURDER. NOW, UNDER PRESSURE FROM "ANTI-WOKE" ACTIVISTS, IT'S AXING ITS RACIAL EQUITY CENTER AND DITCHING DEI. DOES THE COMPANY STILL DESERVE A PIECE OF BLACK AMERICA'S \$1.8 TRILLION

BY LIZ COURQUET-LESAULNIER, WORD IN BLACK

Let's be clear: Walmart needs Black America a heck of a lot more than Black America needs Walmart.

Wielding roughly \$1.8 trillion in spending power this year, Black folks' economic clout is undeniable. We get to choose where we spend our hard-earned cash during the holiday shopping season and beyond.

But Walmart — one of many companies that made lofty promises about fighting systemic racism after George Floyd's murder — just pulled the plug on its diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Now, three weeks after Donald Trump's election, they claim they want to be "a Walmart for everyone." And the anti-woke bros on the right are trading high-fives, claiming they forced the retail giant to abandon its DEI initiatives.

Yes, DEI, the root of all so-called reverse racism in America. Because for some folks in this nation, DEI is code for anything that gives the appearance of supporting Black people, communities, or businesses.

It's not that Black folks thought the post-George-Floyd-murder racial reckoning would last forever. Our ancestors lived through Reconstruction, so we know better.

But back on June 12, 2020, just days after Floyd's murder, Walmart's CEO Doug McMillon emoted in a blog post about how the company's goal was "to help replace the structures of systemic racism, and build in their place frameworks of equity and justice that solidify our commitment to the belief that, without question, Black Lives Matter."

McMillon pledged to examine every aspect of Walmart to ensure the company was prejudice-free. He waxed poetic about a conversation he had with a Black woman employee about racial microaggressions. He pledged \$100 million to a Center for Racial Equity that would "address the root causes of gaps in outcomes experienced by Black and African American people in education, health, finance and criminal justice systems," according to Walmart's website.

Walmart, he vowed, was on a "journey in support of racial justice and equity."

One thousand, six hundred twenty-eight days later, that journey is over.

The Center for Racial Equity? Closing. Racial equity training for employees? Not today, Satan. Using the phrase "DEI" in corporate communications? Axed.

Walmart now says it wants to foster "a sense of belonging." Apparently, as journalist Judd Legum quipped on Bluesky, "Walmart has solved racism."

Right-wing anti-DEI activists like Robby Starbuck are popping champagne, claiming they pressured the company into ditching its "woke" policies. Starbuck, a former music video director, regularly posts lines like "It's a fact that DEI is antiwhite," and "DEI IS racism and deserves to die," on X.

In a lengthy post on the social media platform, Starbuck insinuated that his conversations with Walmart — the nation's biggest, most influential retailer — led to this rollback, a move that will "send shockwaves throughout corporate America."

"This is the biggest win yet for our movement to end wokeness in corporate America," Starbuck posted on X.

Walmart touts itself as Black America's biggest private employer and has long been a retail giant in the Black community. A 2023 analysis by Collage Group identified Walmart as our favorite brand, due to the company's investments "in Black enrichment, and taking a stance on social matters."

But here's the other side of the coin: research revealed that Walmart stores in Black and Latino neighborhoods consistently get worse reviews for service quality. Walmart's been hit with multiple discrimination lawsuits. Remember that \$17.5 million class-action lawsuit? Yeah, the 2009 one where Walmart settled claims that it discriminated against Black folks trying to get truck driving jobs? That was a thing.

Just two years ago, an Oregon jury ordered Walmart to pay \$4.4 million to a Black man after a white Walmart employee racially profiled and harassed him in one of their stores.

A quick internet search nets plenty of other examples of people suing Walmart over shopping while Black experiences, Black employees suing for

being repeatedly passed over for promotions, and Black employees suing because they were being called racial slurs in the workplace.

Let's call Walmart's abandoning DEI efforts what it is: a slap in the face to the Black folks who've kept their registers ringing for decades.

This isn't just about Walmart, though. Across corporate America, anti-DEI crusaders are attacking anything and everything related to leveling the playing field for Black folks, the Latino community, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. And companies are nervous about Trump 2.0, as well as a Supreme Court that's overtly hostile to anything that smacks of affirmative action.

But here's the kicker: Black America is not powerless. Walmart, like every other company, runs on dollars. And Black dollars matter — a lot. If Black shoppers took their spending power elsewhere, the fallout for Walmart would be seismic.

Starbuck, though, doesn't think Black folks have a choice.

"I'm happy to have secured these changes before Christmas when shoppers have very few large retail brands they can spend money with who aren't pushing woke policies," he gloated. Amazon and Target, he said, "should be very nervous that their top competitor dropped woke policies first" and should brace themselves for losses.

Which begs a simple question: Should Black America keep shopping at Walmart when it seems Walmart might have forgotten who helps keep its lights on?

"I think America has figured out that if you dish out racism and bigotry subtly one drop at a time and not in a direct overt manner the Black community is OK with it," Isaac Hayes III wrote on X about the situation. "Kneel on their necks and kill one of them they get mad. Dismantle systems that level the playing field for them and they just accept it and still continue to spend money with us."

A company that caves to racist attacks coded as "anti-woke" does not respect Black America. It doesn't deserve our loyalty. Because loyalty isn't free — and \$1.8 trillion in purchasing power can go a long way somewhere else.

FEATURED

Why Trump's HUD Pick Is a Red Flag for Housing Advocates

HUD, A16



FEATURED

The Spiritual and Scientific Benefits of Saying Thank You

Thank You, A18



Savannah Britt, New York, 30, PR Specialist and CEO of The Brittprint Agency .

PHOTO SAVANNAH BRITT

Health Care

Three people told us their thoughts and fears about what Trump, RFK Jr, and Dr. Oz will do to the nation's health system.

Trump Has Black Americans Worried About Health Care

ANISSA DURHAM
Word In Black

Kamala Harris had just 107 days to state her case for the most powerful office in the world.

Her presidential campaign, historic in so many ways, ultimately fell short.

Now, with Donald Trump preparing to re-enter the Oval Office, questions abound: What will his administration mean for the already deeply fractured American health care system? What will happen to the health care progress many hoped for? And how will Black Americans, already disproportionately affected by health care inequities, navigate what's to come?

Trump's cabinet picks, including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as Secretary of Health and Human Services and Mehmet Oz as head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, have sparked alarm among many advocates for equitable health care.

RFK Jr., an anti-vaccine advocate, and Dr. Oz, known for promoting questionable health remedies, represent a stark departure from policies aimed at expanding access to care. Black Americans, who already face barriers to health care, are bracing for even greater challenges.

For example, a recent KFF Health

Tracking Poll revealed that in the past 12 months, uninsured Americans are more likely to skip necessary care due to cost — a reality many fear will worsen under Trump's administration.

Word In Black reported in August what seven young people wanted improved from a potential Harris administration. They overwhelmingly wanted improvements in access to mental health care services, an expansion of reproductive health care, and social media literacy. Three other Black Americans across the country told us their current fears, concerns, and hope for the American health care system. Here are their stories in their own words, edited for brevity and clarity.

Savannah Britt, New York, 30, PR Specialist and CEO of The Brittprint Agency

I voted for Harris. Trump's election has definitely taken a hit on my mental health. I went into the election period very optimistic, very hopeful about change with different policies.

To see wither at such a polarizing state right now, and to see the Trump victory, it's disappointing. It just speaks to the systems in place, that we are fighting racism, we are fighting misogyny, and that we have a long way to go as a country.

Cont. A17, Health Care

HUD

Why Trump's HUD Pick is a Red Flag for Housing Advocates

Yes, Scott Turner is a former NFL player. The bigger issue? He'll be putting the plans of Project 2025 into action.

JENNIFER PORTER GORE
Word In Black

Over the weekend, President-elect Trump announced his nomination of Scott Turner to lead the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Turner, a former NFL player and Texas legislator, would be the first — and so far, only — Black appointee in Trump's second cabinet. But for housing advocates, his nomination and Trump's anti-fair-housing agenda raise plenty of red flags.

Indeed, while most housing advocates know little about Turner, they're amply aware of and concerned about what the second Trump Administration has

Cont. A17, HUD

Health Care

Anxiety and grave disappointment for many



From A16

The health care system in American, still needs a lot of reform. This idea that we still privatize health care is just very inhumane. Health care is a human right.

Post-COVID, it's been very hard to get access to mental health providers, particularly Black mental health providers. There's long waiting lists for people to get access to mental health providers. As Black people, particularly African Americans, we need access to these services.

It's only going to be more challenging for Black people to have access to mental health services. Trump, his administration, and the Republican Party, as a whole, still believe in the privatization of health care and not having it readily accessible to everyday Americans. So, it'll just create more barriers,

fear. They name things like Project 2025 and abortion rights. But I push back – and ask, how are you voting locally?

We need to pay attention to city council meetings. I feel like more Black people can attend these meetings. That is a goal for me. Just being a part of the conversation, part of that is knowing where these meetings take place.

I want our people to focus on being more active within local politics and not just taking everything that you hear – but doing the research yourself.

Adolph Brown, 64, Clinical Psychologist

The impact of the recent election has led to anxiety and grave disappointment for many Black adults as the stakes were high both from a present and historical perspective. Anxiety and depressive symptoms are further perpetuated with the President-elect's

“

I want our people to focus on being more active within local politics...

Devon Horace, Portland, Oregon, 32, Investor



TOP Devon Horace, Portland, Oregon, 32, Investor
PHOTO COURTESY OF DEVON HORACE

BOTTOM Ali Wentworth and Dr. Adolph Brown, of ABC's 'Parent Test' pose for TV Guide Magazine during the 2023 Winter Television Critics Association Press Tour at The Langham Huntington, Pasadena on January 11, 2023 in Pasadena, California.
PHOTO MAARTEN DE BOER/GETTY IMAGES

longer waiting lists, and more uncertainties moving forward for Black people and their mental health.

I just encourage Black people to continue to center ourselves moving forward. We are all we have and to not forget the fight that we came from.

Devon Horace, Portland, Oregon, 32, Investor

I voted for Cornell West. I wanted Harris to win, to see what she could do. But I knew she wasn't going to win because America likes theatrics.

I'm interested to see what Robert Kennedy Jr is going to do because he's about less chemicals and he puts his foot down with pharmaceuticals. And I like to think of medicine from the natural standpoint. I do feel like it's going to be very difficult for the Black community to seek health care.

They say they're looking to make health care more private. Health insurance is really expensive, and that can be a hindrance for many people in the Black community, just based on social economics and the average household income. Access to health care is going to be more difficult.

A lot of people are afraid of what this administration will bring. I've been talking to my family and friends about what brings that

cabinet and staff nominations including some individuals with similar views and/or criminal-like behaviors.

As a clinical psychologist, it's important to acknowledge what Black Americans are feeling is real and not imagined – and to make space for it. I tell my clients it's impossible to heal what we don't reveal! It's also important to remind Black people of the connection to their ancestors who fought to overcome many atrocities in America. This evokes a sense of pride, resilience, and a sense of duty.

Establishing boundaries surrounding the aftermath of the election is paramount as discussions may lead to further distress. My clients are taught that boundaries do not mean you have to put up a wall. It simply means you have added a door whereby one must knock and be permitted to enter.

Voting is more than a political act for many Black Americans; it's a deeply emotional experience intertwined with personal and ancestral histories, identities, and aspirations. But we need to remember that the President of the United States occupies the White House, he does not have to occupy your mind.

Anissa Durham is the health data journalist for Word In Black. She reports on healthcare inequities and mental health in the Black community.

HUD

Trump Admin supported “too expensive to fix” housing policy

From A16

signaled will be its housing policy.

Trump's Housing Policies Weren't Great

During Trump's first term, HUD – under Dr. Ben Carson – focused on policies like the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program, designed to repair aging public housing. Since much of the nation's public housing is more than 50 years old, many of the buildings need billions of dollars in repairs and updates. Sounds great, right?

Not so fast – those policies often came with a catch: HUD also supported closing public housing properties deemed “too expensive to fix,” leaving families with Section 8 vouchers that didn't always translate into homes.

Having a voucher doesn't guarantee finding housing. So, families may be unable to find a landlord who will accept the voucher – and, in some cases, the voucher can expire before the family finds a home.

“I suspect that a key initiative for this next administration will be to increase the number of public housing properties eligible for RAD, especially considering that Congress is now Republican-led and Congressional authorization is needed for this program,” Sue Popkin, a fellow with Urban Institute, tells Word In Black about Trump's plans.

“Over the next four years, I hope that HUD will ensure these agencies have the support and resources needed to allow their residents to thrive,” she says. “I hope that Turner does not follow in Carson's path by proposing cuts that would displace older adults and people with disabilities [who have] very low incomes.”



PHOTO METRO CENTRIC - QUEENSBRIDGE HOUSES, CC BY 2.0

Evictions, Homelessness, and Project 2025

Peggy Bailey, executive vice president for policy and program development at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, says the new administration's agenda could make things even worse.

“The incoming Administration has laid out an agenda that makes clear they will try to make it harder for people who are struggling to afford rent, worsen discrimination, and undercut effective efforts to address homelessness, similar to what we saw in the first Trump Administration,” she says.

Bailey is especially concerned because Turner's nomination comes against the backdrop of the Trump administration's previous efforts – criticized by both Democrats and Republicans – to dismantle fair housing protections. Slashing programs like the Community Development Block Grant falls right in line with the conservative Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, which would reverse gains in fair housing and fair lending and shred the housing safety net.

An NFL and Trump 1.0 Background

For nine years, Turner played NFL football for the formerly named Washington Redskins, the San Diego Chargers and the Denver Broncos. He later was elected to the Texas legislature and served as a state representative until 2017.

During Trump's first term he led the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council, which was positioned as serving the nation's “most distressed communities” in his Friday night announcement. He also serves as a chair at the Center for Education Opportunity at America First Policy Institute, a think tank aligned with Trump.

Ultimately, Bailey says, “Their plans will lead to more evictions and homelessness. We've seen this playbook before. Policymakers should reject these extreme proposals and prioritize making sure that everyone in this country can afford a home.”

Jennifer Porter Gore is a writer living in the Washington, D.C., area.

Thank You

The Spiritual and Scientific Benefits of Saying Thank You



PHOTO BRAD NEATHERY ON UNSPLASH

REV. DOROTHY S. BOULWARE
Word In Black

Giving thanks is a holiday table tradition, but the power of gratitude makes it a transformative force in our lives year-round.

It's a holiday tradition in many homes: between the clinking of glasses and the passing of the candied sweet potatoes, someone asks everyone to share what they're thankful for. The ensuing answers are often a mix of the intangible — health, resilience, friendship — with tangible blessings like cars, homes, jobs, and the like. There's laughter, sometimes tears, and plenty of reflection.

But gratitude isn't just a warm, fuzzy feeling. It's a practice rooted in something deeper.

"The word gratitude is derived from the Latin word gratia, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness," notes Harvard Health Publishing. It's about recognizing the good in your life, both big and small, while also seeing how those blessings connect us to something larger — "whether to other people, nature, or a higher power."

As Psalm 100:4 tells us, "Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name."

The Science of Gratitude and Happiness

According to happiness scholar Dr. Kortni Alston Lemon, there are actually scientific

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It is essential that the storytellers behind the news focus on well-being since they're exposed to work-related trauma from the stories they cover.

Dr. Kortni Alston Lemon, scholar

benefits to gratitude, too.

Lemon has dedicated her career to exploring the power of gratitude. Her journey began in tragedy — becoming a widow at just 25 years old. "I remember looking in the mirror and saying, 'Kortni, this will make you even stronger,'" she recalls.

Her grief didn't vanish, but her perspective shifted. "Now, more than 25 years later, I'm happily married to an amazing man who's an optimist like myself."

While pursuing her doctorate at the University of Florida, Alston Lemon discovered positive psychology, the study of what helps people thrive. For her, gratitude became a cornerstone—not just in her personal healing but in her work training journalists to prioritize their well-being in an industry often marked by trauma.

"It is essential that the storytellers behind the news focus on well-being since they're exposed to work-related trauma from the stories they cover," Alston Lemon explains. "My life's work is to provide them with the support they need."

Although many are resistant to the concept, she finds ways to engage them and ultimately win them over.

"Once they hear the scientific benefits of gratitude, from helping with stress to sleeping, some become curious. But what I believe they really treasure is my vulnerability in sharing my story of resilient grieving," Alston Lemon says.

"And then I ask them what one or two things they are grateful for right now. It changes their mindset from what I don't have to what I do have."

Ready to Feel Happier? Start Here

- Gratitude can be hard to find, especially during tough times. But since journeys start with small steps, these tips, inspired by the University of Minnesota, are simple ways to build a gratitude practice:
- Keep a gratitude journal: Write down one or two things you're thankful for each day.
- Say it out loud: Share three good things that happen daily with a friend or partner.
- Express your thanks: A quick "thank you" text or note to someone who made a difference can brighten their day — and yours.
- Look for silver linings: Even in challenges, find the small victories or lessons.
- Practice self-gratitude: Acknowledge what you've done well or what you've overcome.

It's always a good time of year to consider what gratitude could mean for you — not just as a holiday sentiment but as a life-changing habit. Because when we focus on what we have instead of what we lack, the feast before us becomes all the sweeter.

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