



## *2024 ANNUAL REPORT*



**We Don't Let Kids Face the Capitol Alone...**

**A guide to the work of making a difference for Oklahoma's children in 2024.**



# OICA Improves Our State for Children

In a time when children need a voice at the State Capitol more than ever, as it is harder than ever to enact to policies which help improve their lives at the Oklahoma State Capitol. We have many lawmakers who want to provide better opportunities for youth, but they need the data to make the case and the connections with youth-serving programs to provide the stories. This is where the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy comes in and is so valuable as a resource, both for policymakers and those serving the children of our state. Don't let kids or those lawmakers who want to help face the State Capitol alone.

This document is designed to detail what is done in our state by the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, or OICA. Over the next few pages, you will see the work that we accomplished in 2024, and the potential for so much more that can be done with the help of advocates across the state. Through the work done by advocates, coordinated by OICA, we have improved the quality of life for children and families by submitting ideas to lawmakers for suggested policies, helped improve filed bills by suggesting amendments to legislators, and battled to stop legislation which would be detrimental to children. Our work is data-driven, and our Board of Directors, made up of leaders from across the state, takes very moderate positions based on research and peer-reviewed data.

In 2024, OICA re-established our advocacy training program, formerly called the Kids Count Leadership Forum, to now be named the Advocacy Boot Camp. This program was held over the course of meetings reaching into 2025 in various locations across the state. Emerging advocates from varying levels of involvement are taking part in training that enhances their knowledge of the state governmental system, advocacy concepts, and the diversity and resources from across our state. Business leaders and foundations sponsor this, securing positions in the camp for an employee working in a leadership role. The Advocacy Boot Camp will teach participants how to fully engage with communities and lawmakers.

In addition, our Kid Governor® program, in partnership with the Connecticut Democracy Project and Oklahoma 4-H in 2024, offered free lessons to 5th grade 4-Hers to enhance their understanding of basic civics and the need for them to become engaged as they grow older. One student annually earns the right to be the Oklahoma Kid Governor® and share their platform of ideas around the state with their peers, lawmakers, and civic organizations. Through this endeavor, we champion the voice of Oklahoma's children to offer ideas for improvement and encourage them to grow active in the political system, and we hope to return it to Oklahoma 5th grade classrooms in 2025.

We have served Oklahoma for more than 40 years to provide connection to the Oklahoma State Capitol for a network of youth-serving organizations. Each, with their own important mission, needs that relationship with lawmakers to prevent harmful policies and explore positive changes to improve their opportunities. Our team of legislative advocates at the Capitol working directly with OICA provide weekly information to our network to keep them fully informed of conversations occurring.

Together, we move Oklahoma closer to becoming the state we desire and that our children deserve. With the programs detailed herein, this will happen faster and better serve our youth today and the generations of young Oklahomans yet to be born.



# Our Mission – Our Charge

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA) has transformed lives in our community for four decades. OICA is a 501(c)3, non-partisan organization that engages in policy, while equipping advocates with the tools for success. Our core mission is to create awareness, take action, and support policy to improve the health, safety, and well-being of Oklahoma's children.

OICA was launched in 1983 by a group of citizens as the result of an investigative report by the national news media which exposed a horrific story of cruelty and abuse experienced by Oklahoma children who were in the state's custody. That media report, "Oklahoma Shame," spurred child advocates from every corner of the state into action to create an organization whose mission was to ensure the protection of Oklahoma's children.

For more than four decades, OICA has been informing and educating state policymakers and other citizens on the importance of investing wisely in children and families. We understand that when children thrive, our state thrives. Whether working with state policymakers and agencies, or with health, education, business, and community organizations across our state, Oklahoma's children - and our state's economy - are reaping the benefits of the work we do together as voices for Oklahoma's future.



# 2024 Legislative Achievements

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy is a force at the State Capitol because of support from generous sponsors like you. In 2024, for example, we worked with lawmakers to pass The Hope Shaffer Act, which requires driver education classes to get waivers from parents of students if a youth learning to drive will be operating the vehicle with other children as passengers. The measure is named for a young lady who lost her life in a driver education car driven by a student driver.

Senate Bill 1324 required the state Education Department create an optional electronic universal application for free or reduced-price meals, making it far easier and less costly for the state to process benefits for Oklahoma families. In the shadow of the governor's refusal to accept \$40 million in federal summer food funding for Oklahoma families, OICA encouraged lawmakers to move \$8 million from the state Commerce Department to Oklahoma Human Services to increase funds for the grant program supporting affordable and nutritious lunches for children.

A series of initiatives at the Oklahoma Legislature were passed in recent years with OICA's support including measures to:

- Increase teacher pay.
- Improve maternity leave for school district and state employees.
- Protect students' rights to wear tribal regalia to graduation ceremonies.
- Enhance state support for access to local fresh fruits and vegetables for consumers.
- OICA will continue the fight against senseless violence against students with disabilities as we fight to end corporal punishment inflicted upon students who may not even OICA supported and continues to support many of the recommendations from Governor Stitt's 2023 Child Welfare Task Force.
- OICA encouraged several of the Legislature's interim legislative studies which were conducted to lay the groundwork for future successes at the State Capitol.







# Celebrating Heroes for Children

The **Heroes Ball** is OICA's premier annual event, recognizing those exemplary advocates working on behalf of Oklahoma's youth. This gala is held each July, and it is our most visible event with hundreds of engaged guests in attendance. The list ranges from civic and political leaders to child advocates representing youth-serving organizations and business leaders involved in their communities. In 2024, the Heroes Ball saw more than 400 people gather at the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City to celebrate the good work benefitting our youth.



Sponsorship of the event includes tickets and recognition at the event, along with promotion on social media. Additionally, a Sidekicks Ball is held for children ages 6- to 12-years-old who have adults attending the Heroes Ball, which includes activities for the children.





# From Knowledge to Action: The Advocacy Boot Camp's Transformative Impact

The Advocacy Boot Camp is more than just a theoretical exercise. It's a crucible where participants are empowered to become agents of change, equipped with the tools and knowledge to tackle real-world problems affecting children.

This approach goes beyond mere lectures and workshops. Participants are challenged to actively envision projects that address specific needs in their communities. This visioning process fosters critical thinking and a deeper understanding of local challenges, promoting creative solutions tailored to the unique context.

The Advocacy Boot Camp then equips participants with the skills and resources to translate their visions into reality. This might involve:

- Project management: Learning to budget, organize resources, and build timelines.
- Communication and advocacy: Mastering the art of persuasive communication, engaging stakeholders, and rallying support for their initiatives.
- Collaboration and networking: Building connections with local organizations, community leaders, and other advocates to leverage existing resources and amplify their impact.

By requiring each participant to implement a project, the Advocacy Boot Camp ensures that knowledge is not simply acquired but actively applied. This hands-on experience fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, building confidence and encouraging participants to become lifelong advocates for children's well-being.





# Knowledge is Power

**OICA's Legislative Learning Lab** is another annual program for advocates to learn more about the complex operation of state government. The 2024 edition was held just before the annual session of the Oklahoma Legislature, and concluding with a panel discussion on the governor's "State of the State" address, this is the training that most legislators should get but often do not receive.

It is an unmatched opportunity to educate, inform, and empower advocates from all over Oklahoma to be well-prepared to follow and engage during Oklahoma's legislative session and beyond. Attendees in 2024 were highly engaged and motivated.







# Building Better Citizens in the Classroom

**Oklahoma's Kid Governor®** is a national award-winning civics program created by The Connecticut Democracy Center and led locally by the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy. Fifth graders across the state learn about state government, voting, and the importance of civic engagement through a real election for Oklahoma's Kid Governor®.

Each registered Kid Governor® school is eligible to nominate one student to run for the position of Oklahoma's Kid Governor®. Each participating classroom will get curriculum materials tailored to Oklahoma's system of voting and government, including a lesson plan, digital materials, and a comic book written specifically for Oklahoma fifth graders. The curriculum, designed to give students an inside look at how the State Capitol operates, is free for participating classrooms.

Mila O'Brien of Enid is the 2023-2024 Oklahoma Kid Governor® and Emma Stephens (pictured above) is the 2024-2025 Kid Governor®. Mila was an effective advocate for youth mental health, making countless visits to the State Capitol, raising money for sensory tools for all fifth graders in her hometown of Enid, and promoting the importance of yoga, hosting classes in various locations across the state. Emma has taken the reigns and is guiding her cabinet of 5<sup>th</sup> graders from across the state to develop programs to improve lives of their fellow children.

This is a program that is fully dependent on sponsorships. OICA is fortunate to have five former Oklahoma governors and their spouses as dedicated supporters. The governors – Fallin, Henry, Keating, Walters, and Nigh – host an annual fundraising reception.





## Where Advocates Found a Voice for Policy

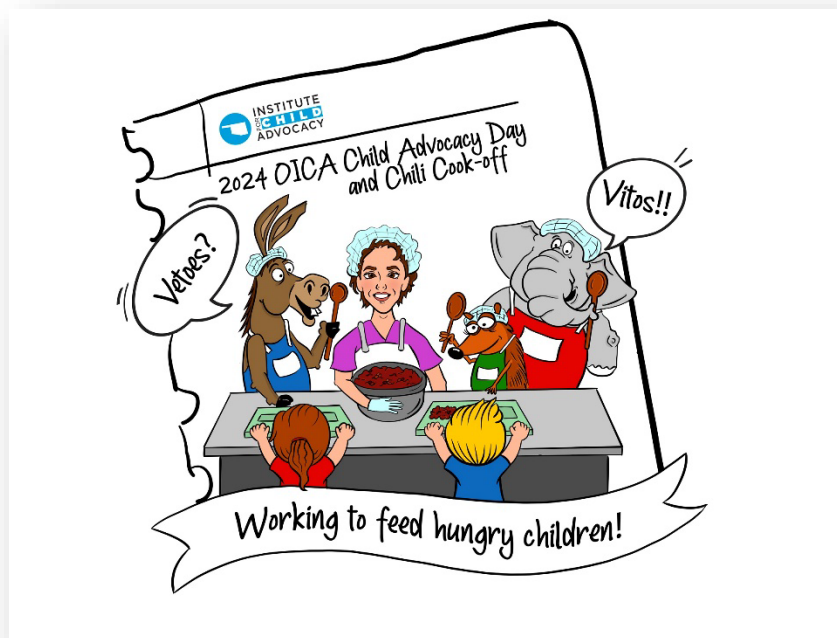
**OICA's Fall Forum** is where the “rubber meets the road” when it comes to developing positive child advocacy. This annual forum gathers partners from across Oklahoma to help shape OICA's legislative agenda for the upcoming year.

Held November 19-21 at The Ellison Hotel in Oklahoma City, Fall Forum brought together advocates to hear from subject matter experts, including lawmakers, on a variety of important children's issues. The advocates also enjoyed networking opportunities with other child advocacy organizations from across the state.

Breakout groups on specific subjects help to develop policy proposals that were then heard by the entire group of attendees. Those proposals were discussed in the plenary session and the result of those discussion built the foundation for OICA's “Children's Legislative Agenda” for 2025, which was presented to lawmakers for consideration during the Oklahoma Legislature, guiding OICA's work at the State Capitol for the year.







## Fun with a Purpose

The **Chili Cookoff and Capitol Advocacy Day** was held at the State Capitol Complex in March. Representatives of child-serving organizations put their best chili up against each other with much networking happening during the day. After the chili was judged by actual Oklahoma Supreme Court Justices and judges from various courts, advocates walked the halls of the Capitol supporting their programs and the OICA legislative agenda.







## What If You Had a Day to Change the Lives of Children?

**OICA's Annual Desk Calendar** for 2024 presented advocates a terrific way to remain top-of-mind among Oklahoma's critical decision-makers. Sponsorships for one or more days of the year, or the full calendar, ensured advocates and supporting organizations were in front of elected officials at the State Capitol.

Each page contains a critical statistic on the state of children in Oklahoma, the day's "child advocate" – the sponsor of the page – and one of our partner advocacy organizations. In addition, elected officials' birthdays are noted, as well as holidays and any special recognition days.

Each calendar page is posted on its day to OICA's social media platforms, or organizations and the challenges facing Oklahoma's children. Many use the calendar as a way to pay tribute to someone close to you. We have pages dedicated to the memory of loved ones who have passed and many more signifying the birthdays and anniversaries of those still with us.



# Some of Our Sponsors

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# Financial Integrity

OICA received a “Gold Transparency” designation from GuideStar, showing that it was “candid” about its finances to the public.

In addition, an independent auditor’s report of OICA’s financial statements deemed that “the financial statements...present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy...and the changes in its net assets and its cash flows for the year then ended in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.”

OICA continues to be a good steward of the resources contributed to it by sponsors and donors as it continues its work on behalf of Oklahoma’s children.



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