OKLAHOMA INSTITUTE FOR CHILD ADVOCACY
2027 Children's Legislative Agenda
November 16, 2026

Annually, the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA) assembles advocates from across the state to share ideas for improving governmental policies which would benefit the children of Oklahoma. Our Fall Forum conference this year focused on essential policies tied with issues associated with H.R. 1, the "One Big Beautiful Bill" and subsequent cost shifts to states, along with impending fines and penalties if error rates are not reduced. The delegates to Fall Forum and the OICA Board of Directors submit these suggestions to policymakers for their consideration.

Eliminating Food Insecurity

It is virtually impossible for a child to thrive while in the throes of hunger. As such, the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy recommends that Oklahoma approve the following recommendations to reduce childhood hunger in the state, which affects one out of every four Oklahoma children. Oklahoma has the highest child food insecurity rate in the United States, with an estimated 27.3% of children facing hunger.

- More than 1 in 4 children (approximately 263,450 children statewide) live in food-insecure homes, which is higher than the 14.4% national average.
- Adopt EBT programs and maximize all other sources of federal nutrition funds.
- Expand nutrition programs that are documented as successful such as DUO.
- Resume special funding for regional food banks so that they are able to manage emergencies or dramatic changes in Federal policy.
- Strengthen Oklahoma Human Services' capacity to process nutrition program applications and renewals quickly and efficiently by hiring more trained staff, adding access points for SNAP verification interviews, expanding outreach, education, and client-response services, and upgrading outdated technology.
- Create exceptions to SNAP work requirements for families with children.
- Work with the Congressional delegation to delay SNAP work requirements implementation.
- Appropriate state dollars for food assistance (apart from SNAP) to households that lose SNAP
- Target discretionary exemptions toward families with young children.

- Create volunteer opportunities to qualify for work requirements

Education

A quality public education is necessary to ensure that every Oklahoma child has the opportunity to reach their full potential. While true for every child, this is especially the case for children who endure Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Therefore, the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy recommends the following reforms to the state's education system, focused on providing the finest public education to every child, regardless of their location or circumstance. Oklahoma frequently ranks near the bottom nationwide, placing 48th in education according to the 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book and between 49th and 50th in standard national quality assessments like WalletHub. Only 27% of students test at "proficient level" on overall assessments. The 2026 KIDS COUNT report metrics reveal that 77% of 4th graders score below reading level (48th nationally) and 83% of 8th graders score below math level (49th nationally). High school graduates' average composite ACT score is **17.5** (two points below the national average), though Oklahoma is one of only nine states requiring 100% of its students to take the exam.

- Provide funding and support to Family Resource Centers who can share existing resources with schools, students, families, and teachers to impact absenteeism, mental health needs, transportation, and other needs critical to a child's educational success.
- Develop programs focused on retaining experienced career teachers.
- Expand support for teachers to address behavioral Issues in the classroom, such as hiring support staff, lower classroom size, trauma-informed training for teachers, parent-engagement programs, and healthy relationship education
- Require seatbelts on new school buses purchased after a certain date. And allow local school districts to create a use policy that best suits their area.
- Increase school transportation appropriations.
- Provide teachers with more training for children with disabilities; to include topics such as IEPs, classroom behavior management, creativity in supporting children with various needs
- Reduce class sizes.
- Make early childhood services available for children ages 3-4 in all school districts.
- Pay educators and support staff with regionally competitive wages to address the teacher shortage crisis.

Access to Quality Health Care

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA) believes that the future prosperity of our state rests on the health and well-being of our youngest citizens. Ensuring that every child in Oklahoma has reliable access to quality, comprehensive healthcare is both a moral imperative and a critical investment in our workforce of tomorrow. To bridge current gaps in care, support rural and urban families alike, and build a healthier generation, we present the following series of actionable proposals designed to strengthen our pediatric healthcare infrastructure and guarantee that no child's potential is limited by a lack of medical access. 9% of Oklahoma children (around 87,000 minors) live without health insurance coverage. Oklahoma has the 10th worst infant death rate in the country, 6.9 to 7.1 deaths per 1,000 live births. The state ranks 7th worst nationwide for deaths of children aged 1 to 14. Evaluated at a "D" grade by the March of Dimes, 11% of babies are born prematurely, frequently tied to maternal health conditions like clinical obesity, maternal smoking, or lack of first-trimester prenatal care. Approximately 8.2% to 8.6% of infants are born below the standard weight threshold (5.5 lbs.). Anxiety & Depression: More than 37,300 children under 19 received formal psychiatric or mental health therapies in the state, with clinical anxiety (41.2%) and depressive disorders (19.9%) making up the vast majority of diagnoses.

- Increase access to behavioral health and children's services statewide and to all in need of assistance.
- Create workforce development programs for medical professionals in the pediatric fields.
- Prevent SoonerCare coverage losses by simplifying renewals, providing clear notices, and ensuring accessible phone and in-person assistance. Establish accountability measures to distinguish coverage losses caused by paperwork from those caused by ineligibility.
- Establish a dental therapist program in communities experiencing a shortage of dental aid to help families and address dental workplace shortages in rural areas.
- Direct the Oklahoma Health Care Authority to expand SoonerCare coverage for applied behavior analysis (ABA) beyond autism spectrum disorder to other developmental and neurodevelopmental conditions, including Down syndrome, ADHD, fragile X syndrome, and intellectual disabilities.
- Encourage the Congressional delegation to support modifications or delay to the Medicaid/SoonerCare work requirements.
- Protect Health Care coverage for Oklahomans, regardless of their age.

TSET Tobacco & Vaping Cessation

As a new generation faces the severe developmental risks of nicotine addiction, safeguarding Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trusts' resources and implementing aggressive preventative measures are essential to preserving the well-being of our state's students. The following proposals are designed to equip Oklahoma with the targeted strategies necessary to reverse this dangerous trend, hold bad actors accountable, and secure a healthier, smoke-free future for all of our children. Nearly 22% of high school students use e-cigarettes, a rate that is more than double the national average. High School Vaping Rate: 21.8% to 22% of high school students in Oklahoma actively use vapes.

- Protect TSET's dedicated funding and governance by opposing efforts to divert or redirect TSET's protected funds or restructure its Board of Directors.
- Support a statewide vape tax on vaping products.
- Support lifting state preemption to allow local governments to implement and enforce their own tobacco control policies.
- Support stronger restrictions on advertising and packing of flavored tobacco and vaping products to help reduce youth access and appeal. Regulate the importation of goods to ensure quality and safe products.
- Support building awareness of tobacco prevention and public health priorities while expanding participation in youth health and wellness groups across Oklahoma.

Better Access to Quality Childcare

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy recognizes that accessible, high-quality childcare is the backbone of a thriving state economy and the essential foundation for our children's lifelong success. Currently, too many working families across Oklahoma face insurmountable barriers to finding safe, affordable, and reliable care, forcing difficult choices that sideline parents from the workforce and deny early educational opportunities to our youngest citizens. The following proposals are designed to strengthen our state's childcare infrastructure, support hardworking families, and ensure every child receives a strong start in a safe environment. The state counts roughly 181,350 children under age 5 with a potential need for care against a supply of about 119,150 licensed slots, creating a significant statewide gap. The average cost of childcare in Oklahoma is about $10,809 a year ($901 per month) for infant care, $838 per month for toddlers, and $785 per month for 4-year-olds. Approximately 61% of children in Oklahoma have all available parents participating in the workforce

- Create ways to encourage the creation of childcare businesses especially for 24 hour and overnight care.
- Create a sign-on bonus or upfront stipend to open a childcare Facility.
- Fund a program for kinship care, where relatives are childcare providers.
- Cap insurance premiums for childcare Businesses.
- Provide more training for early childcare workers to improve their interactions with young children, especially when they are feeling stressed.
- Mandate higher education to create a workforce pipeline for early childcare industry.
- Reimburse early childcare providers for up to seven days of absences to promote financial stability.

As Oklahoma's youth navigate an increasingly complex world, it is imperative that policies adapt to protect them from modern vulnerabilities while offering meaningful pathways to healing and success. The key to improving child well-being includes the following proposals to better assure every Oklahoman child the chance to reach their potential. In the 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Oklahoma ranks 44th overall child well-being (tied with Texas). While this is a slight improvement from ranking 46th in recent years, the state remains in the bottom 10 nationwide. Only Nevada, Alaska, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Mississippi rank below or tie lower than Oklahoma. As such, various other proposals gained the support of child advocates, including:

- Guarantee that every child referred to mental health services receives an initial assessment within 14 days and treatment within 30 days.
- Improve mental health and behavioral support for rural students/families without access to providers.
- Recognize and address the current epidemic state of youth mental health in Oklahoma and get serious about bipartisan prevention, intervention, and treatment solutions.
- Allowing developmental disability evaluations in secondary education be transferable to the Office of Juvenile Affairs.
- Increase reimbursement amounts paid to foster parents.
- Prevent children from entering foster care due to poverty-related issues when safety concerns can be addressed through short-term support.
- Focus on cybersecurity for children aged birth-to-five.
- Invest in prevention before families reach crisis.
- Continue to fund the statewide expansion of the Office of Family Representation.

- Establish independent oversight of the soon-to-be-created State Child Well-being Agency.
- Reform Guardian Ad Litem system with required training and better guidelines in child and family-oriented practices.
- Expand on the spirit of HB 2361 from last session which requires youth aging out of foster care to get certain essential documents, to also get certain essential services such as driver training, financial literacy, and access to employment.
- Make extended foster care service portable among the states.
- Expand the Recovery Oriented Justice System to provide immediate and long-term support to Oklahoma's children. Embed therapists in local police stations to assist officers in the field as needed and provide real-time mental health support to law enforcement officers. Also embed therapists in district courts to better support individuals and families.
- Work with the Congressional delegation to create housing programs that foster financing & affordability both to individuals and communities.

- NOTE: These proposals for legislative action were made and approved by the attendees of Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy's 2026 Fall Forum on October 15, 2026.
- The proposals were then presented to the OICA Advocacy Committee, which met on October 22,2026 and recommended adoption with one amendment to the Board of Directors of OICA on the same day. The Board adopted the committee's recommendation, also on October 22, 2026.
- The final adopted proposals will be submitted to the 61st Oklahoma Legislature for consideration by lawmakers.