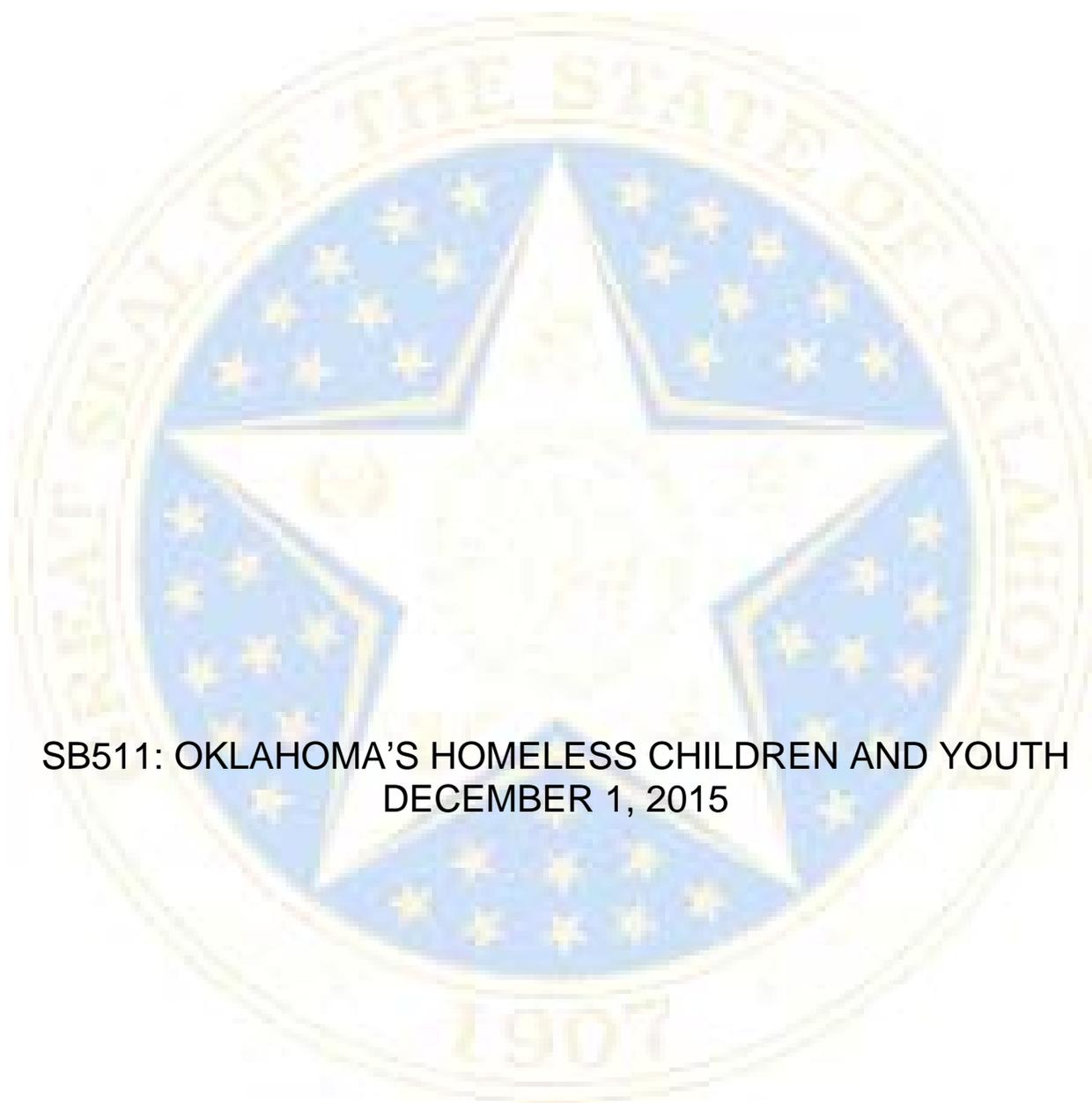


OKLAHOMA COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH
OFFICE OF PLANNING AND COORDINATION



SB511: OKLAHOMA'S HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH
DECEMBER 1, 2015

SB511: Homeless Children and Youth Summary & Recommendations

Background:

The Office of Planning and Coordination Steering Committee (P&C Steering Committee) is a sub-committee of the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth Board of Commissioner's. The P&C Steering Committee serves in an advisory and leadership role for the Office of Planning and Coordination (P&C). The P&C Steering Committee provides direct support to goals and initiatives outlined in the Oklahoma State Plan for Services to Children and Youth. The P&C Steering Committee's members serve in direct leadership roles in the development and implementation of demonstration projects and allocation of resources by the P&C.

The P&C under the auspice of the P&C Steering Committee established the Strengthening Custody and Transition Services Advisory Team (Advisory Team) as a goal in the 2009-2013 Oklahoma State Plans for Services to Children and Youth. The Advisory Team was established to provide advisory and leadership support for the implementation of demonstration pilot projects and the development of a response to systemic issues identified through demonstration pilot projects. P&C with the support of multiple children serving agencies developed and implemented demonstration pilot projects at institutions, residential facilities, and local communities across the state of Oklahoma. Community based initiatives were implemented in Jackson and Payne Counties during the early stages of implementation.

The Advisory Team quickly learned of the overlapping issues for children and youth exiting the Office of Juvenile Affairs or Oklahoma Department of Human Services custody. The FY2013 - 2016 Oklahoma State Plan for Services to Children and Youth continued with the goal of strengthening custody and transition services and included a greater look at systemic issues impacting children and youth exiting state care. Children, youth, and families that were involved with community-based initiatives also experienced similar issues as youth who were exiting the state's system. Children, youth, and families appeared to be challenged by issues such as housing, education and employment, transportation, and positive permanent connections. The Advisory Team supported the development of the systemic issues sub-committee to look closer at the identified issues for children and youth.

Senate Bill 511 became effective July 1, 2015, and directs the OCCY, P&C Steering Committee, to review data and propose policy solutions relating to children and youth at-risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. SB511 directs the P&C Steering Committee to submit a report including policy recommendations to the legislature by December 31, 2015.

SB511 also directs the OCCY, P&C, to include certain data specific to homeless children and youth in the Oklahoma State Plan for Services to Children and Youth. The legislation calls for the an annual report to be distributed to legislative leadership that includes activities of the Commission, recommendations for further development and

improvement of the services to children and youth, services for homeless children and youth, and budget and program needs specific to homeless children and youth.

Assessment:

P&C completed multiple assessment activities beginning in April 2015 through November 2015. P&C interviewed key stakeholder, facilitated state and local focus groups, met with boards, councils, committees, and networks specific to children, youth, and families at-risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. Please attachment A for more detailed information regarding aforementioned focus group findings.

During the assessment activities P&C noted two federal definitions of homelessness during assessment activities that are directly related to children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. The two federal definitions also appeared to directly impact funding available for states, non-profits, and faith-based organizations addressing homeless children, youth, and families.

The first federal definition regarding homeless children in youth states in part, “*Homeless children and youths*’ means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes children and youths who are *sharing* the housing of other persons, due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters ; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placements; (ii) children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (iii) children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and (iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless...”

The second federal definition regarding homeless children and youth is referred to as *unaccompanied youth* which includes a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Unaccompanied youth include young people who have run away from or been thrown out of their home or been abandoned by their parents. According to the literature the primary causes of homelessness among unaccompanied youth is physical and sexual abuse by a parent or guardian, neglect, parental substance abuse, and extreme family conflict.

P&C through its assessment activities identified what appear to be two sub- populations of children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. The sub-populations of children and youth at risk of becoming or experiencing homelessness are:

1. *Children and Youth that are a member of an economically fragile family*
2. *Children and Youth that exit the state child serving system at age 18*

It should be noted that the identification of children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness was limited by the fragmented data collection system that currently exists for the state of Oklahoma. While data could be requested from multiple state and private data collection systems at the time of the review there wasn't one single agency or organization that had universal data information regarding children and youth at-risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness.

Recommendations:

1. Develop legislation and/or support Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that creates the Oklahoma Homeless Children and Youth Centralized Data Repository. The Oklahoma Homeless Children and Youth Data Repository would collect federally driven *universal data* elements across state adult and child serving systems specific to children, youth, and families that are at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. In addition, the data repository would provide a clearer understanding of the prevalence, characteristics, and needs of children, youth, and families at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness.

State agencies that should be considered to be included in the reporting of *universal data* elements include but are not limited to: Oklahoma Department of Commerce, Oklahoma State Department of Education, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Office of Juvenile Affairs, Department of Rehabilitation, Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Oklahoma Health Care Authority, and Oklahoma Department of Health. Further, some consideration should be given to the inclusion of large non-profit organizations in urban areas of the state to include data as well.

2. Develop legislation that creates an Oklahoma definition of children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. Currently, Oklahoma does not have a homeless definition that provides more guidance in the identification of children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. The lack of an "Oklahoma" definition of homelessness among children and youth often appears to lead to inconsistencies across state agencies and non-profit organizations in the identification of children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness.
3. Review and reform existing emancipation statutes to allow for greater flexibility and a possible "supervised emancipation" for unaccompanied youth. Many providers and children and youth have expressed "challenges" in achieving emancipation status through existing Oklahoma emancipation statutes. Providers of services to at risk homeless children and youth reported that the inability of youth to obtain emancipation for unaccompanied children and youth impacts the agencies capacity to deliver services to children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. Further, a supervised emancipation status may be considered a prevention approach by allowing

unaccompanied youth to receive supportive services without directly entering Oklahoma's state custody.

4. Review and support the development of licensing standards that are inclusive of "drop-in centers" and/or day shelters for children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness. Many professionals in the field reported that "drop in-centers" are supportive in addressing children and youth at risk or experiencing homelessness; however, P&C did not identify any licensing standards at the time of this report regarding "drop-in-centers."
5. Consider the extension of aftercare services with existing allocated dollars for children and youth who exit Oklahoma's care at the age of 18. Currently, a small percentage of children exit the State of Oklahoma's care at the age of 18. A comprehensive cost analysis study completed by child serving agencies such as OJA and OKDHS would provide greater insight on the cost associated with providing aftercare services such as supportive housing, employment and education, transportation, and case management for children and youth that exit the state's care at age 18.
6. Support the delivery of services that emphasize case management specific to unaccompanied youth that are consider "non-traditional" tenants by property managers and may be at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness.
7. Explore and possibly implement legislative solutions that support greater access to dental coverage for children and youth at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness.
8. Develop legislation that supports the Oklahoma State Department of Education's implementation of Best Practices Guidelines in the identification of children and youth at-risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness.

Respectfully,

Sid Brown, Chair
Office of Planning and Coordination Steering Committee
Appointee of the Governor