Governor Mary Fallin’s 2015 Inaugural Address

OKLAHOMA CITY – The following is the text of Governor Mary Fallin’s 2015 Inaugural Address, as prepared for delivery:

Elected officials, members of the court, tribal leaders, distinguished guests, and citizens of the great state of Oklahoma, it is with a deep sense of honor and humility that I stand here today to accept the opportunity to serve a second term as your governor.

Before I begin I want to take a moment to recognize my devoted family: my loving and supportive husband Wade, our wonderful and talented children, and our family and friends, without whom we would not be here today. Thank you for your love, support and prayers over the years.

Four years ago I stood here to be sworn in for the first time.

It was a historic occasion, and I was proud and honored to serve as Oklahoma’s first female governor. As I came into office, I was very much aware, as The Bible tells us, that to whom much is given, much is expected.

We faced serious challenges. Despite the hard work of governors and legislatures that had come before me, our economy had taken a huge hit because of the national recession. Unemployment had climbed to seven percent. We had –literally – only $2.03 left in our state savings account.

Many Oklahomans and many state agencies were going through a tough time.

When I came into office, I promised to get our economy back on track and families back on their feet. I was lucky to have a newly elected, energetic and conservative Legislature, equally committed to that task.

To those legislators here today: serving in public office requires dedication and sacrifice. I would like to thank you, and all of our elected officials, for your service.

Together, we worked hard to help move Oklahoma forward. I believe the story of the last four years will be the story of an economy lifted out of one of the deepest recessions our state and our nation has ever faced. We have seen:

- An unemployment rate that went from over 7 percent to just 4.4 percent
- 103,000 new jobs created, and the fourth-fastest growing economy in the nation
- Oklahomans earning more, with a per capita income rising by 15 percent – the second highest rate in the U.S.
- The highest rate of job creation in the manufacturing sector in the country in 2013, helping to power a record high in Oklahoma exports of goods
And a Rainy Day Savings Account replenished from almost nothing to over $530 million.

As Oklahomans, let’s be proud of what we accomplished.

Let’s be proud of Oklahoma’s construction boom, the new 50-story building on the Oklahoma City skyline and the plans for even more high rises. Our capital city was just named one of the top 20 travel destinations in the world by National Geographic, alongside exotic locations like the Swiss Alps and Taiwan.

Let’s also be proud of the strong and sustainable growth in downtown Tulsa and the ongoing transformation of the city by projects like The Gathering Place. In fact, the New York Times just listed Tulsa as one of the Top 50 places in the world to visit, listed right between Rome and Shanghai.

Let’s celebrate the great quality of life, the growth and the beauty of the towns that make up rural Oklahoma.

Let’s be proud to be home to an agricultural sector that is feeding the country; an energy industry that is powering the nation’s cars and heating its homes and businesses; medical facilities doing groundbreaking research for cancer and diabetes treatments; and an aerospace industry that is developing the technology we need to protect our nation and further commerce and trade. Let’s be proud of the beauty of our great outdoors, our lakes and land.

Above all, let’s be proud that Oklahomans are a special people. Every time we are challenged as a state, we see neighbor helping neighbor.

In May 2013, when central Oklahoma was struck by devastating tornadoes, the world was inspired by the bravery, compassion and generosity of our people as they worked to help families who, in some cases, had just lost everything.

The nation and the world saw our strength and spirit, and we became known as “Oklahoma Strong.”

I have seen the sheer determination of the people of Oklahoma; and I know they can rise to meet any challenge.

Today we must recommit ourselves and our state to meeting the challenges in front of us, to protecting our freedoms and liberties, and to acting as a successful laboratory for democracy.

We have worked hard to create a friendlier business climate and to become a better state in which to invest, build a business and create jobs. We know that the best way to lift people out of poverty is to provide them with a good education and a good job, so we must continue to pursue the pro-growth reforms that have helped to jumpstart our economy.
We must also continue to reform outdated and inefficient government programs to deliver quality services to our customers: the taxpayers.

We must continue to improve programs that protect our citizens and offer care to the most vulnerable.

And we must continue to teach our children the value of hard work and personal responsibility. Those are the values that lead to success and a great future.

We have worked hard on all these fronts to set a new course for Oklahoma, to build a stronger economy and a better state government. But now it’s important to look inward and ask, “How can we do better? What’s holding us back? And what are the challenges remaining not just over the next four years, but over the next 40, that we must address to ensure our fellow Oklahomans and their children can achieve their dreams?” And yes, we know as we do this work there will be setbacks; but setbacks are opportunities for comebacks.

There are three areas that we must resolve to make a priority, areas that we must improve or risk stifling our forward momentum: educational attainment, over-incarceration, and health.

When we ask – how can we ensure long term prosperity in Oklahoma? – the most important answer is educational attainment. Oklahoma must raise its high school graduation rates and award more career technology certificates and college degrees.

Individuals need to have marketable work skills to flourish in today’s economy. Businesses need skilled and educated individuals to succeed, grow and expand.

Increasing educational attainment is about creating more and better Oklahoma jobs. It’s also about providing a way out of poverty. Education beyond high school is absolutely “the new minimum” for success in the workforce. If we can increase our educational attainment as a state, we will benefit from everything from higher earnings to less crime, less teen pregnancy, and less reliance on government aid, saving taxpayers money.

Speaking of increasing educational attainment, I want to congratulate and offer my sincere thank you to our friends in higher education for successfully implementing the first stages of Oklahoma’s Complete College America program. Over the last two years, we’ve increased the number of college degrees and career technology certificates awarded by over 6,500. And over the last five years, we have increased STEM – or science, technology, engineering and math – degrees by 27 percent, helping to improve the quality of our workforce and providing more Oklahomans with the skills they need for high-tech, high-paying jobs.

We have great teachers, professors and educators who are absolutely dedicated to their students and their profession.

I believe in those educators. I believe they can rise to the challenge and find innovative ways to teach our students and help us meet and exceed student achievement goals. Educators are important, and they deserve our thanks. Our children will spend at least 12 years of their lives
with their teachers, and we need to work with them to improve student learning and deliver better outcomes.

In the last four years, we’ve already worked to deliver more accountability and transparency in public education while focusing on early childhood literacy. As our economy has grown stronger in recent years, we have been able to put $150 million of increased funding back into K-12 schools. Oklahoma’s commitment to public education is strong; in fact, 51 cents of every dollar now goes toward education.

But the fact remains, we need to do more. We need to improve, and improve quickly. This is an all-hands-on-deck challenge. It requires an all-hands-on-deck solution. Together – as parents, teachers, lawmakers, and even the business community – we need to do the work and get it done.

Second, another issue which year after year holds back our state, breaks apart our families and leads to poverty is crime and incarceration.

Let me be clear: community and personal safety will always be a top priority. Anyone who is a threat to those around them must be locked up, and violent criminals must be in prison. Nothing about that will change.

But here’s the sad truth: many of our inmates are non-violent offenders with drug abuse and alcohol problems.

They don’t need to spend long stints at the state penitentiary, where they can join gangs and acquire criminal networks.

They need treatment; they need supervision; and they need to be returned to their communities as sober adults ready to support themselves and their families. Some of these individuals are already benefitting from successful public/private partnerships like ReMerge and Women in Recovery that are transforming lives and making a difference.

That’s a “smart on crime” approach and it’s a conservative approach. There is a smarter way to help someone who is addicted to prescription pain pills than to have them sit in a jail cell with little or no access to treatment. And for those who suffer from mental illness, we need to offer help and counseling to get them healthy and to divert them from our prison system.

In this next legislative session, I am committed to working with our legislators to redouble our efforts to pursue smart-on-crime solutions and offer common-sense paths to help people with mental health and substance abuse problems get their lives back on track.

Finally: health.

We must work together collectively and individually to improve the health of the state and our citizens. We may not all agree on how to create better access to care, lower medical costs, and provide greater choices for individuals and businesses shopping for insurance plans. These are all
important goals, but I believe we can agree on the importance of encouraging personal responsibility to improve one’s health. We need to do a better job educating people about why this is important, and what they can do to get healthier.

Poor health outcomes are destroying our quality of life, leading to thousands of unnecessary deaths each year, and costing taxpayers and businesses a tremendous amount of money.

It is time to face these hard truths and take responsibility for these outcomes as a state and as individuals.

We are too good of a people to allow ourselves to continue to be the worst state in the nation for prescription drug abuse, or for one-in-10 Oklahomans to have diabetes, or for the state to be ranked seventh-worst in the nation for obesity and sixth-worst in smoking rates.

I know we can improve; but state government can’t do it alone. All of us can find ways to help and participate. Oklahomans have worked hard to develop an Oklahoma Health Improvement Plan with great coalitions and partners. For example, I’ve been proud to partner with Kevin Durant on the Governor’s Get Fit Challenge. Kevin and I launched that program, in partnership with our schools, which is working to get our children up and moving through exercise and proper nutrition.

The state has increased resources for mental health treatment and substance abuse prevention programs that have proven to be successful; but we need to do more.

In the coming months I will continue to work with health providers, employers and lawmakers to make inroads that will make a real and immediate difference in the lives of Oklahomans and chart a better course for the health of the state.

We need to set the bar high for that work. One of the big indicators of overall health – because it is so closely linked to smoking, obesity, and nutrition – is prevalence of heart disease. Let’s set an aggressive goal: to reduce heart disease deaths in Oklahoma by 25 percent between now and 2025. If we are successful, and I believe we will be, that alone will save over 2,400 lives every year.

I am excited and optimistic for the next four years, but our goal should be to lay a stronger foundation to grow our state and improve our quality of life for decades to come.

Collectively, we should all commit to working together so Oklahoma will be a place where our children and their children can stay and find great opportunities in healthy, strong and safe communities; a place where they can pursue their dreams, get a good education and a good-paying job.

We can make that happen, by learning from our past successes, while honestly confronting the challenges in front of us.
Although we know there will always be ups and downs in our economy, we’ve successfully pushed through the last recession by pursuing fiscally responsible policies focused on right-sizing government while pursuing private sector job growth.

Today is no different. Tomorrow offers us a new day with bold ideas and possibilities to dream big dreams for Oklahoma.

There are many things we know we must do to keep our state moving forward, but increasing educational attainment, reducing incarceration, and improving health outcomes are three which directly impact our quality of life.

Every parent wants their children to have more opportunities than they did. I know I do. If that is going to happen, we must work to address these challenges.

I have great confidence in Oklahomans and our lawmakers, and I’m excited to work together to usher in another generation of prosperity and forward momentum to make Oklahoma the best place to live, work and raise a family for generations to come.

Thank you, and God Bless Oklahoma!