



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Community Forum Creates System of Care for Local Families

Pontotoc, Seminole, Hughes, Bryan and Coal Counties host family forum to promote joining together to create “Communities of Care” that support all children and families.

Ada, OK (June 13, 2014) – Nearly 20 local community service agencies have joined together to host “It Takes a Whole Village to ‘Foster’ a Change” forum on Friday, June 20 from 10 a.m. to noon at the Pontotoc Technology Center, 601 W. 33rd St., Ada. The free forum is being offered to the community as part of the statewide Communities of Care initiative kick-off event.

Communities of Care representative Bonnie Keeley, MS, LPC, Project Director of Pontotoc and Seminole Systems of Care, Multi-County Counseling, Inc., explains the purpose of the forum is to raise awareness of the number families in the community struggling through traumatic events. These events often weaken the family structure and end with children being taken into the foster care system. Helping these families on the front end is an investment that results in stronger communities.

“Working together we can build stronger, healthier communities. We want our friends and neighbors to join us Friday and gain a better understanding of what community services are available and how even the smallest commitment of time and resources can help strengthen our community,” says Keeley.

The free event will include food, prize drawings, guest speakers, information about local community services and a live music performance by Injunuity.

Community leader Sandy Poe, Director of Parent Involvement, English Language Learner Services and Homeless Liaison for Ada City Schools, has taken an active role in the event because she believes the entire community plays a role in the overall health, safety and wellbeing of all local children and families. Poe says, “I am part of this effort by the Communities of Care initiative because I care about the future of our children, the future of our community. I am encouraging everyone to step up and commit to adding value to the quality of life for all of us.”

As a leading agency in the Communities of Care Initiative, the Department of Human Services invites everyone to attend the forum and gain a better understanding of how everyone can get involved and help build a stronger community by working together to keep children out of the state's foster care system and keep those in the system in loving, caring homes. "One hour, one month or one year and endless opportunities to contribute make it possible for everyone to find a way to help our friends and neighbors and create stronger communities," says Robin Kennedy, Pontotoc, Seminole and Hughes Counties Child Welfare District Director. "Oklahomans are famous for taking care of our own. No matter how much time a person has, they can do something positive to change the life of a young person in a struggling family."

Families are the most basic building block of any community and the statistics in eastern Oklahoma indicate there are high numbers of children and families at risk for experiencing some type of stress that often leads to undesirable outcomes such as divorce, incarceration or children entering state custody. These situations add stress to the entire community and are concerning to local businesses, faith-based organizations, tribes and community partners.

Families can become fragile for many reasons. Most often these reasons include divorce, unemployment, school dropout, unintended pregnancies, homelessness, crime, incarceration, injuries and loss of life. When families are impacted, the entire community is impacted. "Communities are one living organism just like our bodies," explains Lynn Smith, MPH, CHES, Communications and Event Specialist at Oklahoma Systems of Care. "If a child suffers from a broken arm, the whole body and soul is affected. When communities suffer from broken family units, we all are impacted. From a less productive workforce to increased crime and children entering the system, our communities suffer. We all need to work together to invest in our future on the front end. The time is NOW. Together we can create a stronger, healthier future."

In eastern Oklahoma alone, in 2013, there were 1,498 confirmed reports of child abuse and neglect representing 2,781 children. An overwhelming 60 percent of those children were age 0 to 6. This is an increase of nearly 20 percent over 2012. These traumatic experiences for children are often caused by adults with untreated mental illness or substance abuse habits and lead to children and youth being placed into state custody.

With approximately 70 percent of adults and 40 percent of youth left untreated for mental health issues and 77 percent of adults and 80 percent of youth needing help for substance abuse problems, Oklahoma communities must work together for the sake of the children and the future.

Further statistics show that for eastern Oklahoma, in 2013, more children entered foster care than there were approved beds. With only 1,761 approved beds, 2,217 children were removed from their homes and placed into the system. This startling statistic represents 21 percent of the total number of children in Oklahoma removed from their family and is a 23 percent increase over 2012.

Because children entering state custody, untreated mental illness and substance abuse and other traumatic events affect the entire community, several local resource agencies and businesses have joined together to sponsor the event. The partners represent all sectors of the community and include businesses, faith-based organizations, tribes, community partners and families. Organizations hosting the event include Multi-County Counseling, Pontotoc and Seminole County Systems of Care, Ada City Schools, Chickasaw Nation, Oklahoma Parents as Teachers, Ada Regional United Way, Seminole Nation,

DHS, Oklahoma Family Network, Oklahoma Federation of Families, Smart Start South Central, Choctaw Nation, Mental Health Services of Southern Oklahoma Systems of Care, Office of Juvenile Affairs, 1-1-1 Project, Life Launch, Trinity Baptist Church, Byng Public Schools and Pontotoc County Drug Court.

Information about the event and the Communities of Care initiative can be found on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OKCommunitiesofcare or by calling (580) 235-0210. Additional information about resources for families and how everyone can help will be available at the event.

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