



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hundreds of Community Members Learn How to Help Struggling Families at Communities of Care Family Expo

Okmulgee, OK (June 18, 2014) – In just four hours, nearly 300 individuals learned about how it takes an entire community to support struggling families and 150 people committed to providing support to local children and families during the Communities of Care Family Expo event in Okmulgee last week. Garnering this community support was the goal of the 15 local service agencies that hosted the event for Creek, Hughes, McIntosh, Okfuskee and Okmulgee counties. Their efforts will result in stronger families and stronger communities.

The forum was the fourth of six to be offered in southeastern Oklahoma as part of the Communities of Care initiative kick-off events. The goal of the initiative is to raise awareness about the number of families struggling through traumatic events in local communities. Initiative members also are emphasizing the importance of helping fragile families on the front end before the family structure weakens to the point of children being taken into foster care.

In addition to the local entertainment, food and prizes for the whole family, the event included guest speaker Pan Toohey, nationally renowned speaker and child advocate, who told her story of what it means to be part of a struggling family and how community support helps families rise above difficult times. A panel of “local champions” that included Johnny Magness, Valerie Steele, Regina Henson, Melissa Hembree and Daniel Herring also spoke.

Communities of Care representative Samantha Bowman, LPC, Assistant Children’s Services Director for CREOKS Behavioral Health Services, said those in attendance became aware of how working together to help struggling families is beneficial to the whole community. “All of the agencies involved feel those who attended the event left with a better understanding of what community services are available locally and how even the smallest commitment of their own time and resources can help strengthen our community,” Bowman commented.

Some of the comments on the commitment forms included, “increase my knowledge of the needs in the community,” “change my mindset about families at risk,” “create opportunities for more community

involvement” and “volunteer as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for a child.” According to Casey White, Communications Manager for the Department of Human Services, “These are great commitments and they show that a day, a week or a year of someone’s time can make a difference. The event may be over but Communities of Care will continue to work to help everyone understand that the entire community must work together to create strong families and keep our children out of the foster care system, or safe while they are in the system. Communities of Care will continue to engage in a variety of efforts that promote healthy families and healthy communities across the state for a long time to come.”

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 can lead to children entering the foster care system.

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. Approximately 70 percent of adults and 40 percent of youth are not being treated for mental health issues and 77 percent of adults and 80 percent of youth need help for substance abuse problems.

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.

To make a commitment of time or resources and join with others in strengthening the community, information about the Communities of Care initiative and its goals can be found on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OKCommunitiesofcare or by calling (918) 752-9024.

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Local Agency Hosts of Communities of Care Family Expo

Okmulgee Health Department
Creek Nation
CREOKS Behavioral Health
Okmulgee County Wellness Coalition
OSU-IT
DHS
Beggs Public Schools
Office of Juvenile Affairs
Beggs Head Start
Oklahoma Family Network
Turning Point
Caring Community Friends
Anne Moroney Youth Services
Evolution Foundation
East Central Oklahoma Family Health Center

Cutlines for attached photos

Photo 1: _DSC1688 from left to right.

Ryan Brecheen of TFI Family Services and Michelle Poull of Henryetta Head Start share ideas about how to get the entire community working together to create stronger families at the Communities of Care Family Expo.

Photo 2: _DSC1709 from left to right.

Jennifer Avery from the Tobacco Prevention Program of the Okmulgee Health Department and the Okmulgee County Wellness Coalition talks with event speakers, Johnny Magness, Pastor of Mt. Calvary Miracle Temple in Okmulgee, and Valerie Steele, Pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Okmulgee, about the role faith-based organizations play in strengthening struggling families in the local community.