



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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## **Spring Fling Forum Creates System of Care for Local Families**

**Cherokee, Wagoner, Sequoyah, Adair and Muskogee Counties host family forum to promote joining together to create “Communities of Care” that support all children and families.**

**TALHAQUAH, OK (May 15, 2014)** – More than ten local community service agencies have joined together to host the Communities of Care Spring Fling forum on Monday, May 19 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Tahlequah Armory Municipal Building, 100 N. Water St., Tahlequah. The free forum is being offered to the community as part of the statewide Communities of Care initiative.

Communities of Care representative Cassie Gray, LPC, Assistant Systems of Care Director at CREOKS Behavioral Health Services for Cherokee and Wagoner counties explains the purpose of the Spring Fling forum is to raise awareness of the number of community families 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 Monday 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 Gray.

The free event will include food, prize drawings, guest speakers, information about local community services and a live remote broadcast with Lou and Blake from Lake County Radio 102.1.

Community leader Sam Bradshaw who will speak at the event 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. Giving only five minutes of our time can help build a stronger community,” says Bradshaw, a Certified Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist with Cherokee Nation Regional Prevention. He works locally to prevent alcohol and substance abuse.

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 KI BOIS/Head Start, CREOKS Behavioral Health, Tahlequah Health Department, Tallgrass Family Services, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Oklahoma Family Network, Supportive Services for Veteran Families, People Inc., Cherokee Nation, Green Country Behavioral Health, Bacone College and Tahlequah Communities of Excellence.

Information about the event and the Communities of Care initiative can be found on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/OKCommunitiesofcare](http://www.facebook.com/OKCommunitiesofcare) or by calling (918) 633-2409. Additional information about resources for families and how everyone can help will be available at the event.

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