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## **‘STATE OF THE STATE’ DETAILS STATUS OF CHILDREN’S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN OKLAHOMA**

Thousands of Oklahoma children are needlessly suffering from mental and addictive disorders, because they have no access to treatment or prevention services.

That was the message delivered Thursday, March 5, at “Children’s Mental Health and Substance Abuse Awareness Day at the Capitol,” sponsored by advocacy groups from throughout Oklahoma.

Much of the discussion generated at the event was based on data provided in a “State of the State” report by the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services detailing the status of children’s behavioral health in Oklahoma.

The report provides a snapshot of issues that affect Oklahoma children, and emphasizes the necessity of state agencies working in partnership to promote children’s behavioral health issues, rather than in a “fragmented” system. Information in the report covers such topics as emotional disturbances and substance abuse, accessing appropriate mental health care, suicide, juvenile justice, and the importance of prevention and early intervention.

“More than 40 percent of Oklahoma youth who need mental health services and 80 percent who need substance abuse services don’t receive them, said ODMHSAS Commissioner Terri White. “Part of that is due to stigma surrounding these issues, but much of it is due to a lack of services in Oklahoma geared toward children and youth.”

White said the importance of prevention and early intervention cannot be overstated. By bringing awareness to this issue, she said she hopes policy makers, community partners and families will work together to bring down these barriers.

“Oklahoma is slowly moving toward providing more behavioral health services to children and youth, and state agencies are working together to facilitate these efforts, but much more needs to be done,” she said.

“Mental health is an integral, critical part of overall health and of every outcome of life,” she said. “If we are going to improve the future of Oklahoma, we have to include Oklahoma’s children in that vision.”

In addition to White, a number of Oklahoma’s top children’s advocates also spoke at Thursday’s event, including Lt. Gov. Jari Askins; Dr. Mary Anne McAffree, professor of pediatrics at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and member of the Board of Trustees for the American Medical Association; several Oklahoma legislators; family members and young people who have been involved with treatment services.

To obtain a PDF version of the report, go to the ODMHSAS website at [www.odmhsas.org](http://www.odmhsas.org).

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*(Editor’s Note: Please see the attached highlights of the report.)*

## Highlights from the “State of the State” Report on Children’s Behavioral Health in Oklahoma

- The “Every Child Matters” Education Fund – which compared all 50 states on the basis of 10 key indicators of child well-being, including infant mortality, child poverty, child abuse fatalities and per-capita child welfare spending – ranks Oklahoma 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation for child well-being.
- More than 10 percent of Oklahoma youth ages 9-17 have a mental illness and an additional 10 percent have a substance abuse issue.
- An assessment of children in foster care found that more than 85 percent met the criteria for mental health disorders.
- Children and youth with untreated serious emotional disturbances are the least likely to graduate from high school, to vote, to live on their own and to find employment. They are also the most likely to be arrested.
- The lack of significant investment in early intervention in the mental health of Oklahoma’s children and youth is a major contributor to future mental health and substance abuse problems in Oklahoma adults.
- In Oklahoma, suicide is higher than the national average and the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-19.
- Nearly 60,000 Oklahoma children are being raised by their grandparents, because their parents are incarcerated, not able to mentally or physically care for their children, or are unavailable in some other way.
- Every year, more than 6,500 college and university students drop out of Oklahoma’s colleges and universities because of problems related to alcohol.
- Most adults with substance abuse addiction initiated their use as children, and Oklahomans start young. One out of every four high school students reported drinking alcohol before the age of 13 and one in 10 had tried marijuana.
- Children who begin drinking before age 15 are *five times* more likely to become alcoholics as adults than those who begin at 21, the legal drinking age.
- Like many physical health issues, avoiding or delaying appropriate behavioral health treatment only allows the disease to worsen. This requires more invasive and costly treatment options at a later point.
- The good news is this: Just as families routinely experience successful outcomes for the treatment of asthma or other medical diagnoses, mental health and substance abuse issues also can have successful outcomes with prevention services, early intervention or easily accessible treatment.
- The earlier an effective intervention can be introduced into a child’s life, the better the chance for averting negative outcomes now and in the future. Addressing the behavioral health needs of Oklahoma’s children and youth is imperative if our state is going to prosper and thrive.