



ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS IN OKLAHOMA: STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A CHANGING POLICY LANDSCAPE

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

On 14 February 2025, the Oklahoma Children of Incarcerated Parents (CIP) Advisory Committee convened to discuss the evolving challenges facing children with incarcerated parents. The committee's discussions were shaped by shifting political priorities, changes in policy positions, and fluctuations in funding streams. These shifts have created an environment of uncertainty and fear, particularly among vulnerable communities and the service providers who support them.

Oklahoma has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country, disproportionately impacting children who experience parental incarceration as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). Oklahoma ranks highest in the percentage of children with an ACE score of two or more, meaning that a significant portion of the state's youth are at increased risk for negative educational, social, and health outcomes. As such, urgent, coordinated action is needed to support these children and the service providers working on their behalf.

KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS & ACTION STRATEGIES

1. SYSTEMIC BARRIERS ARE DEEPENING—BUT STRATEGIC ADVOCACY CAN COUNTERACT THEM

THE CHALLENGE

- Funding cuts and economic instability are threatening programs and services that support CIP.
- Political shifts have made diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and broader social service funding more vulnerable.
- Service providers face increased bureaucratic and legislative hurdles that slow down critical interventions for CIP.
- The stigma surrounding CIP continues to limit public and policymaker support.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

- **Reframe the Narrative:** The committee must position CIP support as a nonpartisan issue, framing it as a matter of child well-being, public safety, and community resilience rather than a political debate. Include data wherever possible.
- **Policy Advocacy Through Coalition-Building:** Strengthen alliances with faith-based organizations, law enforcement, child welfare advocates, and bipartisan legislators to ensure broad support.
- **Local-Level Action:** Given federal-level inaction, efforts should focus on state and municipal policies that provide school-based and community-based solutions for CIP.
- **Crisis Response Infrastructure:** Develop contingency plans for sudden funding losses, including engaging private philanthropy and local businesses to fill gaps.

2. COLLABORATION IS THE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

THE CHALLENGE

- Service providers face burnout, resource scarcity, and bureaucratic obstacles that reduce their capacity to serve CIP effectively.
- There is fragmentation among service organizations, schools, and agencies, leading to duplication of efforts and missed opportunities.
- The absence of a coordinated statewide approach makes it difficult to address systemic challenges efficiently.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

- **Statewide CIP Network:** Continue to expand the CIP Advisory Committee collaborative that includes nonprofits, government agencies, educators, and mental health professionals to share best practices, coordinate services, and advocate collectively. Utilize CIP toolkit to support expansion.
- **Leverage Existing Infrastructure:** Strengthen school-based support programs, faith-based initiatives, and community centers as entry points for CIP services rather than building entirely new programs.
- **Streamline Service Coordination:** Improve cross-agency communication to reduce duplication and maximize impact.
- **Capacity-Building for Service Providers:** Secure additional funding for mental health and workforce resilience initiatives for those working with CIP.

3. DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES WILL STRENGTHEN LEGITIMACY AND FUNDING ACCESS

THE CHALLENGE

- Policymakers and funders are increasingly requiring measurable, evidence-based outcomes before committing resources.
- There is a lack of robust data collection to track the long-term impact of interventions for CIP.
- Without strong data, public and policymaker awareness remains low, making advocacy efforts more challenging.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

- **Implement Evidence-Based Practices:** Prioritize and scale proven interventions that improve school attendance, mental health, and social outcomes for CIP.
- **Data-Driven Policy Development:** Collect and analyze longitudinal data on CIP outcomes to build a compelling case for sustained funding and legislative action.
- **Public Awareness Through Data:** Use research-backed messaging to educate the public and decision-makers on the economic and social benefits of supporting CIP.
- **Pilot Programs with Measurable Outcomes:** Implement small-scale initiatives with built-in evaluation frameworks that can later be expanded and used to advocate for greater funding. Include qualitative data to capture the stories of CIP.

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR ACTION IN A CHALLENGING POLITICAL CLIMATE

To move forward effectively despite current political and funding challenges, this committee must adopt a four-pronged approach that prioritizes advocacy, collaboration, data-driven solutions, and caregiver well-being.

1. NONPARTISAN, CHILD-CENTERED MESSAGING

- Emphasize public safety, economic stability, and child well-being rather than politically divisive language.
- Work with trusted messengers (law enforcement, faith leaders, educators) to amplify CIP needs.

2. TACTICAL POLICY ENGAGEMENT AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

- Develop state-level policy recommendations for school-based interventions, family reunification efforts, and mental health support.
- Engage state legislators, municipal leaders, and advocacy organizations to push forward targeted initiatives.

- Focus on incremental, achievable wins, such as school-based mentorship programs or funding restorations for specific CIP-related services.

3. STRENGTHENING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

- Expand inter-agency partnerships to increase service efficiency and reduce provider burnout.
- Align efforts with juvenile justice reform, education equity, and workforce development initiatives.
- Establish a centralized database or knowledge-sharing platform to track CIP services and outcomes.

4. CARING FOR CAREGIVERS & SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Organize statewide service provider networking events to foster collaboration and provide professional support.
- Implement self-care and mental health initiatives to combat burnout among those working with CIP.
- Advocate for service provider funding and resources to prevent high turnover and maintain a high-quality workforce.

EXAMPLES OF TANGIBLE NEXT STEPS: INITIATING ACTION

To kickstart this initiative, the following concrete actions could be taken:

1. ORGANIZE A “DAY AT THE CAPITOL” FOR CIP ADVOCACY

- Bring service providers, affected families, and advocacy groups together to educate policymakers on the needs of CIP.
- Provide data, success stories, and legislative recommendations to state leaders.

2. HOST NETWORKING & RESPITE EVENTS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Create opportunities for peer learning, mental health support, and cross-agency collaboration.
- Provide self-care resources to help prevent burnout.

3. MAP OUT SERVICE PROVISION IN OKLAHOMA

- Conduct a statewide survey of service providers to identify who is serving where, what gaps exist, and how to coordinate efforts.

- Use this information to develop a comprehensive service coordination strategy.

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