

# OOCYS

empowering youth,  
families & communities

Dawn Carter | Reporter

Oklahoma faces significant challenges in ensuring the well-being of its youth. According to the 2024 KIDS COUNT Data Book, the state ranks 46th nationally in child well-being, with particularly low standings in education (49th) and health (45th). Alarming, 22% of high school students in Oklahoma have seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and 10% have attempted suicide. Additionally, one in eight children ages 3-17 have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression, reflecting a 15% increase from previous years. These statistics underscore the critical need for comprehensive support services for young people in the state.

In response to these pressing issues, the Okmulgee-Okfuskee County Youth Services (OOCYS) program stands as a beacon of hope, offering free, transformative services to youth and families in the region. With a dedicated team of educators, counselors and community coordinators, OOCYS is committed to fostering positive change and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Oklahoma's youth.

During a recent interview, I had the privilege of sitting with this remarkable team, and the collective dedication and heartfelt sincerity of their work left a deep impression on me. Each staff member brings their own expertise to the table, creating a unified force for positive change.

## A Multifaceted Approach to Community Care

The cornerstone of OOCYS is their comprehen-

sive programs designed to meet diverse needs. As Dr. Sherri Carter-Greene, the agency's Executive Director, explained: "We provide counseling, crisis intervention, school-based outreach, substance abuse prevention, protective parenting classes and our impactful 180 program, which is a diversion initiative for first-time offenders."

With programs tailored for children as young as three years old up to young adults age 19, OOCYS emphasizes prevention, education, and intervention. Amanda Thomas, coordinator for the "Successful Futures" program, noted, "I tailor my curriculum to each school's unique needs. Okmulgee schools face different challenges than Okemah schools. I work to ensure students get the tools they need to make positive choices, such as avoiding vaping or dealing with peer pressure."

## Molly Mabrey: Leading the 180 Program with Impact

One of the agency's most transformative programs is the 180 Program, a diversion program for first-time youth offenders. Molly Mabrey, who coordinates the program, explained its purpose: "The 180 Program is a one-time opportunity to reduce court fines and school suspensions. It focuses on building family systems, making smart choices, and addressing substance use."

Molly works closely with local courts and schools to receive referrals for the program. "A lot of our cases involve vaping or other behavioral issues," she shared. "The curriculum covers topics like communication, values, and even cultural identity. What's beautiful about it is that parents



Dr. Sherri Carter-Greene, OOCYS Executive Director

attend the sessions with their children, and it often leads to family healing. We've had kids who initially resisted the program leave with a new sense of purpose and gratitude."

She also reflected on success stories, such as one student who spoke to the Oklahoma Legislature about how the program changed her life. "She didn't want to participate at first, but by the end, she wrote a letter about how impactful the program was. She presented that letter at the Capitol, and today, she's graduated and thriving."

## Vickie Jones: Prevention Champion in Digital and Substance Abuse Awareness

Vickie Jones plays a vital role in addressing two major issues affecting today's youth: digital safety and substance abuse. As a prevention educator, she leads sessions on digital citizenship, online safety, bullying prevention, and substance use education.

Her work with digital citizenship covers everything from cyberbullying to catfishing and the dangers of sharing inappropriate images. "We teach kids how to be good digital citizens and recognize red flags when interacting online," Vickie explained. "Many of them don't realize that their digital footprint is permanent. We help them un-

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derstand how their online actions can have lasting consequences."

Vickie also leads the agency's efforts to combat the fentanyl crisis. "We're no longer just telling kids not to do drugs because they'll get addicted," she said. "Now, they need to know that one bad decision can be fatal. Fentanyl has changed the game." Through interactive lessons, she provides information about Narcan, its temporary effects, and the importance of immediate follow-up care.

### Portia Butler: Expanding Outreach

Portia Butler, Outreach Supervisor, brings nearly 27 years of experience to the team and emphasizes how prevention and education are the key to long-term change. "We focus on building relationships with families and schools," she said. Portia is also central to OOCYS's efforts to address bullying and cyberbullying through the Steps to Respect curriculum, which helps students learn how to stand firm against peer pressure. Back in the day, we'd just say 'no,' but today, kids need more tools to deal with social and digital pressures."

### Koltyn Morehead: New But Impactful

Though new to the team, Koltyn Morehead has already made an impression. As a receptionist in the Okemah office, Koltyn spoke about the joy of witnessing the team's work firsthand. "I get emotional seeing how all the team works together and the impact they're making," Koltyn said. "It's like food for the soul. Watching them come back from schools, knowing they helped someone, is heartwarming."

### A New Chapter in Okemah

In July, OOCYS expanded its reach with the opening of a new office in Okemah, providing even greater access to its life-changing programs. The new office, which officially opened on July 17th, is already making an impact through parenting classes, crisis counseling, and plans to rollout the 180 Program in the area. Kelly Furer, an education coordinator, has been instrumental in working with schools and expanding the protective parenting classes in Okemah. Jawanna Wheeler, one of the driving forces behind the new office, explained, "Kelly and I are in every school in Okfuskee County. We work closely with families referred to schools, DHS, or the court system." A core component of OOCYS's mission is educating parents about preventing child abuse. Jawanna-



Wheeler, who leads the agency's protective parenting program, explained: "We teach parents about body safety, communication, and how to build a prevention plan for their families. One of the most eye-opening lessons for parents is understanding how often abuse occurs within trusted relationships." She added, "We help families establish prevention measures, starting with proper names for body parts and regular check-ins with their children. These conversations are crucial for keeping kids safe."

Receptionist Roxanna Bell, who started when the office opened, shared her pride in being part of the expansion: "It's amazing to see what we're able to do here. When families come in, they leave knowing that someone cares and that there are resources to help them."

### Building Bridges in Schools

OOCYS has formed strong partnerships with 15 school districts, where its staff members provide programs ranging from life skills training to crisis response. Brad Wion, a community education coordinator, teaches life skills to over 200 students per week. "Sometimes, they just need someone to listen," he said. "I'm like a life coach for many of them, helping them build self-esteem and make better decisions."

The agency's quick response to community crises demonstrates its commitment. "When tragedies like the recent mass murder in Henryetta occur, we deploy crisis teams to support students and families," explained Dr. Carter-Greene. "We collaborate closely with schools to make sure no one feels alone."

### Revitalizing the Building to Enhance Services

Recent updates to OOCYS's main office have created a more comfortable and secure space for staff, clients, and visitors. The improvements include new lighting, security doors and monitors, a new roof, three new HVAC systems, and fresh paint throughout the building. Newly in-

stalled signs on the property proudly reflect the agency's commitment to visibility and growth.

Dr. Carter-Greene shared how the changes impact the team: "It's important for the environment to feel safe and welcoming, not just for our clients but for our staff, who are dealing with heavy emotional work. The upgrades have made a world of difference."

### Cindy Lane: The Glue That Holds It Together

Cindy Lane, who has been with the agency for 27 years, plays a vital administrative role in ensuring the team operates smoothly. As Dr. Carter-Greene's assistant, she handles everything from organizing schedules to providing administrative support during major crises. "I just try to keep everything flowing," Cindy said with a smile. Her long-standing experience has made her a trusted resource within the agency. "We're a family here. We collaborate and support each other, especially on the hard days. Everyone here is walking in their purpose."

New team member Shawna Morris, a licensed professional counselor, echoed this sentiment: "I've worked in behavioral health for 25 years, but

this is the most supportive, compassionate environment I've ever experienced."

### A Safe Space for All

For Dr. Carter-Greene, creating a peaceful, supportive environment is intentional. "Our work is heavy, but when you step into our office, it should feel like a refuge," she said. "We've worked hard to foster a culture of mutual support and spiritual grounding."

### Get Involved, Spread the Word

OOCYS provides all services free of charge, yet many in the community are still unaware of the life-changing resources available to them. "We want people to know we're here," said Dr. Carter-Greene. "Our doors are open to any child or family in need."

To learn more about Okmulgee-Okfuskee County Youth Services or to support their mission, visit their website at [OOCYS.org](http://OOCYS.org) or follow them on social media.

This article only scratches the surface of the incredible work being done by OOCYS, but one thing is clear: this team is making a profound difference, one life at a time. It's not just a program - it's a lifeline for our community.

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