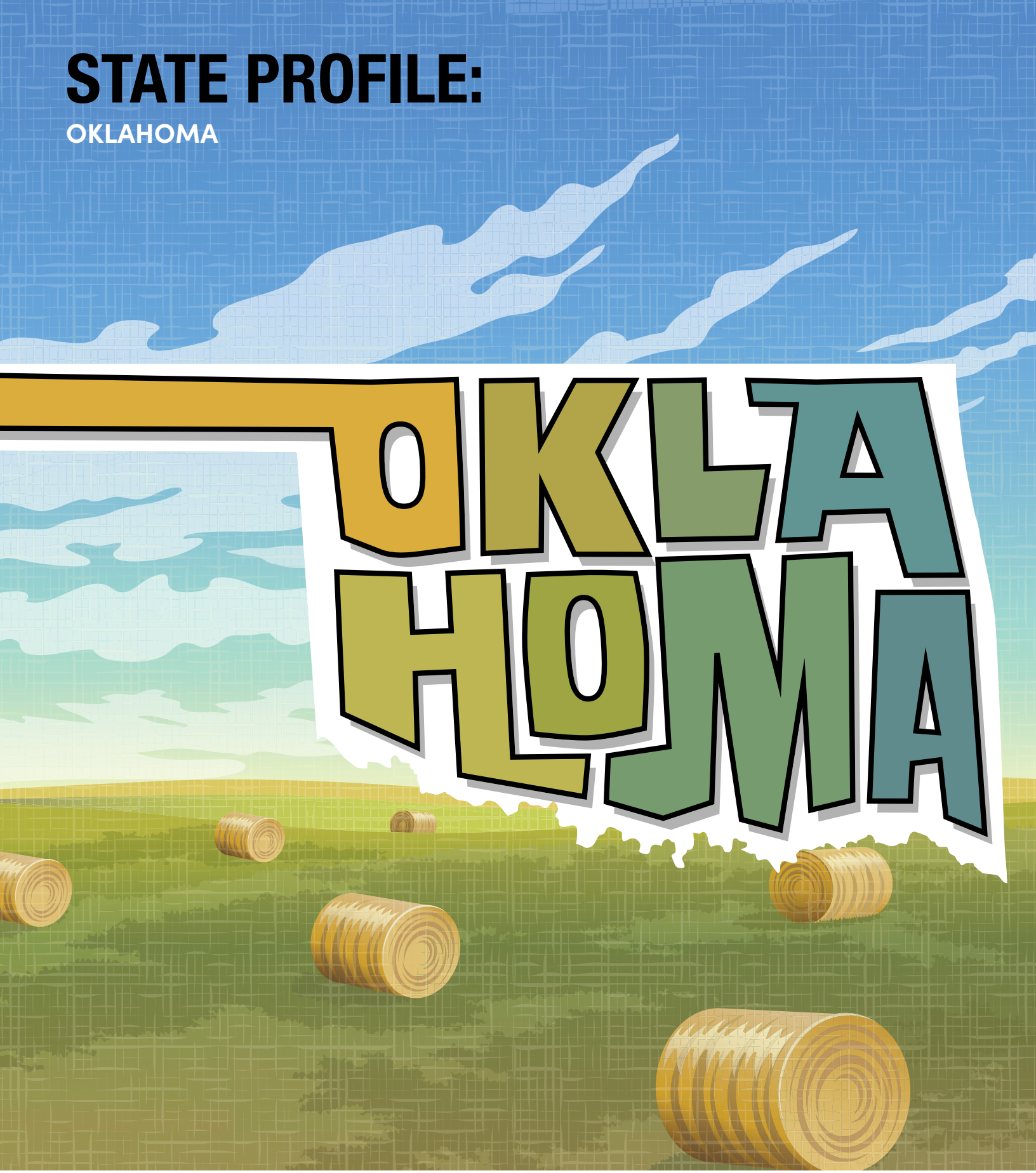


STATE PROFILE:

OKLAHOMA



OKLAHOMA

Using TANF Funds to Support Fathers: An NRFC Spotlight on Oklahoma Human Services¹

Azaliah Israel, Ph.D. and Nigel Vann | Fathers Incorporated

Introduction

This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) spotlight is part of an ongoing series of spotlights highlighting fatherhood work across states, including [Ohio](#), [West Virginia](#), [South Carolina](#), and Indiana [LINK TO BE ADDED]. The previously published spotlights have shown how federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds have been used in various ways to support fatherhood programming, including direct grants or contracts with community programs or intermediary organizations, initiatives to better engage fathers in Family Support Center support programs, and fee-for-service support services provided by community programs in partnership with local child welfare offices.

To demystify the process for using TANF funds to support fatherhood programming, and serve as a resource for other states, this spotlight highlights how Oklahoma Human Services has used TANF funds and other state and federal funds to work with community service providers to strengthen families by engaging and supporting fathers.

Specifically, this spotlight:

- 1** Details early milestones in the state's rich history of using TANF funds to support and engage fathers, recognizing their vital role in child development and family stability.
- 2** Explains how TANF funding has been provided through Oklahoma Human Services for two concurrent funding cycles (April 2023 to April 2026 and December 2024 to December 2027) for 20 fatherhood programs in various locations around the state.
- 3** Highlights the roles of Oklahoma Human Services and an independent contractor, Public Strategies, in providing ongoing oversight and assistance to 20 fatherhood contractors.
- 4** Provides a detailed look at how five of the grantee organizations are engaging and supporting fathers in their local communities.
- 5** Details three key themes across the five programs and discusses takeaways from the work of Oklahoma Human Services and its partners.

¹ Suggested citation: Israel, A. & Vann, N. (2025). Using TANF Funds to Support Fathers: An NRFC Spotlight on Oklahoma Human Services. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. LINK TO BE ADDED

1. OKLAHOMA'S EARLY USE OF TANF FUNDS TO SUPPORT FATHERHOOD WORK

With leadership from Oklahoma Human Services and Public Strategies, a professional services firm based in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was one of the first states to realize that fatherhood work has a direct correlation with some, if not all, of TANF's four statutory goals,² which dictate that TANF funds must be used to:

- 1 Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.
- 2 Promote job preparation, work, and marriage.
- 3 Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies.
- 4 Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Oklahoma's TANF-supported fatherhood efforts have been intentionally designed to meet goals 3 and 4 by providing relational, parental, and economic tools to reduce unplanned pregnancies and strengthen two-parent family foundations.

– Rhonda Archer, TANF Programs Administrator, Oklahoma Human Services

In 1999, the state used a \$10 million surplus in TANF funds to launch the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative and provide marriage support services statewide. The goal of this initiative is to strengthen families and reduce divorce and nonmarital childbearing rates. By supporting marriage to strengthen families, the initiative also aimed to increase father involvement and ultimately served as a precursor to the later role of TANF funds supporting father-specific work in the state.

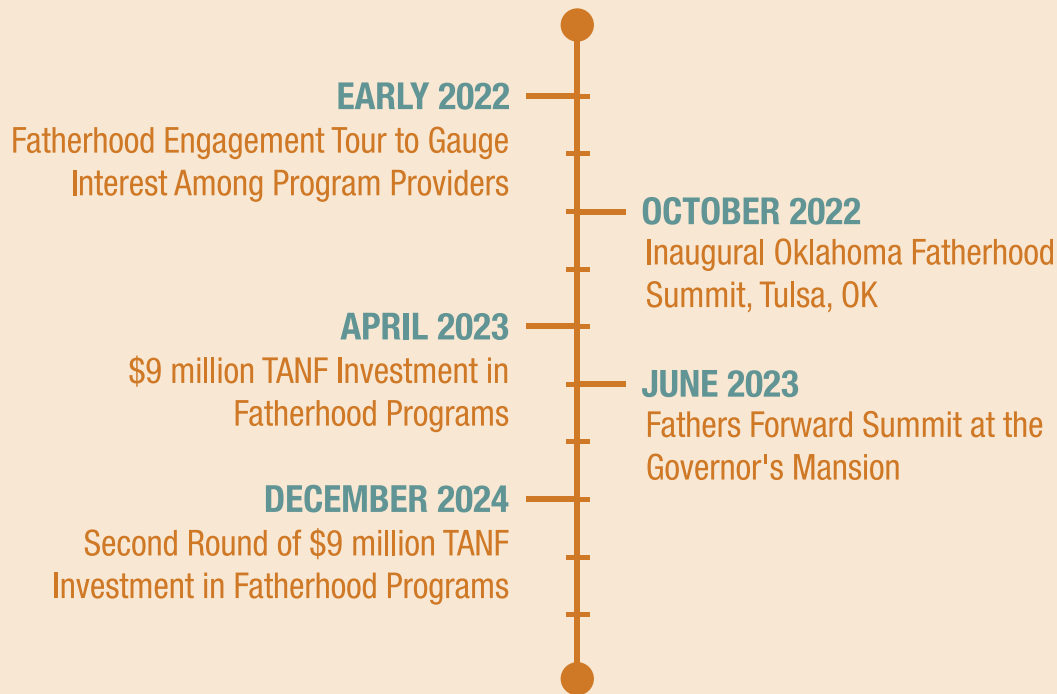
From 2014 to 2015 a fatherhood-specific pilot program, Project Relate extended the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative services to individuals, fathers, and divorcing couples. The pilot program focused on nurturing healthy relationships and marriages. Since 2015, TRUE Dads, a program operated by Public Strategies as a continuation and extension of that pilot project, has provided parenting and relationship education along with tools and resources to help fathers in Oklahoma City build strong relationships with their children. The program is supported by Oklahoma Human Services TANF funding and has also received Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants from the federal Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in their last two funding cycles (2015–2020 and 2020–2025).

More recently in 2023 and 2024, Oklahoma Human Services has twice invested \$9 million in TANF funding to implement and support fatherhood-related services in 20 counties across the state in rural, urban, and suburban areas.

² [Govregs.com](https://govregs.com) (2024)



2. BROADENING THE SCOPE OF FATHERHOOD SERVICES WITH TANF FUNDS



FATHERHOOD ENGAGEMENT TOUR

During the **early months of 2022**, and in partnership with Oklahoma Human Services, Public Strategies deployed a team of fatherhood researchers and practitioners to conduct community conversations around the state and identify organizations interested in providing services to engage and support fathers. As a follow-up to this activity, Public Strategies hosted a two-day training in June 2022 to enhance program providers' skills in serving fathers. Attendees received training on how to facilitate two popular fatherhood curricula: On My Shoulders and 24/7 Dads®.³

INAUGURAL OKLAHOMA FATHERHOOD SUMMIT

In **October 2022**, community leaders hosted the state's first [Fatherhood Summit](#) in Tulsa. The goal was to educate and empower fathers and offer suggestions for organizations and programs interested in providing support for fathers. Shortly after this summit, officials at Oklahoma Human Services announced their pending investment in fatherhood programs and solicited funding applications through a competitive bid process. A request for proposals was released, and Oklahoma Human Services Secretary Justin Brown hosted a podcast episode highlighting the announcement.

³ All current Oklahoma Human Services fatherhood contractors are now using either On My Shoulders or 24/7 Dads curricula.

FIRST \$9 MILLION TANF INVESTMENT IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

In **April 2023**, Oklahoma Human Services [announced an investment of \\$9 million in TANF funding](#) to implement and support fatherhood-related services across the state. After a competitive bid process, contracts were awarded for 10 programs to serve fathers for up to three years at a maximum amount of \$300,000. Nine of these programs are operated by Oklahoma State University's Cooperative Extension (in Carter, Creek, Garfield, Kay, Muskogee, Oklahoma, Payne, Rogers, and Tulsa counties), and one program is operated by the University of Oklahoma in Cleveland county.

FATHERS FORWARD SUMMIT AT THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION

In **June 2023**, Governor Kevin Stitt and officials at the Oklahoma Human Services hosted the [Fathers Forward Summit](#) at the Governor's Mansion to celebrate and strategize continued development of fatherhood initiatives, emphasizing the importance of fathers in family life. During the summit, Governor Stitt expressed his vision to make Oklahoma "the most pro-family state in the nation" by implementing fatherhood-specific services and fostering a culture where every family member is respected and included.

SECOND ROUND OF \$9 MILLION TANF INVESTMENT IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

The availability of a second round of funding was announced in October 2024, and in **December 2024** another 10 three-year program contracts were awarded to six more nonprofit organizations to provide fatherhood services in 10 more counties. LIFT Community Action Agency and Circle of Care are each operating three programs in three counties; the Girl Scouts of Eastern Oklahoma, Youth Services of Bryan County, Youth Family Services of Canadian County, and Community Renewal are each working in one county.



The fatherhood landscape in Oklahoma is strengthened by our Governor's leadership. Conferences and networking have helped to shape the vision for fatherhood programs in the state.



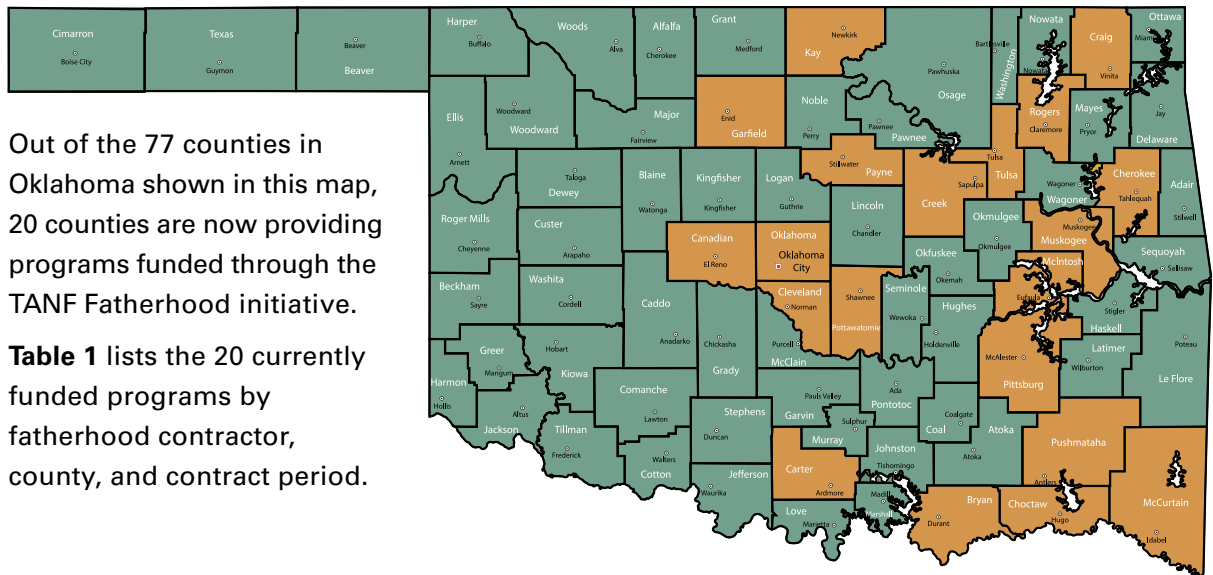
– Flynn Mason, TANF Program Manager, Oklahoma Human Services

The Importance of State Leadership in TANF Policy Implementation

States have broad discretion in how they use TANF funds, which leads to key differences in policy implementation and service delivery. State level leadership, with strong support from the Governor, has been instrumental in the sustainability of fatherhood initiatives in Oklahoma.

I believe one of the best preventers of poverty is a married mom and dad in the home. That's why Oklahoma is investing in programs like Fathers Forward and so many other family-oriented programs. As a father, husband, and as governor, I firmly believe that fatherhood is an important and often overlooked piece of the puzzle in our society today.

– Kevin Stitt, Oklahoma Governor



Out of the 77 counties in Oklahoma shown in this map, 20 counties are now providing programs funded through the TANF Fatherhood initiative.

Table 1 lists the 20 currently funded programs by fatherhood contractor, county, and contract period.

Table 1. TANF Investment in Oklahoma
Oklahoma Human Services Fatherhood Contractors

Contractor	Number of Awards	Counties Represented	Contract Period
Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension	9	Carter, Creek, Garfield, Kay, Muskogee, Oklahoma, Payne, Rogers, Tulsa	2023–2026
University of Oklahoma	1	Cleveland	2023–2026
LIFT Community Action Agency	3	Choctaw, McCurtain, Pushmataha	2024–2027
Youth Services of Bryan County	1	Bryan	2024–2027
Youth Family Services of Canadian County	1	Canadian	2024–2027
Circle of Care	3	Cherokee, McIntosh, Pittsburg	2024–2027
Community Renewal	1	Pottawatomie	2024–2027
Girl Scouts of Eastern Oklahoma	1	Craig	2024–2027
20 awards		20 counties	

3. SUPPORTING CONTRACTORS AFTER FUNDING AWARDS

Oklahoma Human Services staff are providing support for the contractors throughout each of the three-year grant periods. Contract monitors are assigned to each contracted organization, and group contractor meetings are scheduled on a regular basis. Oklahoma Human Services staff also help facilitate training and technical assistance opportunities where contractors receive regular individual and group-based training in various program implementation areas.

In addition, each fatherhood contractor also receives ongoing support and technical assistance from Public Strategies to enhance their success in implementing and evaluating funded fatherhood services. Specifically, contractors receive tips on how to develop marketing campaigns and materials that effectively convey messages to target audiences, strategic planning to enhance organizational capabilities, and project oversight to ensure effective implementation of initiatives.



4. PROGRAM SERVICES: HIGHLIGHTS FROM FIVE PROGRAMS

The size and scope of the 20 Oklahoma TANF-funded programs vary relative to their location and the communities they serve. Because Oklahoma is one of the most rural states in the United States (in 2023, 35.8 percent of Oklahoma’s population lived in rural areas, compared to a national average around 20 percent⁴), many of the programs are based in rural areas. When fatherhood programs in these rural areas are also serving incarcerated fathers, additional complex interrelated challenges are likely.

To shed light on the challenges faced by fathers in these diverse communities and learn more about the services available to help them, NRFC staff conducted virtual visits with organizational representatives from five of the programs—four programs from the most recent cohort (funded December 2024–December 2027) and one program from the first cohort (funded April 2023–April 2026). In attendance were organizational leaders, project directors, program managers, case managers, outreach and recruitment staff, curriculum facilitators, and previous program participants recently promoted to full-time and part-time staff members.

“The top challenges fathers face in our state include lack of father figures, coparenting while on TANF, rural isolation, and navigating systems.”

– Flynn Mason, TANF Program Manager, Oklahoma Human Services



“We realized that if our goal is to reunify families, foster care was not a solution – it was an outcome. Once we asked ourselves the question of how we could work to reunify families, it was a natural progression shifting into fatherhood services.”

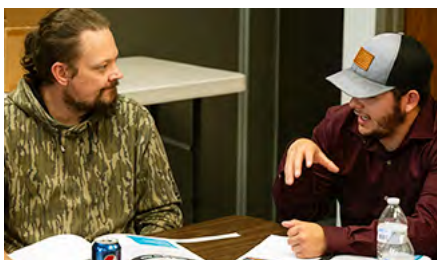
– Keith Howard, CEO,
Circle of Care

01 Circle of Care Fathers Empowered

Based in Oklahoma City, [Circle of Care](#) serves fathers in nine sites across three counties (Cherokee, McIntosh, and Pittsburg). Originally founded in 1917 as an orphanage, this program has focused on foster care in recent years and now offers a program for single mothers. With the fatherhood TANF funding, they have expanded to serve fathers as part of the whole family.

Circle of Care’s [Fathers Empowered](#) program is designed to help dads expand their access to resources, such as life skills, parenting knowledge, family relationship dynamics, and community networking. They seek to create a meaningful support network for fathers and their families. The program provides group sessions using the 24/7 Dad curriculum along with case management support for job readiness and everyday needs. Outreach and referrals are through local high schools, churches, and counseling centers. Participants are typically 25 to 34 years of age. Although the majority of fathers are married, the program also serves some noncustodial fathers.

³ Data from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1-Year Dataset, 2023



EveryDay Dads is for everyday guys who want the best for their kids. When a father is at his best, his kids do better. Their mother does better. Their family does better. Their community does better.

– Everyday Dads webpage

TESTIMONIALS FROM EVERYDAY DADS ALUMNI:

- “The opportunity to get to know and learn from other dads is priceless.”
- “I gained confidence, and I gained respect for my kids’ feelings.”

02 Community Renewal

EveryDay Dads

Based in the county seat of Shawnee, [Community Renewal](#) serves fathers in Pottawatomie County. The program’s work is based on the belief that communities rest on a foundation of relationships and the health of those relationships defines the outcomes of those communities. The organization operates “Friendship Houses” in two under-resourced areas to identify caring people in the community, connect them to one another to build trusting and supportive relationships, and equip them with the tools to develop healthy, caring relationships throughout their community.

Community Renewal offers fatherhood services through the [EveryDay Dads](#) program, which works with fathers using the On My Shoulders curriculum in 7-week and 14-week formats. Because many of the dads live in rural areas, case management services are provided online through an app. Through the app, participants can converse with assigned case managers on various topics, discuss challenges, and receive referrals. The program serves a diverse and youthful population significantly represented by American Indian and Alaska Native residents. On the second Saturday of every month, the program offers an alumni breakfast from 9 to 10:30 a.m. This gives program alumni the opportunity to stay in touch and support each other, while other dads can also attend to meet program graduates, learn about EveryDay Dads, and ask questions.



CORE Dad is a movement of empowerment, where fathers discover, embrace, and amplify their full potential. We provide a community where dads connect, share experiences, and grow together. CORE Dad is for every dad ready to connect, grow, and thrive.

– Core Dads webpage

03 LIFT Community Action Agency

Core Dad

[LIFT Community Action Agency](#) serves three counties (Choctaw, McCurtain, and Pushmataha) that are among the 10 poorest counties in Oklahoma. The organization was established in 1968 to improve self-sufficiency among low-income families. The LIFT [Core Dad](#) program is part of a Strong Fathers movement to empower dads in the three county areas. The TANF funding has allowed them to transition from a father-friendly approach to a father-focused approach. Previously, they had focused on father-friendly strategies such as hosting a Head Start “Dad’s Day” to engage dads. With the new funding, the program can now provide direct father-focused services for community fathers and incarcerated fathers (at least half of whom were jailed as a result of substance use issues). Many of the fathers served are of Native American descent.

The program uses the 24/7 Dad curriculum for group work. Community fathers attend one workshop a week at local community centers, and incarcerated participants attend two workshops a week. Referrals come from local county jails, the Choctaw Nation, Family Resource Center, Healthy Start, and Work Ready Oklahoma. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has its own reintegration program that offers treatment planning, case management, and referral assistance to tribal members who have been incarcerated. The Nation also refers fathers to LIFT for parenting education and employment assistance.



04 Youth Services of Bryan County

Fathers in Action

"Don't be afraid to go into the 'dark' places. Places like sober living houses, correctional facilities, low-income housing projects, and tribal courts are filled with men who would appreciate these services."

- Stefan Roberts,
Project Director,
Fathers in Action Network

[Youth Services of Bryan County](#) is based in Durant, which is also the headquarters of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. The organization started out as a youth shelter before becoming a community action center with counseling and employment programming for community-based youth and youth in residential facilities. The new TANF funding now enables the program to work more directly with fathers through their [Fathers in Action Network](#), a 6-week program designed to strengthen and empower dads to be powerful role models and mentors for the betterment of their children's futures. Workshops for community fathers are provided using the 24/7 Dad curriculum with two 2-hour sessions a week. The organization offers child care, transportation, meals, and gift cards as incentives to enable participation.

Services are also provided online for incarcerated fathers in collaboration with the local county jail. According to fatherhood program staff, both organizations have been strategic about finding and supporting "forgotten" fathers in their communities. Incarcerated fathers who participate actively in the program are rewarded with time off their sentencing for participating in the program. These fathers receive a day-for day-credit for each class they attend. As a staff member noted, *"This is a useful incentive and a long-term investment for public safety."* Besides offering the motivating prospect of early prison release as a tangible, immediate benefit, program participation also supports rehabilitation goals such as a reduced likelihood of reoffending.





05 Oklahoma State University (OSU) Cooperative Extension

Core Dad

"I was invited to join a fathers' group. I already have five kids so didn't think I needed a group, but once I joined I realized I was wrong. I embraced the connection with other dads and got the passion to get more involved as a facilitator."

– Eric Garza, Strong Dads Payne County

"I participated in a coparenting class, which inspired me to join a fatherhood class led by Aleshia [a program coordinator]. I got so much out of both experiences, that I also participated in a second class and have been coming back to help and speak with other dads ever since."

– Austin Freeman, Strong Dads Oklahoma County

Based in Stillwater, [Oklahoma State University \(OSU\) Cooperative Extension](#) provides and oversees programs in nine counties (Carter, Creek, Garfield, Kay, Muskogee, Oklahoma, Payne, Rogers, and Tulsa) through local extension offices in each county. As a land grant university, OSU is charged with serving rural and underserved communities through teaching, research, and extension outreach. They have offered a *Coparenting for Resilience* class to help children of divorce in each of Oklahoma's 77 counties for more than 30 years. These classes provide a powerful source of recruitment for OSU's [Strong Dads](#) fatherhood program. Other recruitment partners vary from county to county; some programs work with local prisons to recruit dads returning to the community.

Strong Dads is a 12-week fatherhood program utilizing the 24/7 Dad curriculum and designed to equip fathers with self-awareness, compassion, and a sense of responsibility. Participants include married, noncustodial, and nonresidential fathers. To ensure that the program is available for all, workshops are provided at convenient community locations, including churches, libraries, and halfway houses. Strong Dads also offers a Spanish language class and now employs two previous program participants as field coordinators. Incentives for continued participation are offered and can total up to \$220 per person, including gas cards for transportation and Walmart cards for completing survey forms at three program stages (pre-participation, midway, and after program completion).

Moving into the third year of operation, the program also has some preliminary outcome data. For instance, although quantitative surveys have shown a low impact on self-efficacy, the responses of fathers in qualitative interviews may indicate a more positive outcome: several dads mentioned they realized how much they did not know prior to joining the program and new participants mentioned more frequently than other participants that word-of-mouth was their reason for joining the program, which indicates the role that program alumni can play in recruiting fathers.

5. KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

The following three common themes emerged from the virtual conversations NRFC staff had on virtual calls with organizational representatives from the above-featured programs:

1. A focus on services for rural fathers.

- Due to geographic isolation, limited job opportunities, transportation barriers, cultural barriers, and the digital divide (i.e., lack of reliable internet services), rural communities are difficult to serve.
- Many fathers served in rural communities are currently or have been incarcerated, which compounds their challenges and the issues programs need to address.
- By employing local staff with deep knowledge of—and ties to—the community, programs can better engage with rural dads, understand their challenges, and help them find solutions.

2. Organizational mission realignment.

- Although most of these programs served fathers in an indirect capacity in the past, several program staff noted that the new TANF funding allowed them to transition from a father-friendly approach (designed for families broadly) to a father-focused approach (centered around fatherhood identity, development, and barriers).
- Most programs underscored how TANF funding had enabled them to expand their mission. LIFT staff explained how a community assessment process helped them develop more father-focused services. Youth Services of Bryan County have expanded their services to include fathers. Circle of Care has benefited from already evolving plans to better serve whole families. OSU has built on lessons learned from their long-running coparenting programs.

3. Alumni engagement.

- Engaging alumni can be an effective method to enhance participants' experience, provide opportunities for continued engagement and growth, and help recruit new participants.
- Alumni engagement can foster long-term support, accountability, and improved community relationships for programs—all are essential for maintaining positive change.
- Several programs mentioned they are creating opportunities for committed program alumni to transition to roles as program staff.

ORGANIZATIONAL MISSION REALIGNMENT

“Father-Friendly” to “Father-Focused”

Nonprofit organizations often need to revisit and refine their mission to stay aligned with evolving goals, community needs, and circumstances. The recent investment of TANF funding has helped program contractors better meet the needs of families in their communities.

Rather than using *father-friendly* approaches to engage dads in services not originally designed for them, *father-focused* programs can more intentionally engage and support fathers.

Father-focused programs are specifically designed for fathers.

Their mission, services, and outcomes revolve around engaging, supporting, and empowering fathers.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP PIPELINES AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR SUPPORTING FATHERHOOD

Alumni engagement can turn a short-term intervention into a lifelong network of growth, impact, and resilience. Sustained engagement not only strengthens individual fathers but also builds leadership pipelines and community capacity for supporting fatherhood.

A recent initiative, the [National Responsible Fatherhood Alliance](#) funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, is creating career pathways for fatherhood participants to transition into fatherhood practitioners. Following this national model, programs in Oklahoma have also sought to create employment opportunities for exemplary former participants. Community Renewal (EveryDay Dads) plans to hire a peer mentor out of the pool of applicants who complete their program, and OSU Extension (Strong Dads) employs two previous program participants as field coordinators.



CONCLUSION

Although every U.S. state operates under the same guidelines for TANF policy, states vary significantly in how they design and deliver their TANF programs. This NRFC Spotlight shows how Oklahoma has decided to deploy some of their TANF funds to meet two key goals of the TANF program (preventing and reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families) by providing relational, parental, and economic tools to reduce unplanned pregnancies and strengthen two-parent family foundations.

As the federal funding landscape changes in response to changing community needs and new administrative priorities, nonprofit based fatherhood programs will need to leverage state-based partnerships to continue to respond to community needs. Until recently, TANF agencies

were an untapped resource for fatherhood programs. Recent data suggests that may be changing in the right direction. The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network reports an uptick in the number of states utilizing TANF funds to support fatherhood and family formation and to maintain two-parent families.⁵ A continued trend may lead to long-term fatherhood engagement that could enhance child and family well-being, increase families' economic self-sufficiency, and decrease the number of families participating in TANF.

The spotlights in this series are meant to provide context and inspiration for the fatherhood field as programs work together to achieve mutual goals. They also provide examples of how states have the flexibility to tailor their use of TANF funding to local needs, while enabling national goals to be pursued in diverse ways.



⁵The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network reports that TANF funds were used to support fatherhood programs and the maintenance of two-parent families in 14 states in fiscal year 2022. These states were Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Utah. Since 2022, more states, including West Virginia and Indiana, are using TANF funds to support fatherhood programs and the maintenance of two-parent families.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

For More Information on Fatherhood Work in Oklahoma:

- [October 2022 Inaugural Fatherhood Summit](#)
- [June 2023 Fathers Forward Summit](#)
- [April 2023 Oklahoma Human Services Funding Announcement](#)

NRFC Resources:

- [Using TANF Funds to Support Fathers: An NRFC Spotlight on the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood](#)
- [Building Supports for Fathers in West Virginia: 2024 Technical Assistance Report](#)
- [Spotlight on South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families](#)
- [Leveraging Leadership and System Change Innovation for Fatherhood Program Sustainability](#)
- [Ensuring Fatherhood Program Sustainability: Seven Tips From the Field](#)

See also:

- [TANF and MOE Spending on Fatherhood in FY 2022 Remains Extremely Limited](#) (Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, 2024)

This brief was developed by Azaliah Israel, Ph.D. and Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated) on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Flynn Mason (Oklahoma Human Services), Rhonda Archer (Oklahoma Human Services), Andrew Freeberg (Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota), Paige Thompson (Urban Institute), and Dina Israel (MDRC) reviewed the document and provided helpful feedback and suggestions.

Suggested citation: Israel, A. & Vann, N. (2025). *Using TANF Funds to Support Fathers: An NRFC Spotlight on Oklahoma Human Services*. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

LINK TO BE ADDED