


OKLAHOMA COUNTY
**CRIMINAL
JUSTICE**
ADVISORY COUNCIL

Oklahoma County Criminal Justice
Advisory Council
Annual Report to Interlocal Partners

Seventh Annual Report for the FY 2024-2025
July 2025



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MEMBERS OF THE OKLAHOMA COUNTY CRIMINAL JUSTICE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Vicki Behenna, Chairperson, (District Attorney of Oklahoma County)

Brigitte Biffle, Vice-Chairperson, (Chief Public Defender of Oklahoma County)

Sue Ann Arnall, Second Community Representative

Ron Bacy, Chief of Police of Oklahoma City

Sanford Coats, Greater Oklahoma City Chamber Representative

Craig Freeman, City Manager of Oklahoma City

Christy Gillenwater, President & CEO of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber

Mankinta Holloway, Court Administrator of Oklahoma City

Judge Philippa James, Presiding Judge of Oklahoma City Municipal Court

Sheriff Tommie Johnson III, Oklahoma County

Rev. Theodis Manning, Fourth Community Representative

Brian Maughan, Oklahoma County Commissioner

Judge Richard Ogden, Presiding Judge of Oklahoma County District Court

Tony Tyler, First Community Representative

Retired Rear Admiral Gregory Slavonic, Interim Commissioner of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Dan Straughan, Third Community Representative

Rick Warren, Court Clerk of Oklahoma County

Police Chief JD Younger, City of Edmond Designee

Melissa Walton, Executive Director

Amy K. Simpson, City Clerk for OKC, Secretary

Cole Marshall, General Counsel McAfee & Taft

BACKGROUND

In response to the growing concerns about chronic overcrowding in Oklahoma County's jail facility, the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber announced the creation of a special task force to evaluate Oklahoma County's criminal justice system in December 2015. With collaboration and input from a diverse group of community members, the Chamber contracted with the Vera Institute of Justice to complete an initial analysis and make recommendations for reform of the Oklahoma County criminal justice system. Vera released their recommendations in December 2016. As a central recommendation of the report, an interlocal agreement between Oklahoma County, the City of Oklahoma City, the City of Edmond and the City of Midwest City created the Oklahoma County Criminal Justice Advisory Council (CJAC) in November 2017. The Advisory Council continued to evolve with the hiring of a full-time executive director in February 2018 to provide support to the CJAC's efforts. The creation of this permanent oversight body is key to implementing the proposed criminal justice reforms which can be summarized in these six key recommendations:

- Create oversight and accountability mechanisms for the local justice system.
- Reduce jail admissions for municipal violations and low level misdemeanors.
- Create a fair and efficient pretrial release process that safely reduces unnecessary pretrial incarceration.
- Identify and address district court case processing delays that increase jail admissions and length of stay.
- Expand meaningful diversion program options, focusing on those with mental illness and substance abuse disorders.
- Reduce the impact of justice system fines and fees as a driver of jail growth and recidivism.

Although each of the six recommendations carries numerous challenges and barriers to improvement, the good news is that because of the cooperative effort of the Advisory Council's stakeholders, progress continues to be made on all six recommendations.

CJAC completed its seventh full fiscal year on June 30, 2025, further advancing the mission to make Oklahoma County's justice system fairer and more effective. The year was marked by major leadership transitions, including new executive leadership and a turnover in the council chairs. Thanks to several long-held partnerships, bold progress in diversion programs has helped create paths to stability for folks without financial resources and those struggling with

substance use disorders. These strong partnerships and the new phase of folks at the helm of the council is evidence of the stability CJAC has created in the over seven years of collaboration. Many years into this ongoing effort to improve the justice system, CJAC remains committed to bold, data-driven solutions, knowing that progress requires vigilance, innovation, and a shared determination to build on a strong foundation.

A NEW CHAPTER OF LEADERSHIP AND REFORM

MELISSA WALTON APPOINTED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CJAC

In a significant leadership transition, the Oklahoma County Criminal Justice Advisory Council (CJAC) named Melissa Walton as its new Executive Director, marking only the second person to hold the role in the council's history. This appointment signals both a continuity of purpose and a renewed commitment to reform.

Bringing more than 15 years of experience in organizational leadership, public policy, diversion programming, and justice reform, Walton is uniquely qualified to lead CJAC into its next phase. Her prior role as strategic director of the Oklahoma County Treatment Courts saw the expansion of rehabilitative alternatives to incarceration, particularly for veterans and individuals with a history of substance use and mental health disorders. Before that, she served as Director of Community Engagement at ReMerge, a nationally recognized diversion program focused on women and families affected by the justice system.

Walton assumes this role following the tenure of founding director Timothy Tardibono, whose leadership helped establish CJAC as a key convener in the county's efforts to reduce incarceration and promote more equitable outcomes.



Walton's diverse background across systems-level strategy and therapeutic court programming positions her to carry forward CJAC's mission of transforming justice outcomes through data-informed, collaborative solutions. Her leadership will be critical as CJAC continues to advise on the development of the new Oklahoma County Detention Center and mental health treatment center, with the Vera Institute recommendations at the center of our progress.

THE FUTURE OF OUR JUSTICE SYSTEM

Looking ahead, Walton outlined a forward-thinking agenda designed to deepen CJAC's understanding of the human impact of justice system policies. The Council plans to pursue studies evaluating the financial burden of court fines and fees on families and conduct updated evaluations of treatment availability for opioid-dependent defendants. This new data could refine CJAC's continued judicial training on the socioeconomic factors influencing justice involvement and behavioral health needs. These initiatives could not only improve outcomes for justice-involved individuals but also drive future policy making by providing more accurate data and insight.

Additionally, Walton will broaden CJAC's partnerships with community-based providers, mental health advocates, and public health experts. Prioritizing mental health support and advancing evidence-based practices positions CJAC as a model for systems-level coordination, reform and strengthening public safety through prevention.

With Melissa Walton at the helm, CJAC enters a new era defined by rigor, compassion, and a clear-eyed vision for system-wide transformation. Please join the council in welcoming her, reach out to discuss partnerships and follow CJAC's work by subscribing to the newsletter and following on social media.



Oklahoma County Criminal
Justice Advisory Council



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COUNCIL MEMBERS, OLD AND NEW

DISTRICT ATTORNEY AND LEAD PUBLIC DEFENDER APPOINTED CJAC CHAIR AND CO-CHAIR

In further leadership evolution, this year, Oklahoma County District Attorney Vicki Behenna was appointed CJAC chair and Chief Public Defender Brigitte Biffle was appointed co-chair. This partnership is a powerful gesture of alignment from both sides of the criminal justice system. The county D.A. and P.D. have always served together on the council, and now, as leaders, together at the table, they have exceptional potential to better utilize sentencing alternative policies to drive down incarceration.

Behenna was elected in 2023, and her service has been marked by outspoken advocacy for a fairer, more effective justice system that protects everyone in our community. With decades of experience, from prosecuting high-profile cases to leading the Innocence Project, she leads with accountability and compassion. Her appointment to CJAC chair comes at a pivotal moment to build on current momentum for mental health treatment as key to breaking the cycle of crime.

Biffle was appointed as Chief Public Defender in early 2024, after the passing of Bob Ravitz, who had served in the role for 35 years. A longtime advocate for justice, Biffle expanded treatment courts and pushed for smarter pretrial reforms. Her work expands beyond the courtroom; her office has already helped hundreds of Oklahoma County residents clear low-level warrants throughout her tenure. Her work emphasizes supporting clients in turning their lives around, making her a fantastic fit for our council.



LONG-TIME MEMBERS' ROLES EVOLVE

Behenna and Biffle succeeded previous chair Clay Bennett and co-chair Tony Tyler. The two had served since the launch of the Criminal Justice Advisory Council in 2017, and have worked hard for

the past near decade to influence the community for the better. Bennett has left the council and Tyler will continue to serve, now as a community representative.

Judge Philippa C. James retired this summer, after 28 years of service. Judge James acted as one of the founding council members for CJAC, and we are sincerely grateful for her guidance and insights. She began her career in 1997 when the Oklahoma City Council appointed her a Municipal Judge over the juvenile docket. She was appointed Oklahoma City Municipal Court Presiding Judge in 2013. A champion of criminal justice reform, she led initiatives like Community Court, fostered partnerships with service agencies, and helped implement warrant reforms focused on fairness and transparency.



Their commitment to a more efficient and fair justice system helped motivate public support, forge effective partnerships throughout the system, and has no doubt facilitated a second chance for

many individuals involved in the justice system. CJAC is grateful for the service of all three of these distinguished council members.

HIDDEN WORKFORCE SUMMIT

In October 2024, the Oklahoma County Criminal Justice Advisory Council, in partnership with the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber, hosted its largest and most impactful event of the year, the Hidden Workforce Summit. This convening brought together employers, HR professionals, workforce development leaders, and criminal justice reform advocates for a serious and solutions-driven dialogue on fair chance hiring.



fair chance hiring [*fer chans HAHY-er-ing*], noun

1. An employment practice that provides individuals with criminal justice involvement an equitable opportunity to compete for jobs by reducing barriers related to past convictions. It promotes evaluating candidates based on qualifications and potential rather than criminal history. Designed to reduce recidivism and expand workforce participation, fair chance hiring fosters inclusion, and economic stability.

The summit was designed to educate and equip employers with the tools to hire individuals who have been involved in the justice system, recognizing employment as the most significant factor in reducing recidivism. Research shows that people with criminal records who gain stable employment are far less likely to return to custody—and more likely to build productive, lasting careers.

Attendees heard from business leaders who have implemented fair chance practices and reaped the rewards, including higher retention rates and stronger team cohesion. JPMorgan Chase executive David Emerick delivered a keynote stressing that hiring justice-involved individuals is not charity—it's

an investment in motivated, resilient talent. An expo also connected employers with local reentry service providers who offer job coaching, skills training, and candidate support.

As Oklahoma County continues to reduce incarceration rates, the next step is clear: help people rebuild. Fair chance hiring isn't just smart policy, it is an economic and moral imperative for a stronger community.

**Download CJAC's Fair
Chance Hiring Toolkit**



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

NEW LAW ADDRESSES HARMFUL COURT FEES

House Bill 1460 has been passed by the Oklahoma Legislature and signed into law by the Governor, marking a significant step forward in reforming how fines and fees are imposed on individuals in the criminal justice system. The new law eliminates or reduces several categories of court-related costs, including supervision and monitoring fees, as well as charges tied to DUI and drug-related offenses.

Currently, Oklahoma’s District Courts are among the most reliant in the nation on fines and fees for operational funding, with some estimates placing the financial burden on defendants at over \$10 million annually. CJAC believes this change in the law represents a critical step toward reforming this unsustainable model.

CJAC has expressed strong support for the measure, emphasizing its alignment with our core values of fiscal responsibility, government accountability, and data-driven reform. CJAC also supports efforts to study the long-term impact of court fines and fees on individuals and families, particularly how the burden contributes to cycles of poverty, recidivism, and barriers to employment.

Looking ahead, CJAC plans to advance additional research, training, and systems-level changes that support stability, rehabilitation, and justice system equity across Oklahoma.

Fee Name	Amount
Misdemeanor Possession of Marijuana or Drug Paraphernalia	\$5
Reimbursement to Clean Up Drug Labs	No Set Cost
Electronic Monitoring	\$300/Month
Indigent Defense Application	\$40
Misdemeanor or Felony DUI	\$15
Drug Abuse Education Revolving Fund	\$100
DA Supervision Fee	\$40/Month

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE CON'T

NEW LAW EXPANDS GED ACCESS FOR INCARCERATED OKLAHOMANS

Senate Bill 690 has been signed into law, removing a significant barrier to education for incarcerated individuals and advancing efforts to reduce repeat incarceration through academic attainment. The new law ensures that individuals working toward a high school diploma or GED while in jail or prison can retain and transfer earned credits if they are moved between correctional institutions or into Department of Corrections (DOC) custody.

Previously, individuals lost all progress toward their GED upon transfer, requiring them to restart the process entirely, a discouraging and costly setback for both the individual and the system. CJAC supports this legislative change, viewing

it as a smart, cost-effective reform that promotes rehabilitation, reduces recidivism, and strengthens the state's workforce.

Studies show that incarcerated individuals who earn a GED are significantly less likely to reoffend and more likely to gain employment post-release. SB 690 supports this path to stability, especially for individuals under age 21, a population at higher risk of recidivism without educational support. CJAC considers the law an important step toward broader justice system reform and supports continued research into how access to education impacts long-term outcomes for individuals and the communities to which they return.




ONGOING INITIATIVES

MISDEMEANOR DIVERSION PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS EMPLOYMENT AS A KEY TO JUSTICE REFORM


Oklahoma County has pivoted to rely more on early diversion efforts that offer more effective paths away from an over-reliance on incarceration. CJAC continues to play a leading role in reshaping local justice efforts through data-driven programs. One of the more impactful initiatives supported by CJAC is the Misdemeanor Diversion Program (MDP), operated by Diversion Hub.

The expansion of MDP was made possible through a federal Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and

Substance Use Program (COSSUP) grant secured with CJAC as the fiscal sponsor. CJAC fulfills the eligibility requirements as a government entity, a requirement that also emphasizes partnership and collaboration with the non-profit sector to effectively respond to the opioid crisis from all sides. This integrated approach functions by having Diversion Hub manage day-to-day case management and Red Rock Behavioral Health providing an on-site therapist and peer support specialist. The program has already diverted more than 550 people from jail.



**78%
Graduation
Rate**



**3.4x success
rate when
employed**



The program boasts a 78% overall graduation rate and participant recidivism has been reduced by nearly half. MDP is a prime model for smarter, more humane justice policy. MDP offers wraparound support, including housing assistance, behavioral health care, and job readiness services.

Data from the program underscores that employment is the most reliable predictor of long-term success. Participants employed at intake were 3.4 times more likely to complete the program. Even among those with prior convictions, 70% graduated

when supported by coordinated services. This program reflects the growing shift toward more humane, effective justice strategies and sets a standard for what works. Future phases will deepen this impact through participant storytelling, expanded data tracking, and broader measurements of long-term progress.

By helping identify what drives successful outcomes, CJAC is guiding smarter investments in public safety—centered not on incarceration, but on stability, support, and second chances.

DATA FEASIBILITY STUDY

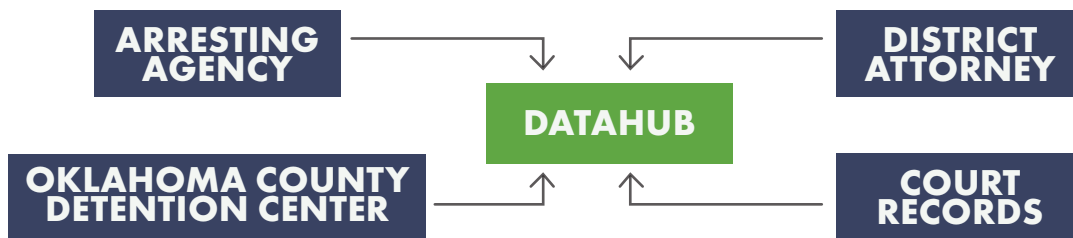
CJAC and its Data Subcommittee commissioned a data feasibility study to evaluate the county’s current capacity for collecting, integrating, and analyzing data across the criminal justice system. The long-term goal is to build traceability into the system, so that all agencies contribute data into an integrated tool called Datahub, which will support evidence-based decision-making.

Based on Vera Institute recommendations, CJAC seeks to make trends and data about how individuals navigate the justice system more transparent. Unfortunately, without quality data sharing there are many questions about process and outcomes that we cannot answer; Datahub offers a powerful solution.

This concept of “traceability,” the ability to trace something as it moves through a process, will identify where the process stalls, what factors

lead to recidivism, and what promotes or hinders progress toward a more effective justice system. Datahub would integrate all the systems used by partnering organizations and agencies and create a common case identifier for all individuals in the justice system. It will reveal the length of time from initial arrest until a case is fully settled so that we may see which types of charges or life circumstances keep people entangled the longest and why. Most importantly, it will help prevent people who need support for circumstances like housing insecurity or substance abuse from falling through the cracks.

A study conducted by Tulsa-based 9b Corp last year assessed the viability of key recommendations from the 2016 Vera Institute for Justice report, specifically, the creation of a common case identifier and centralized analytics



ADDITIONAL DATA INNOVATIONS TO PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY

This work builds on previous efforts, including CJAC’s launch of a **public-facing dashboard**, built in partnership with Oklahoma Policy Institute. The Oklahoma Policy Institute and CJAC are currently conducting a public survey to understand what the public wants from a detention center dashboard and what additional transparency data can offer. An updated dashboard can offer up-to-the-day numbers, demographics, etc. from within the detention center. The goal is that such current and consistent data sharing will help identify trends faster and guide more effective services and policies.



361 ATTENDEES AT APRIL WARRANT CLEARING EVENT

In April, 361 Oklahoma County residents were able to have their outstanding warrants addressed at the Public Defender Office's Warrant Clearing Event. This event was designed through a collaboration between Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County officials, along with incredible diversion and service providers.

The positive impact of these events ripples throughout our whole community, relieving serious financial burdens from individuals and our taxpayers by keeping individuals out of the detention center. Over the past few years, we've continued to see high attendance at each event, highlighting the huge need for such services. These warrant-clearing events will continue to be held by CJAC's partnering agencies to meet the ongoing demand for warrant relief.

CJAC GUIDES STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR NEW BEHAVIORAL CARE CENTER

As planning advances for the \$44 million Behavioral Care Center at the future Oklahoma County jail site, CJAC is playing a critical role in shaping how the facility will be used. The center will strategically serve those who would most benefit from targeted mental health treatment within the justice system. CJAC is leading efforts to ensure the center is integrated with broader regional resources, including the MAPS 4 Restoration Center and crisis services. These additional facilities will offer substance use counseling, supervised detox, mobile outreach, and mental health treatment — helping relieve pressure on the detention center.



The site is currently in the early stages of construction in South East Oklahoma City. CJAC is eager to work alongside the mental health organization selected by the Oklahoma County Board of Commissioners to staff and run the facility.

A mental health facility is a major component to long-term solutions to our systems struggles. With a focus on long-term impact, CJAC is ensuring public resources are used effectively while advancing humane, data-driven justice reform

SHINE 15TH ANNIVERSARY

The 'Start Helping Impacted Neighborhoods Everywhere', better known as the SHINE Program, marks its 15th anniversary this year after launching in 2010 under Commissioner Brian Maughan. CJAC is proud to count SHINE among its partners. This jail-alternative initiative deploys low-risk, non-violent offenders for community service, removing debris and graffiti, and revitalizing public spaces. Over its

lifespan, SHINE has played a role in reducing the county's jail population, cutting around 80 beds per day and saving nearly \$1.5 million annually. Shine's durability and positive impact underscore their dedication to public improvements, commitment to public safety through effective diversion strategies and taxpayer savings—a model for both reform and community revitalization.



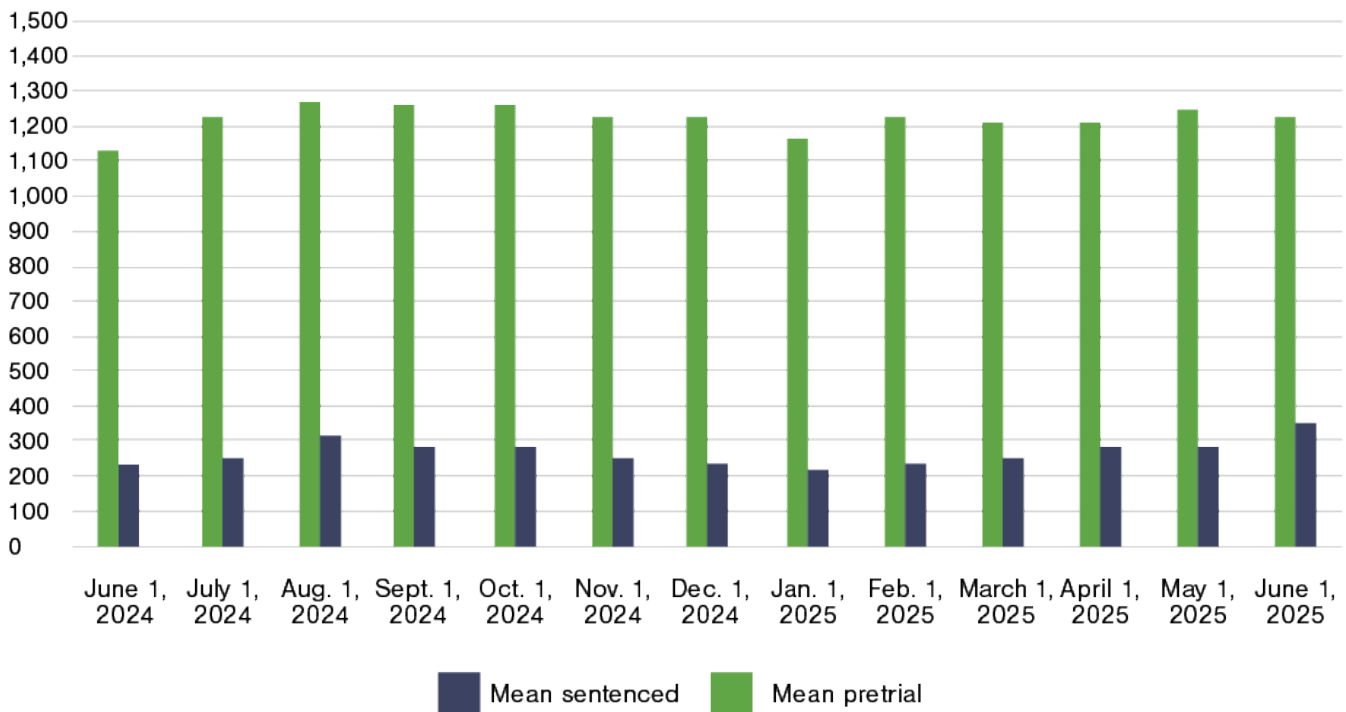
FY25 AVERAGE JAIL POPULATION REFLECTS NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION

Indicators in data from the Oklahoma County Jail Population statistics emphasize the need for alternatives to detention, particularly mental health treatment options. The yearly average population of the detention center grew slightly to 1,501. With last year reflecting a record low, this increase brings the number of detainees to just under the 2023 population average of 1,534. The population reached its lowest point of the year in January, at 1,410 and began to steadily climb in the spring of 2025. By late June the population sat at 1,619 detainees.

Throughout the last year we see a consistently high number of sentenced individuals in the detention center, rather than seeing those people efficiently moved into custody of the Department of Corrections (DOC). An average of 280 people per month completed their trials and were sentenced to prison terms with the DOC but remained at the Oklahoma County Detention Center awaiting transfer. With those sentenced individuals excluded, the remaining jail population is relatively consistent with the previous year's low numbers.

An additional factor that had an impact on the population is a gap in on-site mental health screenings for the new CO-OP program. Previously, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS) had an employee embedded in the detention center to provide mental health assessments and competency evaluations. At the end of 2024, OCDC ended the partnership. This lapse appears to coincide with the recent upward trend of the population.

The need for mental health intervention in Oklahoma County is serious. While the rising population numbers are disappointing, they do offer some clarity on the effectiveness of alternatives to incarceration for those whose crimes relate to their mental health disorders. The impact of a staffing gap on overall jail population, coupled with the stressed mental health services that are capped at capacity, certainly makes a compelling argument to at least continue, and ideally, increase these types of intervention services.





Oklahoma County Criminal
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CONCLUSION

CJAC closed its seventh fiscal year on June 30, 2025, with meaningful momentum and a renewed focus on data-driven justice reform. New leadership at the executive and council levels brought fresh energy, while strong partnerships continued to deliver measurable impact. With a solid foundation, strong collaboration, and a forward-looking agenda, CJAC is well-positioned to lead the next phase of

reform—advancing public safety through opportunity, equity, and stability for all.

CJAC is better off with even more participation, so consider following our newsletter, social media channels and contact us with opportunities for collaboration.