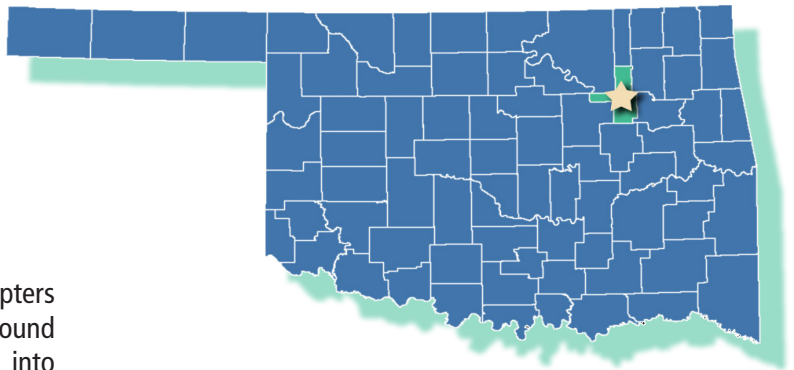


# COUNTY LEADERSHIP IN JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM:

## TULSA COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

**Population (2013 estimate): 622,409**  
**Youth Population: 158,714 (25.5 percent)**  
**Main Community Makeup: 95 percent Urban,  
5 percent Rural**  
**Persons Below Poverty Level: 15.9 percent**



### THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

The state of Oklahoma and Tulsa County were early adopters of the system of care philosophy, implementing wraparound services and embracing the idea of “no wrong entry” into treatment approximately 20 years ago. When Brent Wolfe, Director of the Tulsa County Juvenile Bureau, came on board 10 years ago, he discovered that although the county did have a wraparound system in place, it wasn’t serving very many families—and, in particular, it was difficult to get a juvenile justice-involved youth or family into the system. The juvenile justice system was isolated from the community and its service providers and the one wraparound team had eligibility criteria that were often problematic for families to meet. Wolfe’s goal was to create a better connection to wraparound services, so that justice-involved youth could be directly referred and treated in the community. Wolfe, as well as Doris L. Fransein, the county’s chief juvenile judge, felt strongly that connecting the juvenile justice system to the community was important.

They knew that Tulsa’s juvenile justice system did not have the resources to provide adequate treatment and also believed that the best treatment model didn’t rely on a siloed, do-it-yourself mentality but instead on a collaborative system that provided support for families in the community.

### THE CHANGE ENVIRONMENT

Expanding Tulsa County’s system of care necessarily required cooperation and buy-in from many different agencies and organizations in the community. Wolfe and Fransien worked to promote the concept that the families and young people being served belonged not just to the juvenile justice system, or the mental health system, or the department of human services,

but to the community as a whole—so it was in everyone’s best interest to join together and figure out what the best supports for these families would be.

As Wolfe explains, Tulsa County had a history of being a collaborative community, so this wasn’t necessarily a new concept, but it did require outreach. “We found that in many, many cases, they just simply hadn’t been asked to work together,” Wolfe said.

Strong support from elected officials has also allowed Tulsa County to continually improve its juvenile justice system. For example, **referrals into the juvenile justice system have decreased dramatically over the years, which has led to reduced caseloads for workers, but the county commission did not reduce the budget.** This has allowed for the program to keep the same number of staff but with lower caseloads. “This is where the county has been really supportive of what we do,” says Wolfe. “They could have said, ‘We’re going to reduce your budget accordingly’ but they knew we could use that money effectively and so they let us keep it.” Similarly, when the county closed its juvenile residential treatment center the commission left the operating amount with the juvenile justice system, which was able to invest the money into its current intensive family treatment program. “It’s really a no-brainer,” explains Commissioner Karen Keith. “This is the front end of everything that impacts county government. If we can turn the lives of these children around they are more productive citizens, they’re tax payers, they don’t end up in our jail and long term they’re not in the state system. This is our best shot.”

## TULSA COUNTY’S MODEL

Tulsa County has taken advantage of its collaborative history and continued to engage partners both within and outside the county juvenile justice system. By reaching out to many stakeholders and seeking their input and participation, Tulsa



**Brent Wolfe**  
 Director of the Tulsa County  
 Juvenile Bureau

# HIGHLIGHTS

- Voter-approved sales tax extension to fund new juvenile justice center
- Increased community-based detention alternatives
- Overall diversion of youth from juvenile detention as a sanction
- Improved collaboration among probation and other youth-serving departments and agencies
- Closure of residential treatment center
- Decreased caseloads for juvenile justice staff

County leaders were able to develop stronger linkages and obtain support from a variety of players, including the Oklahoma State Department of Health and Tulsa Public Schools.

### Services that Work for Youth and Families

The county’s juvenile probation department took a hard look at how its services were being delivered, and realized that they weren’t being offered in a way that made sense for the youth and families in its programs. “Ten years ago, the process was just that we came into the office, would make a phone call or do whatever follow up we were supposed to do, and that was it,” Wolfe says. “That obviously wasn’t working—it’s not good enough to just say, ‘They didn’t call back’ or ‘They missed their appointment’ and leave it at that. We need to find out where the youth or family is, find out why they didn’t call and find out how to better help them.” In that vein, Tulsa County services underwent a “cultural change” and now operate under the philosophy that it is their responsibility to get out into the community and meet youth and families where they are.

**The probation department has also focused on determining what treatment will be most effective for each family. “Not every family needs a full-on wraparound system,”** Wolfe says. At intake, Tulsa County screens youth with a risk/needs assessment adapted to suit their community. “We made it a point to do this right at the very beginning, and to do the best assessment possible to get a family to the right place as quickly as possible,” explains Wolfe. The majority of youth and families do not go any further

# JUVENILE PROGRAMS

- Intensive Supervision Program
- Phoenix Rising
- Check and Connect
- Girl Power
- Child In Need of Supervision Diversion Program
- Family Drug Court
- Crisis Intervention Center



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-Karen Keith,  
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into the justice system after their assessment and are instead diverted back out to services in the community that can best treat their needs.

## Intensive Family Treatment Program

**Tulsa’s Lakeside Intensive Family Empowerment (LIFE) program provides intensive, family-based therapeutic and support services** to youth and families in the juvenile justice system. Tulsa County modeled its LIFE program on evidence-based programs such as Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy, which have been evaluated and shown to have positive outcomes, but wanted

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to create a program that fit the county’s specific needs. LIFE is a six-month program that assists youth and families who are assessed as high risk/high needs and who have either failed in probation or are determined to be likely to fail. The primary service offered is a family therapy component, which can be as intensive as necessary, with daily therapy sessions in some instances. Families also have access to support workers whose job is to assess what the family’s basic needs are, determine if

they are being met, where gaps are for needs that are not being met and how the county can help the family meet its needs. “It’s also always important to work with the understanding that we are only here providing support for a short time, so how do we immediately help you with urgent needs but also how do we prepare you to sustain this over time?” explains Wolfe.

## SUCCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Tulsa County’s probation programs have resulted in a recidivism rate of about 7 percent—meaning **93 percent of the youth served by Tulsa County probation do not reoffend**. In its first full year of implementation, 84 percent of youth who completed the LIFE program did not reoffend. As Wolfe noted, although this rate is not as good as the county’s entire probation population, the LIFE program serves the highest-risk youth and families and so that difference in population may explain the difference in rates.

In 2014, **voters approved a sales tax extension to build a new juvenile justice center**. The journey to gaining community support for a new juvenile facility was not a short or easy one, but Commissioner Keith was committed to the effort. “We worked on this for a long time and tried several times,” she explains. “We tried to be strategic, and I talked to every civic group that would listen over the last four years.” Commissioner Keith was also successful in engaging local media to highlight the problems with the county’s current facilities, which helped inform residents about the issue.



## LESSONS LEARNED

**It's important to understand everyone's motivations:** Each system that deals with youth has its own responsibilities—for example, the Tulsa County Juvenile Bureau's mandate is community safety, while community service providers' mandates are to deliver treatment to youth and families. Understanding the perspective from which each partner comes makes it easier to determine how best to have those perspectives work together toward a common goal.

**Collaboration isn't always easy, but it's worth it:** "It takes a lot of work to collaborate," says Wolfe. "It affects staffing, it requires extra communication with all sorts of new people. But the payoff is that it does eventually lighten your workload and leads to better, shared treatment and services."

**The importance of outreach to all stakeholders cannot be overstated:** Even in Tulsa County, which traditionally has been a collaborative jurisdiction, Wolfe had to reach out to many different entities. For example, the county

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had a Children's Behavioral Health Community Team but the team did not have a representative from the juvenile justice system on it. Similarly, Commissioner Keith spent years meeting with local groups to garner support for the new juvenile justice center, and is now still working with neighborhood groups to find an appropriate location for the facility. "None of this happens overnight, but if you keep talking to people, answering their questions and helping them understand what the juvenile justice system really can be, many of them will eventually come around," she says.

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