**Working to Improve Our Community**

**2015-2016**

**Lake Area United Way (LAUW) brings together resources to enhance education, increase financial stability, and promote health and well-being for everyone in Muskogee and Cherokee Counties. LAUW works for the common good by identifying problems plaguing our community and working collaboratively to solve them. For example, we all win when a child succeeds in school, when a neighborhood turns around, when families have good health and workers have solid jobs. These are benefits that will ripple out to the community as a whole, ensuring we will continue to progress and our children will have a better future. It takes the whole community working together to reach our mutual goals. Here are the community partners who work with LAUW and each other to improve our community.**

**American Red Cross (ARC**) – ARC volunteers responded to 112 fires in Muskogee and Cherokee Counties in 2015. They provided $63,526.47 in direct financial assistance to the victims. The ARC replaces such items as clothing, shoes, food, and medications. The number of disaster clients lacking financial resources to adequately recover from the loss of their home and belongings remains high. Average cost of helping families is $567.00 per response.

**CASA for Children, Inc. – Muskogee** – CASA in Muskogee recruits, trains, and supervises community volunteers who look out for the best interest of children involved in the court system. Many of these children have been neglected and abused, and have never had anyone they can count on to stand up for them. Not all children in the court system have a CASA assigned, but those that do have a better chance of being placed in a safe and permanent home. The Department of Human Services reported 468 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in Muskogee County. CASA for Children has 85 active advocates for Muskogee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner Counties, so only the most complicated cases receive a CASA. The average cost per child is $416.00 for an average 24 month period.

**Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL)** – DPIL is a program provided to children under 5 in Muskogee and Cherokee Counties by Lake Area United Way (LAUW) and the Dollywood Foundation. The mission of the program is to get books in the homes of young children. Enrolled children receive a book a month, mailed to their home, until they turn five. By providing no-cost books to the children/families have more opportunities to bond as they read and talk about books. Families do not have to make a choice between books and food/shelter/clothing, or other essentials. There a large body of research supporting early literacy and the correlation between children reading at grade level and school success/graduation. The local DPIL provides books to approximately 540 children a month. That’s 6,480 age-appropriate books in the hands of the future of our community.

**How the program is affecting families:**

Of parents surveyed, 93% said their child’s enthusiasm for books has increased since receiving books; 83% said they spend more time reading to their child; 62% say their child ask to be read to more often; and 93% says the program has had a positive impact on their family.

**Girl Scouts of Eastern Oklahoma – Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program (GSBB)** – Oklahoma has one of the highest female incarceration rates in the nation. For every 100,000 women 134 are in the correction system. That is twice the national average. The prevention program, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars is working to prevent children from following the same path. GSBB program staff transport girls, ages 5-18, to correctional facilities where they facilitate programs that foster positive relationships between mothers and children, maintaining a healthy bond despite separation. Children participate in traditional Girl Scout activities with their mothers and receive drug and alcohol prevention, conflict resolution, and life skills training. Mothers participate in parenting classes and group therapy, which upon successful completion reduces time served, hastening family reunification. 72% of girls surveyed indicated they have confidence in themselves and their abilities, feel they are able to achieve their goals and form positive identifies. 53% of girls surveyed recognized the value of working together and learn to make decisions that benefit the whole group. The cost of this program is $233.32 per child.

**Kelly B. Todd Cerebral Palsy Center (KBT)** – The Center was created in 1975 in response to a need for local children needing physical therapy services at no cost to the families. The clinicians at KBT treat children and babies. KBT has continued the mission of providing these services despite the funding challenges that exist. The community depends on KBT to provide services to families who would otherwise be forced to find services in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, or beyond at great expense. Recently KBT added another physical therapist and speech therapist, with the intention of adding occupational therapy this year. KBT served 165 children this year. If the families were charged, they would pay $80.00 per 45 minute session.

**Kids’ Space** – The official name of this organization is Muskogee County Child Advocacy Center, but they are commonly known as Kids’ Space. They provide services to sexually abused children and non-offending family members that include: forensic exams and interviews to collect evidence to use in the prosecution of the alleged perpetrator; family advocacy to support the non-offending parent; therapeutic services, trauma based mental health services. A multidisciplinary team including law enforcement, the district attorney, a physician, a therapist, a sexual assault nurse examiner, DHS child protective services, and Kids’ Space staff members ensure the child will only have to examined and interviewed once, sparing the child from having to tell their traumatic story over and over.

**Here is a personal story told from a child’s perspective:**

I live at home with my mommy, baby sister, grannie and Uncle. I don’t like being at home because my uncle is there. I told my mom about my uncle and she took us to this really cool place called Kids’ Space. They had a room there with a really big blue chair that I got to sit in and tell a nice lady about my Uncle and how he was a very bad man who hurt me and my baby sister. I marked on a piece of paper where it was not okay for someone to touch! After I talked to that lady I saw a nurse, but it wasn’t like going to the doctor’s office I don’t like going to see the doctor. I saw the nurse at Kids’ Space too. There were birds on the walls there and I got to hold a teddy bear and cover up with a pretty blankie that I got to take home. I guess the people at Kids’ Space told the police what my uncle did to me and my baby sister because when we got back home my uncle wasn’t there anymore. Mommy said he went to jail for hurting us. She said that I never had to be around him again. Kids’ Space gave me a person called a therapist. I like him, I tell him about how I was scared and sad and now I tell him I’m happy. I don’t dream of bad stuff anymore. Kids’ Space Clients, Ages 6 and 2

**Legal Aid Services** – Provides free civil legal services to low-income and elderly residents. With three staff attorneys, Legal Aid was able to provide services to 975 residents. The cases involved include housing issues, bankruptcy, Social Security disability, and family law. If an attorney is not able to take the case, the attorneys will provide as much information and advice as possible for a better outcome. Although Legal Aid never charge for their services, they calculate their cost at $55.00 an hour.

**Example of a case:**

A couple that received Supplemental Security Income due to both of them suffering from intellectual and physical disabilities came to Legal Aid for help with their home. The husband had inherited a house and the couple, excited about their new home, moved in and met the neighbors. One neighbor “befriended” them and would buy odds and ends from them for extra money when they were in a bind because of their limited income. The neighbor finally asked them about buying the house. Although the couple said they would think about it, the neighbor told them the house had to be in her name before she could get the bank to loan her money. The couple who probably did not understand the situation signed the deed to the neighbor and within weeks she was evicting them for their property and did not intend to pay them anything. With the help of Legal Aid, she was prevented from evicting them and provided with representation in the pending litigation to determine if the deed is lawful.

**MCCOYS – Muskogee County Council of Youth Services** – Provides a juvenile community service program with rehabilitative opportunities for improving the individual’s potential and a life skills program that helps youth with decision making, problem solving and critical thinking skills. The like skills program is available to Muskogee, Okay, Braggs, and Oktaha Public School systems. The community service program has had positive outcomes with 45% of the participants showing a change in behavior, attitude, and self-esteem. Only seven out of 404 individuals had to repeat community service hours.

**Essay from juvenile offender**:

I was sentenced to community service for drugs while at school. I have learned a lot since then. The program taught me that I was being stupid and immature. Community service taught me that I had to take charge of my actions and be responsible. It taught me to grow up and stop doing wrong before it is too late; and doing bad things to make me have to do community service is not the place I want to be in my life. I could have been hanging out with friends instead of being here. Having to do community service work taught me how to control my anger and to do what my parents taught me while I was growing up. I also learned to listen more and to have more respect for others.

**Volunteers of America – Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)** – RSVP is geared specifically for residents aged 55+, giving them opportunities to volunteer to provide assistance with meal delivery, transportation to hospitals and doctor’s appointments. Research shows that as we age remaining active in our community increases health benefits. Volunteers report lower mortality rates, lower depression rates and fewer physical limitations, and higher levels of well-being. The RSVP program provided 430 area seniors volunteer opportunities.

**Why one volunteer loves the RSVP program:**

I have been a volunteer for Volunteers of America Oklahoma’s RSVP program for several years. I volunteer at the local hospital and with several other organizations that need help with special events or that may just need a little help in the office from time to time. I have worked all my life and when retirement came around I felt that it was very important to continue to stay active and be of service to our community. I love this town! I have helped other seniors get to doctor’s appointments, served meals to our country’s veterans and a wide variety of other thing through the years. I don’t know what I would have done without the opportunity to stay active and volunteer. Volunteering makes me feel needed and important at a time in my life when a lot of my friends were slowing down. I am still very active and I feel like I have a purpose, people are depending on me. I plan on volunteering as long as possible. I love it!

**Women in Safe Home (WISH)** – WISH is a 27-bed shelter for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Beyond providing the resources and legal advocacy, WISH provides an economic empowerment program that teaches budgeting, financial planning, banking, and helps rebuild credit. The children in the family are also victims. WISH teaches the children social skills and anger management in order to break the cycle of violence in their lives. Costs for these programs cost from $40.00 to $125.00 an hour, but of course there is no charge to the clients. The number of clients served in 2015 was 525. Of the clients surveyed 93% said they had improved confrontational skills; 92% had improved family/friend interactions; 71% had built a new support network; 84% felt they were able to set personal boundaries; and 92% knew more about healthy relationships.

**One client’s story:**

Jane Doe was married to a man for 9 years and she suffered physical abuse from day one. They had two children. After one event, the cops were called and her children were taken due to “failure to protect” and she was told to go to the shelter. This woman married right out of school and he had never let her work. To assist her in her DHS reunification plan, we provided parenting, one-on-one sessions, group therapy, and life skills classes. In life skills, she was assisted in creating a resume, taught proper dress for interviewing and taught interviewing techniques through role play. This client did find a job and staff assisted her with creating a budget. She obtained housing and moved out of the shelter. The client continued as a non-resident client and continued group therapy. She has learned about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships and now knows she can take care of herself and her children. She is seeking a divorce. She just recently completed her DHS plan and the children are being returned to her.

**Boys and Girls Club of Tahlequah** – This program provides before and after-school programs designed to inspire, educate, and empower youth. The goal is for them to realize their full potential as productive citizens. The cost to serve each child a year is $168.70. The Boys and Girls Club monitors all the club members for school attendance and grades. Their grades, behavior and overall attitude changes for the better when they participate in the program. All of these components add up to success in school, graduation, and a successful life. Children who attend the Boys and Girls Club at least 2 to 3 times a week greatly improved all areas of their academic lives.

**One boy’s story:**

It was very common for Decotah to have outbursts of yelling and crying when he was agitated or frustrated. He would begin crying and yelling at the other children and youth leaders, which was very difficult to deal with. He hated to do schoolwork and refused to do any homework during Power Hour. There were times that we visited with Decotah’s family about his behaviors and with the fact that we were struggling to help him. Decotah has been a Boys & Girls Club member at Heritage Elementary for 3 ½ years now. Decotah has built an amazing relationship with his youth leaders over these 3 years. He has opened up to them about the difficulties at home with his mom leaving the family and leaving him and his 7 siblings with their father. It has been a trying time for him to say the least. Decotah told me that he “loved his leaders like his family” and “feels like he is important here”. As of today, Decotah is doing very well academically, completing his homework daily at Power Hour with the help of our youth leaders and tutors and raising his GPA consistently over the past 2 nine weeks. He has become successful in controlling his outbursts better and is doing well socially with the help of the leadership and team building activities that our leaders initiate with the students along with his involvement in SMART Moves and role play activities where he is allowed to practice reacting appropriately to a variety of situations.

**CASA of Cherokee Country** – This CASA serves Cherokee, Adair, and the Cherokee Tribal Court Systems. Their mission is to be a voice for children who come into the court system as a result of abuse and/or neglect by providing trained volunteer advocates who speak independently for the best interest of the child. Each volunteer must complete 30 hours of training required by the National CASA Association with 12 hours of continuing education to remain certified. Due to the lack of volunteers, CASA was only able to serve 71 children of the 471 in need. The cost per child is $879.00.

**How CASA can make a difference:**

A CASA advocate was assigned to a case by the judge in June 2011, when the baby girl was one month old, because both the mother and child had tested positive for narcotics when the baby was born. Eighteen months later the CASA volunteer reported, once again, that there are been an unsuccessful trial re-unification with baby and mother – the fourth trial re-unification since the baby was removed from the mother’s care. The baby’s father did not have a bond with his daughter, and it was not until late 2014 that he contacted the caseworker and began working on the service plan to correct conditions (at that time the girl was three years old and had never seen her father), and bonding therapy was ordered by the judge. One year later the CASA volunteer advocated for bonding therapy to cease, as the bonding process was unsuccessful. The CASA advocate documented changes in the child’s behavior, and reported the foster parents’ concern about the child having nightmares more frequently. At each court review, the advocate recommended the bonding therapy cease and stressed that efforts to reunite the family were not successful. The CASA advocate was instrumental in seeing that the little girl was adopted by the foster parents that had taken care of her for four years.

**Hope House** – Provides families who have become homeless and at risk of being homeless by providing emergency food, shelter, and supportive services. The goal is to end “generational dependency” on social services by providing skills and support to become independent. Hope House provided services to 280 clients. 90% of clients participating in services provided by Hope House have maintained permanent housing.

**From abandoned and helpless to empowered:**

A young mother of two young children was abandoned by the children’s father. He also left them with all the household bills. Mom was on maternity leave and could not return until she was released by the doctor. Plus, it would be two more weeks after the release before she would receive her first paycheck. The family was approved for one month rent payment and Hope House staff worked with the mother to create a workable budget. Mom is working full-time now and able to maintain stable housing. Without Hope House, this family would have become homeless.

**United Methodist Children’s Home – Preparation for Adult Living (PALS)** – This program supports high school and college age youth with housing and education support services to ensure they graduate with the education and skills needed to be independent/productive adults. Most of these children have aged out of the foster care system or at risk of homelessness and have little or no support system. DHS reports about 300 kids age out of foster care each year with no permanent placement or support in place. This is a safe place to stay with a network of adults in their lives can guide them toward achievement.

**From disaster to success:**

Mallory is a senior at NSU. She will graduate in May with a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice, a minor in Homeland Security, and a minor in the Collegiate Officer Program. She completed her CLEET training in 2015 and will be applying to be a police officer after graduation. She has also been accepted into the Master of Science in Criminal Justice Program at NSU. Mallory credits her success to the Circle of Care PAL Program. When her mother became disabled after a car accident, her family’s main source of income was lost. Mallory was not sure if she would be able to return to college, thinking her only option may be to return home for good. A friend introduced her to the PAL Program and she has been thriving since her arrival.