

March 18, 2020

*Electronic Delivery*

Dear Judges:

I write to you as the interim executive director for the Office of Juvenile Affairs (OJA). It has been quite a first week! As our state responds to the COVID-19 crisis, I want to keep you informed of the steps that OJA is taking as a state agency to comply with directives from Governor Stitt in response to this state of emergency.

- In accordance with Executive Order 2020-07, OJA is shifting as many workers as possible to temporary telework status. This is true of a majority of our Juvenile Service Unit field staff that interact with the court system.
- OJA has suspended all face-to-face visits of OJA staff with OJA youth, families and providers. We have increased our phone and video monitoring for all OJA youth.
- OJA has suspended all visits to OJA-operated facilities (SWOJC in Manitou and COJC in Tecumseh) and our OJA-contracted group homes. Most of the OJA-contracted detention centers have also banned visitations.
- OJA has suspended transportation of all OJA custody youth from placement to court.
- In accordance with the Chief Justice's Order SCAD-2020-24, OJA is requesting all juvenile court reviews or hearings be postponed and/or executed via telephone or videoconference.
- Any OJA youth that are eligible for a pass or currently on a pass from their placement will remain in the community and not return to their placement.
- Due to COVID-19 concerns and our inability to determine exposure that youth may have had waiting for a placement while in the community, we are not sending any youth from the community into placement at this time.

I ask for your assistance and cooperation as we plan to move forward in next steps in these extraordinary times.

Our next tasks:

- Evaluate all youth currently in our OJA-operated facilities (SWOJC and COJC) and make determinations on whether they are appropriate for consideration of an administrative parole or other release to the community.
- Evaluate all youth currently in our OJA-contracted group homes and make determinations on whether they are appropriate for consideration of a return to the community.

- Evaluate all OJA custody youth in any placement that are over eighteen (18) years old and will not/do not have the ability to parole or complete their program and, therefore, are just occupying a bed until they “age out” at nineteen (19) years old. OJA will consider a release to the community with appropriate/available community resources. OJA will also ask the court to consider releasing these adults from OJA custody and consider closing their cases and/or moving them to a cost docket.
- Evaluate all youth currently in a detention center and determine if they are appropriate for community release. We hope to work with judges in authorizing releases when appropriate.
- Monitor all new detention admits to determine if detention is absolutely necessary for that youth. I ask that courts not use detention for parole violations, drug court violations, misdemeanor charges, status offenders, etc. at this time.

I will assure everyone that all of these measures are not a “get out of jail free” card. They are being done in thoughtful consideration and balance of accountability and community protection while in the midst of a pandemic. As this continues, we anticipate severe staffing pressures in all of our placements that may necessitate shut downs. We are hoping that these proactive steps will help ease the pressure on the staff and youth that live and work in congregate populations. These same measures are being employed by the majority of states across the country in response to this national emergency. I am proud to say that in my correspondence with my peers across the country, Oklahoma is on task or ahead of steps the other states are implementing.

For those of you who have youth on your dockets who are currently in a placement, I ask that you consider writing them a note of encouragement. Our local OJA staff will provide mailing addresses.

Thank you all for your partnership in these difficult times. I look forward to brighter times ahead. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to email me or call me on my cell phone (405) 397-2681.

Sincerely,



Rachel C. Holt  
Interim Executive Director

CC: Chief Justice Noma Gurich, via email  
Jari Askins, Administrative Director, via email  
All JSU District Supervisors, via email