

INSIDE



Children Services' Imelda Rivera Spices Up Life with Dance

*By Dustin Pyeatt
Public Information Officer*

The music makes you want to move, and she knows exactly how. Spinning gracefully as the trumpets pelt out a staccato melody, her feet move to the buzz of the guiro. Watching Imelda Rivera, you almost envy her ability to use the music for what it was made for, dancing.

Rivera, a Secretary IV for the Children and Family Services Division (CFSD) KIDS Technology and Research Unit, began learning Latin dance two years ago

when the teacher at her daughter's dance studio asked her to join their dance group. Since then, Rivera not only has learned salsa, flamenco, merengue and hula, but she now teaches dance, as well.

"Salsa is my favorite style of dance because it's the most common. So no matter where you go, if there is Latin music and dance, it's probably salsa. But I don't do lambada," said Rivera. "I'm a mom, so no 'forbidden dance' for me."

Rivera began working for OKDHS 12 years ago as a

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Esther Houser Joins Elite Oklahoma Women

By George Earl Johnson, Jr.

Oklahoma Department of Human Services Long-term Care Ombudsman Esther E. Houser was inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame March 29.

Houser was recognized for her role during the last 24 years in developing and administering the state's ombudsman program, which started with the passage of Public Law 95-478 in November 1978. This state advocacy program has been charged with ensuring a voice for nursing home

patients and their families when they have concerns or complaints on care and treatment.

"Esther is an outstanding advocate dedicated to improving the quality of life for nursing home residents," says OKDHS Aging Services Director Roy R. Keen. "Because of her dedication and commitment during the past quarter century, thousands of nursing home residents have benefited."

Her leadership recently earned Oklahoma's ombudsman

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Hear, Hug and Hush: The Best Help...

By Judy Hill
Chaplain Co-coordinator



In recent weeks we have all been glued to the TV, radio, Internet and other news as we anxiously watch, listen and read reports on the war in Iraq and the Middle East. Many different emotions sweep over us. Mainly, we feel

pride in our military and our precious men and women who are

"Workers do not leave their problems, emotions, and worries at home.

A chaplain can be a very positive influence in the workplace."

- Chaplain Mary Harrison

willing to lay down their lives for our freedom and the freedom of others.

Also, there are the families who wait anxiously and who are also sacrificing so much. There is no way my finite mind can begin to comprehend how they feel. I can only lift them up in prayer to one who does know and understand.

I am so thankful for all OKDHS employees. You are always right there, ready to do your part. Many have asked, "What can we do?" Thanks to our Director, our Employee Recognition Committee and the Office of Communications, we are working together to help answer that question.

We now have 10 chaplains around the state serving every county in Oklahoma. Of course, chaplains are there to work with you, your pastor, priest or rabbi to help in any way they can. And we are always looking for more qualified people to serve as chaplains.

Sometimes we wonder what to say to people in our offices who have loved ones already serving, or to those service men and women who are waiting for the call to leave. The "hurry up and wait" people really need our love and support. Just let them know that you have them in your thoughts and prayers and are there for them.

One helpful thing we have been taught as chaplains is to hear, hug and hush. Those three things serve a better purpose than any words we might have.

Kyle McGraw Named Professional of the Year

Kyle McGraw, MHR, CDAC, director of OKDHS Substance Abuse Services, has been named Oklahoma Alcohol and Drug Professional of the Year by the Oklahoma Drug and Alcohol Professionals Association.

The association presents the annual award to the professional who has demonstrated strong leadership and unselfish devotion to improving the lives of individuals, families and communities through providing and implementing effective drug and alcohol services and programs.

Before coming to OKDHS in early 2002,



Kyle McGraw

McGraw served as the executive director of the Oklahoma City-based A Chance to Change Foundation for 10 years.

Baby Boomers' Retirement: Are We Prepared?

Baby boomers have made a remarkable impact on American life. They spurred the rise of suburbs, transformed popular culture, and continue to define the political landscape.

As they have aged, their impact on the nation's economy has evolved. Now, as they prepare to retire, their influence will be felt in new ways. This phenomenon, known as "The Pig in the Python," introduces an array of unsolved dilemmas. Are we, as a society, prepared for these baby boom retirees?

In a study published in the January 2003 issue of *Gnosis* titled "Baby Boomers' Retire: Are We Prepared?", authors Zohre Salehezadeh, Ph.D., and Kenneth Kickham, Ph.D., describe how economic and budgetary constraints impact the systems of social programs. *Gnosis* is a publication of the OKDHS Office of Planning, Policy and Research that provides facts for informed human services decision making.

The search for ways to pay for baby boom retirees can be seen as an opportunity to help the disadvantaged, while bolstering the economy and the federal budget. The most promising strategy is to expand the taxable wage base by 1) increasing productivity through enhancing education and training and 2) increasing the number of people earning wages. Welfare agencies are in a good position to further both of these objectives.

For example, it would make

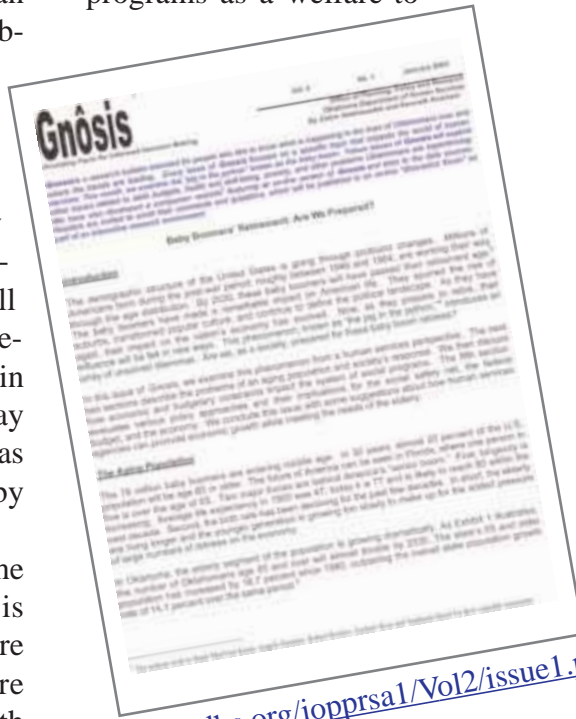
sense to consider nursing degree programs as a welfare-to-

work strategy. The labor market would welcome these new nurses, and pay them very well, thereby increasing the taxable wage base. Moreover, there would be more nurses to care for the elderly.

Many retirees could also benefit from retraining and employment programs that help them remain productive. Authors Salehezadeh and Kickham concluded that to meet the needs of the elderly while fostering economic growth, policies directed at improving education and wages may be the most effective ways to prepare for The Pig in the Python.

The entire 12-page study can be found on the OKDHS Internet website.

It's worth reading.



www.okdhs.org/iopprsa1/Vol2/issue1.pdf

Note from OKDHS Legal Division

Progressive Discipline Law Amended

Governor Brad Henry signed enrolled HB 1127 March 31, which is effective immediately. This act prohibits supervisors from considering "incidents that occurred longer than four years prior to an offense in order to move to a higher level of discipline."

This prohibition does not apply to five categories of conduct: criminal activity; sexual misconduct or harassment; racially discriminatory behavior and/or harassment; threats or acts of violence against employees in the workplace; and drug and/or alcohol use or abuse.

This act will be implemented by modification of merit rules. This act should not adversely affect existing OKDHS disciplinary practice. Pending issuance of emergency merit rules, OKDHS managers should not consider any discipline that is more than four years old in applying progressive discipline and should not list discipline more than four years old in certificates of prior disciplinary action required for proposed discharge, unless in one of the five exceptions listed above.

Governor, Director Praise DDSD Staff at Conference

By Sheree Powell
Developmental Disabilities Services Division

Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry spoke to an audience of more than 500 at the 2003 Governor's Conference on Developmental Disabilities, held March 31-April 1, in Oklahoma City. The conference is one of the longest running of its kind in the nation and concluded the state's celebration of March as Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month.

Governor Henry commended OKDHS Director Howard H. Hendrick, the employees of OKDHS and private providers for their commitment to serving people with developmental disabilities, particularly



Midge Vanbuskirk, a 24-year SORC employee, received a "Best of the Best" award from DDSD Director James Nicholson.

during tough financial times.

"We have tremendous challenges ahead of us," said Henry. "We are facing the largest budget crisis in our state's history, but I will work as hard as I can to make sure that during this budget crisis that we do as little harm as possible to Oklahomans that need help the most. Yes, there will be some belt-tightening until we get through this, but we will get through this together."

Hendrick added his praise for the work being done by the Developmental Disabilities Services Division staff saying, "I think our staff deserve a great big 'atta boy' because I'm very proud of the work they've done.

"In Developmental Disabilities, we've served everybody that was on the waiting list four years ago, nearly 3,000 people. Some are getting in-home support, some are getting other kinds of support, but everybody who was on that list has been served. Of course, when you move people off the waiting list, you continue to get more people applying, so we still have a very long waiting list that still needs attention.

"At the resource centers in Enid and Pauls Valley, our staff have taken on many crises. There have been some private Intermediate Care Facilities for the Mentally Retarded close, and they've had to step up to the plate and take on some of those cases that were very difficult."

During the first day of the conference, DDSD hosted the 3rd Annual Awards of Excellence in Direct Support Services. These awards recognize outstanding direct support professionals who provide the day-to-day care for people with developmental disabilities.

"For me, this is the high point of the conference," said DDSD Director James Nicholson. "We are blessed with excellent direct support professionals who work with the individuals we serve. What really matters in terms of quality is how well the service is provided to the individual who is receiving the services, and most important is the interaction between the direct support professional and the individual."

A total of 40 direct support professionals were recognized from around the state, including employees from the Northern and Southern Oklahoma Resource Centers in Enid and Pauls Valley.

Communications Director Suspends Magazine

OKDHS Communications Director George Earl Johnson, Jr., suspended the award-winning *Inside OKDHS Magazine* in April as part of budget-cutting measures.

Johnson said while the quarterly magazine was a vital internal communications tool, a great deal of time, energy and resources were needed to maintain the quality of the publication. He thought those resources could best be used to support front-line, direct service operations until the state's budget challenges were less severe. Direct production funding for the publication came from the Office Support Services Division budget.

Inside OKDHS Magazine received the 2002 UPPER CASE Award of Excellence from the Public Relations Society of America, which rated the magazine as the top Internal Communications publication in

Oklahoma.

Suspending the magazine was the latest cuts made in Communications this fiscal year. Earlier, funding for two full-time

of us across the Department right now and everyone has helped," Johnson said. "We will continue to publish the employee newsletter, *Inside OKDHS*, and when possible, we will expand an issue a little to tell the stories of employees and the things they do to be well-rounded citizens in the communities where they live.

"It's important for us to know some of the added dimensions available in our workforce. We are more than just government public servants sitting at computers giving out benefits, which is often the only public portrayals one sees through the media and other public outlets.

"When resources are available, we will resume publishing the magazine to continue telling more in-depth stories about those who deliver Oklahoma human services on the frontlines and behind the scenes."



positions and 20 percent of the office's operating budget were applied to cost-saving measures.

"Things are very tight for all

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SoonerStart is Oklahoma's early intervention program for infants and toddlers with developmental delays from birth to 36 months.

For information call 1-800-426-2747 or click on www.okdhs.org/soonerstart/.



switchboard operator at the Oklahoma County 55-C office. She then worked as a typist clerk for Child Welfare in Oklahoma County before moving to the OKDHS State Office, where she has worked in adoptions and foster care. Today, Rivera uses her years of



experience to track e-mail inquiries for the Children and Family Services Division.

“I track public inquiries about child protective services, foster care, adoptions, you name it,” said Rivera. “We have to make sure that we respond timely to the public. These people have legitimate concerns, and it makes the agency as a whole look bad if it’s even perceived that we’re ignoring them.”

Rivera’s Latin dance group has performed at the Oklahoma City Arts Festival, Oklahoma State Fair, Septemberfest at the Governor’s Mansion, the state Latino Heritage Celebration, Global Oklahoma at Rose State College in Oklahoma City, and the International Festival in Lawton. They’ve also started performing in Bricktown.

“Salsa is really popular right now,” said Rivera. “There’s even an actual Latin club on the canal in Bricktown now.”

Rivera’s daughter, Trinity, 10, usually accompanies her mom when dancing.

“She does tap, flamenco, jazz, hula and hip-hop, she does ballet, but she kind of gets bored with that. She’s a little dancing machine,” said Rivera. “She’s too young to do salsa though. Even though it’s a moderate tempo dance, it’s very

technical and is too seductive for her age.”

Rivera, a single parent, also has a 12-year-old son, Estevan, who has recently taken up hip-hop dancing too. “He likes it, but I don’t really think he’s interested in other kinds of dance,” said Rivera.



“I’ve been raising them by myself for 10 years now,” added

Rivera. “We have the usual challenges. I have to discipline my time and budget, but I have the support of my family. And being involved in dance together is great. I hope that being able to spend more time with them will have a positive influence and help set a good example for when they become parents themselves someday.”

Next on Rivera’s dance card is learning ballroom dancing and to tango.

Activated OKDHS Employees on Frontlines

By Stephanie M. Bond
OKDHS Publications

Twenty OKDHS employees have been called to active duty and are currently protecting the people of the world. These employees, who have pledged dual-allegiance to the state of Oklahoma, as well as to the Army, Navy or Air Force Reserve or the Army or Air National Guard, are currently fulfilling their military missions to support the war in Iraq. OKDHS employees also have more than 100 immediate family members deployed to support the war effort.

“The Department is working to assure that all employees called to active duty, and all employees with family members called to active duty, receive the Department’s full support and consideration,” said Joe Kirk, Human Resources Management Division Employee Services Administrator.

In January HRMD sent emails to managers, supervisors and employees requesting information about those facing military duty and employees with activated family members. Kirk and HRMD Employee Services assistant Tina Tate created a new database to track the employees affected.

“We are working to make sure the Department is in full compliance with all federal and state statutes and rules regarding employees called to active duty,” said Kirk. “We also want to assess the impact that the activation of OKDHS employees will have on the Department as we continue to meet its mission and goals.”

In their March meeting, OKDHS chaplains heard from Oklahoma City Police Department chaplain Jack Poe and military chaplain Capt. Quintin Collins from the 137th Air Wing.

“Many people see the work of

While deployed, the Department pays the difference of the employee’s regular salary and military salary.

At a time when the national economy and the OKDHS budget are very tight, losing the work efforts of 20 employees can affect the Department’s mission. According to federal law and to Department policy (DHS: 2-1-41), activated OKDHS employees will

return to the previous positions they held. In the interim, supervisors and managers have the options of hiring a temporary or unclassified individual for a limited term, assigning the workload to other staff, or detailing another employee to the position.

“We look forward to welcoming our employees back into the OKDHS family,” said Kirk.



a chaplain being only prayer,” said Poe. “The umbrella can be a little broader. We try to address any need the family may have.”

“Every person deployed directly affects six to eight people back home,” said Collins. “It’s important for those left behind to have a strong support system. People don’t realize how much the people at home are impacted.”



Several residents from the Northern Oklahoma Resource Center of Enid (NORCE) designed this flag with the help of staff to display outside their rooms. It was created with their handprints to show support for the U.S. troops overseas. The names of friends and family members of NORCE employees who are currently in Iraq are written on the larger handprints that make up the stripes.

Miles Beyond the Horizon

Foster Children Lack Homes in Area I

By Dustin Pyeatt
Public Information Officer

Oklahoma faces a shortage of quality foster homes for abused and neglected children, but in the sparsely populated area that comprises northwestern

some in the most remote counties like Texas, Woods and Alfalfa.

The lack of foster homes in the Area is especially hard on sibling groups.

“It’s a challenge to place sib-

children have, the better.”

Cole added, “There are also economic concerns as well. The cost of transporting these children across county lines adds up both in time and money. And a lot of these rural schools are



Oklahoma, miles of lonely highway compound the problems.

“We have a critical need for quality foster homes in our area of the state,” said Becky Cole, Oklahoma Department of Human Services Area I Foster Care Resource and Retention Specialist. “There are 23 counties in OKDHS Area I, and within this nearly 25,000 square mile space, there are only 189 foster families to help support more than 620 foster children.”

Of those children, more than half cannot be placed in their community due to the lack of foster homes. Of the 23 counties, 13 have more than half of their foster children placed over the county line. This is especially trouble-

ling groups together even when there are enough foster homes, because not all foster parents will take siblings,” said Cole. “Placing them in different counties makes it more difficult for them to visit each other. It’s not uncommon to have to take them out of school early to make the long drive so they can see their brothers and sisters.”

The miles also hamper the reunification process.

“Having to take them from county to county disrupts their schooling, takes them away from their friends and their churches,” said Cole. “It’s important for these kids to stay connected since they’ve been removed from their homes. The fewer losses these

already strapped for cash. Losing a student doesn’t help. Not to mention child care providers.”

Further, Native American foster homes are also difficult to find in Area 1, said Coal.

“We have more than 80 Native American foster children, but only seven Native American foster homes.”

According to the Indian Child Welfare Act, preference is given to Native American foster homes when placing Native American foster children. Six of the 39 tribal governments located in Oklahoma are based in Area 1.

“It would be easier on everyone if these kids could be placed in their hometown,” said Cole. “Unfortunately, until we have more people stepping up to help, we’ll continue to go where the foster homes are, and out here, that usually means a long, long drive.”

Houser, continued from page 1

program national recognition as one of the top two programs in the country.

“Esther is the only state long-term care ombudsman Oklahoma has ever had,” Keen said. “She is recognized nationally as one of America’s top ombudsman.”

Houser is a charter member of the National Association of Long-term Care Ombudsmen. She served on the executive board from 1989-94 and served two terms as national president; 1989-90 and 1993-94.

Houser has been an outspoken advocate in her role and just what the system needed, according to several who praised her ombudsman work. She has pushed for legislation to increase the levels of care in nursing homes and worked tirelessly on issues that support improving the quality of life for all Oklahomans in the sunset of life.

In her position, Houser leads a

staff of 30 employees and more than 250 volunteer ombudsmen around the state. The ombudsmen visit nursing home facilities on a regular and sometimes unscheduled basis to ensure care providers are delivering quality of care and quality of life.

Many don’t know that Houser served as Oklahoma’s first statewide program coordinator of Protective Services for the Elderly, known today as Adult Protective Services. After starting the APS program as mandated in SB 309 of 1977, she was then recruited to head the state’s new ombudsman initiative.

Houser spends a great deal of her time educating anyone who will listen of the issues affecting the elderly. She worked diligently for the passage of such legislation as the Oklahoma Nursing Home Act of 1980, the Health Care Initiative of 2001 and dozens of

other pieces of legislation over the years to improve the lives of elderly Oklahomans. She speaks and lectures at many Oklahoma colleges and universities. She has authored and co-authored articles on adult protection, health care, nursing home care and mental health.

In 1972, Houser earned her bachelor’s in social work from the University of Oklahoma. She then went to work as a nurse’s aide because it was the closest fit to social work she could find that paid a salary. In August that year she first joined OKDHS. She left Oklahoma several years later to earn a Master’s of Social Work degree from the University of Texas, Austin, in 1977.

In her “spare time,” Houser has been lauded for her work with the Sierra Club. She was named “1999 Sierran of the Year” by the Oklahoma City Regional Group.

This prime space in your employee newsletter is blank because there are good stories in your offices that you didn’t let us know about. When you have a story or story ideas contact us.

Communications@OKDHS.org

Communicating a Clearer Vision of Human Services

The War... Health and Human Services

For most of March and April, we have strained ourselves looking for favor in the war with Iraq. More than 100 of our own OKDHS co-workers or their immediate family members have set aside their civilian clothes and donned the military uniforms of this country to defend freedom as we know it. Freedom is not free and has never been free. In every war we studied in history classes in school, there were illustrations of battles where hundreds, thousands and millions of people died. Today, technology has brought history into our homes in real time. Social scientist are busy trying to figure out how it is affecting us now and changing our children.

While the images we are viewing of the war in the Middle East are vivid and life changing, we need to understand that there is a bigger war we must individually

and collectively fight everyday. Because it is so close to home, we often don't see it as one would see it viewing the battles fought worlds away.

It is a health and human services war. It comes to our doors

Best Foot Forward



dressed in the clothes of our relatives, friends and neighbors. They are listed among the 1.2 million lives in the open case files we carry in the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. The battle is fighting to help families, whatever their composition, overcome weakened and broken lives, to get on their feet and be able to live out the Human

Services mission that hangs over our heads – “to help individuals and families in need help themselves lead safer, healthier, more independent and productive lives.” The battlefield is up the street, down the road and around the corner from where we live.

As long as there is war, we will lose life; however, our individual and collective efforts here at home can save a few lives in our neighborhoods. How well we put our Best Foot Forward in serving those who come to us will be a defining factor. Most of us will not be called upon to fight a war on foreign soil, but we can put our strength into winning the health and human services battles at home by giving the families around us the support and tools they need to help themselves. This is a war worth winning, too...

- George Earl Johnson, Jr.

Help keep our elderly and vulnerable adults healthy and strong. Get involved and support your elderly relatives, friends and neighbors. Pay attention to their physical and mental health, offer them assistance and show them you care. To report suspected abuse or neglect, call 1-800-522-3511 www.okdhs.org/aging

This could have been your space, too!
See page 9.

Communications@OKDHS.org
**Communicating a Clearer
Vision of Human Services**

Independent Living Charts Pathway to Adulthood

By Dustin Pyeatt
Public Information Officer

The walls of the Westin Hotel in downtown Oklahoma City vibrate to the bass of rap music while Cassandra Mack, president



Independent Living Coordinator Claudia Hunter receives a congratulatory hug. Hunter retires from OKDHS in July 2003.

of Strategies for Empowered Living, Inc., of New York, leads a cheering group in a trivia game about urban music.

“Who can tell me who introduced the genre of Gansta Rap to the public,” asks Mack during her session on reaching the Hip Hop Culture during the 2003 Oklahoma Independent Living Pathways to Adulthood Conference.

The difference between rap and hip-hop and understanding the culture can help in understanding foster youth, said Mack. More than 200 child welfare workers, care providers, tribal workers, juvenile court personnel and foster parents attended the two-day conference April 9 – 10.

The Oklahoma Pathways

conference provided the opportunity for youth service professionals throughout the state to network with colleagues, refine their skills in preparing youth for adulthood and also find some inspiration.

“I really enjoy coming,” said Michelle Owens, an OKDHS Washington County permanency planning specialist. “I’ve been getting depressed about cuts to programs that help the youth. I recently had to tell one of my foster youth who was all excited and ready to move into her first apartment that it wouldn’t happen because of funding. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. But listening to these speakers has really spoken to my heart and refueled me.”

Along with speakers like Mack, participants also heard from Mark Kroner, director,

Lighthouse Youth Services, Cincinnati, OH; Charles Lee-Johnson, executive director, National Family Life and Education Center, Culver City, CA; and Steven Pemberton, vice president of Strategy and Development, Monster.com, Framingham, MA. Attendants also had their choice of workshops on subjects like Fatherhood, Mentoring, Making a Connection with Youth and the “Yes I Can” Network.

The 2003 Oklahoma Independent Living Pathways to Adulthood conference was coordinated by the University of Oklahoma National Resource Center for Youth Services and sponsored by the OKDHS Children and Family Services Division’s Independent Living Program.



From left: Cathy Connelly, Children & Family Services Division, Mark Kroner, director, Lighthouse Youth Services, Cincinnati, OH, and Claudia Hunter, Independent Living Coordinator, listen as Peter Correia, executive director, National Resource Center for Youth Services addresses more than 200 participants.

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For registration information contact:

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Deana Pilgrim, (918) 421-6101

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Howard H. Hendrick, Director
Department of Human Services

George Earl Johnson Jr.
Director of Communications

Alice Carrillo
Publications Section Supervisor

Bob Ferguson
Print Shop Supervisor

Editorial Team:

Vacant, Editor

Dustin Pyeatt, Associate Editor

Stephanie Bond, Publications Editor

Carla Garrett, Office Manager

Casey Harvey, Asst. Office Manager

Tony Hennigh, Graphic Artist

Jim Gumm, Photographer

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**Oklahoma Department of
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P.O. Box 25352

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