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***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***

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***Child Advocacy Group Awards Grants to***

***Fight Adverse Childhood Experiences***

OKLAHOMA CITY - The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA) awarded a pair $2,500 grants to two 501(c)3 organizations addressing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

The grants were awarded to the Early Childhood Coalition of Payne County for its “HealthySteps” program and Sunbeam Family Services for its “Nurturing Connection through Touch” program.

The Early Childhood Coalition of Payne County’s HealthySteps program served 2,524 families in 2020. Of the diverse array of families served, 45% were Medicaid recipients, 71% were non-Hispanic or Latino, 19% unknown, 7% were Hispanic and Latino, and 2% declined to specify. The grant funds will pay for direct services to families enrolled in the program.

Laura Shellhammer, executive director of the Early Childhood Coalition of Payne County, said the organization was honored to receive the OICA grant.

“The funds provided will aid us in our work through the HealthySteps program, a direct service program that places a Child Development Specialist as a partner in a pediatric clinic and works with young children and families to promote and develop important skills needed for families to foster healthy child development and life-long well-being,” Shellhammer said. “The program focuses on relationships, providing resources and tools that enable families to break the cycle of ACEs and provide opportunities for the best start in life.”

Sunbeam Family Services helps nearly 8,000 central Oklahoma children, families, and seniors learn, grow, and thrive each year. Their Nurturing Connection through Touch program has been proven to reduce adverse childhood experiences. The project promotes positive parenting and infant mental health through infant massage classes and individual opportunities for parents to learn and build important parenting skills during a child’s critical development period.

“We are so thankful for this generous grant from OICA,” said Sunbeam CEO Sarah Rahhal, LCSW, IMH-E®. “Touch is a baby’s first language. Infant massage is an evidence-based parent education program which promotes and supports attachment and bonding between babies and caregivers. As a child’s first and most important teacher, it is crucial to provide parents the knowledge and skills needed to understand the importance of the earliest experiences. Early life experiences and relationships with caregivers literally builds babies’ brains, creating neural connections and memory which establish the foundation for how they will experience the world for the rest of their lives.”

OICA administered the grants for nonprofit organizations that share OICA’s commitment to reducing ACEs; the funding for the grants came from Anthem, Inc.

“OICA is grateful to Anthem for joining with us to help Sunbeam and the Early Childhood Coalition provide a better future for Oklahoma’s children by addressing adverse experiences today,” said Peyton Stacy, OICA’s director of policy and grant administration. “These grants are another way OICA works with our partner organizations across Oklahoma to make life better for our state’s children.”

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***About OICA***: The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy was established in 1983 by a group of citizens seeking to create a strong advocacy network that would provide a voice for the needs of children and youth in Oklahoma, particularly those in the state’s care and those growing up amid poverty, violence, abuse and neglect, disparities, or other situations that put their lives and future at risk. Our mission statement: “Creating awareness, taking action and changing policy to improve the health, safety, and well-being of Oklahoma’s children.”

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