



## **Oklahoma Native Assets Coalition's Children's Savings Account Program Interim Report Authored by Christy Finsel (Osage), ONAC Executive Director December 2021**

The Oklahoma Native Assets Coalition (ONAC) is an American Indian-led nonprofit network of Native people who are dedicated to increasing self-sufficiency and prosperity in their communities. The coalition has existed since 2001, was classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) in 2014, and is one of only a handful of Native asset building coalitions in operation within the United States.

ONAC administers a Children's Savings Account (CSA) program that provides a nest egg of savings for Native youth, ages birth to twenty-two, and helps them save for asset purchases, such as post-secondary education. ONAC provides the opening deposit for the youth, plus a piggy bank, certificate, and financial education booklet. Most of the accounts are held through a 529 Savings Plan, although some of the tribal partners have chosen to have the youth open their accounts at a financial institution (so the youth have experience with depositing their savings at a local bank branch). ONAC's CSA program is the largest Native CSA program in the country, among programs that track Native youth served.

### **Making the Case for Native CSAs**

Instilling young people with the habit of saving is proven to have long-term benefits. In *The College Savings Initiative*, a joint project between the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis and the New America Foundation in Washington, DC, researchers found that “in multivariate analysis, youth who expect to graduate from a four-year college and have an account are about seven times more likely to attend college than youth who expect to graduate from a four-year college but do not have an account.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the American Indian College Fund, “only 14% of American Indians have a college degree—less than half the national average.”<sup>2</sup> Anecdotally, ONAC has heard from other Native colleagues in Oklahoma that there are scholarship funds available that are not applied for, even though Native youth are eligible applicants.

Part of the college graduation gap for American Indian students is related to family financial insecurity. According to data from a 2017 report from the FINRA Investor Education Foundation and First Nations Development Institute, 32 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native respondents reported that they were

---

<sup>1</sup> Elliott, W. and Beverly, S. (2010). The Role of Savings and Wealth in Reducing “Wilt” between Expectations and College Attendance. *Journal of Children & Poverty*, 17(2), 165-185. Also available at <https://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/WP10-01.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Our Purpose*, American Indian College Fund, accessed February 27, 2018, at <http://collegefund.org/ourwork/>.



not setting aside any money for their children's college education. This represents the lowest college savings rate across all major populations. While there are likely various reasons they are not saving, in the United States, more than 28% of American Indians live in poverty (2010 Census), and the unemployment rates of some tribes reach higher than 80%. Investing in Native families, with CSA opening account deposits, is an important way to address racial equity.

CSAs can help create a pipeline for Native youth to college by helping the youth to think positively about their future and their college plans.

### **Framework for Native Asset Building**

In the ONAC CSA financial education booklet, ONAC recognizes that Native people may think about assets broadly (from a community perspective) and not only as money or individual assets. The coalition also notes that Native communities have been building assets for generations. At the account opening events, the youth are asked to draw assets of value to them, with art supplies provided by ONAC. From account opening events, with permission from the parents, ONAC has included the artwork of twenty-four of the youth in a desk calendar to promote the idea of talking about Native assets throughout the year. ONAC has distributed the calendars to the youth and their families, as well to our partners and other constituents. In the future, ONAC hopes to display the artwork, in an art show, to illustrate the various understandings of assets by Oklahoma Native youth. In June 2016, to support the idea that food security/cultivation is a Native asset, ONAC started distributing organic garden seeds to the Native youth and their families at the account opening events.

### **Community Partner Engagement**

As a Native asset building coalition, ONAC works to increase the capacity of our Native partners to be able to offer sustainable asset building programs. Thus, as part of ONAC's CSA program model, ONAC has formed partnerships with twenty-one partners (tribal programs and Native nonprofits). The partners include the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, Osage Financial Resources, Inc., Citizen Potawatomi Community Development Corporation, Cherokee Nation Child Support Program, Mvskoke Loan Fund, Ponca Tribe Head Start, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, Kaw Nation, Ranch Good Days, Inc., Pawnee Tribe Title VI Elderly Meals Program (accounts were opened by grandparents raising grandchildren), BeLieving In Native Generations, Housing Authority of the Seminole Nation, American Indian Resource Center, Inc., the Scholarship Foundation Program of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Osage Nation Financial Assistance Department, Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma, the Housing Authority of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, the Wyandotte Nation, the Kiowa Tribe, and the Anadarko Public Schools Indian Education Program. Also, in January 2019, ONAC will provide funding, from the Wells Fargo Foundation, to support Native child savings initiatives in North Carolina, Alaska, and Montana.

### **Grant Support and Outcomes to Date**

Since 2014, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, First Nations Development Institute (with support of the Ford Foundation), the Osage Nation Foundation, the 1:1 Fund, private donors, the Administration for Native Americans, the Wells Fargo Foundation, and the Chickasaw Nation, the coalition is administering a CSA program. The CSAs are opened for Native youth, ages birth to age



twenty-two.<sup>3</sup> The accounts may be opened through 529 savings plans or savings accounts at banks or credit unions of the ONAC partner's choice. The majority of the partners are choosing to open the accounts through the Oklahoma 529 plan due to asset limit protections related to the 529 plan. The tribe or Native nonprofits working with ONAC may put their names on the accounts, as custodians, for the benefit of the children though, to date, none have decided to do so as they do not want to be administratively responsible for the accounts. (In some cases the accounts may be opened for 18 plus years if the child is an infant when their parents open their account). To date, ONAC has also decided to not put its name on the accounts as the custodian. The youth may save for asset purchases, such as post-secondary education or other asset purchases (depending upon the tribes and Native nonprofits preferences and how the accounts are held, either in a 529 savings plan or at a financial institution). ONAC provides the opening account deposit for the youth, (\$100 per youth) plus a piggy bank with the ONAC logo, certificate celebrating their account, and an ONAC Native-specific financial education booklet.

As of December 1, 2021, ONAC has funded 1,067 CSAs (1,020 opened and funded by ONAC and 47 more CSAs recently funded through grants to three Native grantees). Of the 1,020 accounts, ONAC opened and funded 963 accounts with its partners, plus funded mini-grants for an initial thirty-five accounts that were opened by the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, as well as awarded two mini-grants to the Kaw Nation and Ranch Good Days, Inc. for twenty-two more accounts, for a total of 1,020 accounts. Of the data available to date, 936 accounts were opened through the Oklahoma 529 College Savings Plan; thirty-five were opened at financial institutions, one bank in Anadarko and another in Tahlequah; twenty accounts were funded by ONAC grantee, the Kaw Nation, (the families could choose to open accounts either through the Oklahoma 529 Savings Plan or at a financial institution of their choice and the tribe did not collect information on the family's choice); four were opened through the HI529-Hawaii's College Savings Plan, and twenty-five were opened through MOST-Missouri's 529 College Savings Plan. (ONAC opened 529 accounts in Hawaii as tribal citizens of The Wichita and Affiliated Tribes reside in that state. ONAC opened 529 accounts in Missouri as both the Wyandotte Nation's and the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma's seats of government, located in Wyandotte, Oklahoma, are based near the border of Oklahoma and Missouri. By the parent's opening the accounts in their respective state 529 plans, they receive state tax benefits for contributions they make to their children's accounts.).

Thus far, 1,018 of the 1,020 accounts funded by ONAC were for American Indian youth (one tribal program serves Native and non-Native youth). Less than 1% of the accounts have been opened for families residing in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Norman (largest metropolitan areas in Oklahoma) and more than 99% of the accounts have been opened for families residing in small cities throughout Oklahoma. Mothers and grandmothers raising grandchildren are 86% of the account owners. ONAC did

---

<sup>3</sup> The 270 ONAC CSAs funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation were for children, ages birth to age eight living at 200% of the federal poverty line. The accounts funded by grant funding from First Nations Development Institute had no age or income stipulations. The accounts funded by the Osage Nation Foundation were for Osage youth up to age eighteen. The accounts funded by the Administration for Native Americans, the Wells Fargo Foundation, and the 1:1 Fund are for Native youth up to age twenty-two.



not collect data on the ages, gender, or if their tribal youth were living at or below 200% of the federal poverty line for the twenty-seven accounts opened by the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes during their pilot CSA mini-grant project. ONAC collected the data on gender and if the tribal youth were living at or below 200% of the federal poverty line for the eight United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians but did not collect the ages of those same United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians youth. The Kaw Nation collected gender and age information but did not collect income information on the twenty Kaw Nation youth who received funding for accounts. ONAC collected available age, gender, and income information for the two youth that ONAC mini-grant awardee, Ranch Good Days, Inc., worked with to open accounts.

Since December 2015, ONAC has collected the following income data on 971 of the 1,020 accounts we have funded:

- 814 youth living at or below 200% of the federal poverty line
- 157 youth living above 200% of the federal poverty line

Additionally, since December 2015, ONAC collected the following gender data on 993 of the 1,020 accounts we funded:

- 514 youth identified as boys
- 480 youth identified as girls

ONAC collected age data on 983 of 1,020 Youth Account Owners as of December 2021. This data is included below.

Age	Under 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Numbers of youth that age	47	49	45	82	63	60	61	53	75

Age	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Numbers of youth that age	46	58	44	50	60	43	37	37	31	17

Age	19	20	21	22
Numbers of youth that age	9	8	6	5



Given this data, there is evidence that the families desire these accounts even if the youth is a teenager or young adult. While ONAC promotes the idea of starting earlier in saving for college, parents thought it important to still open accounts for older youth/young adults at ONAC account opening events.

The ONAC CSA program has served Native families who reside in Gracemont, El Reno, Anadarko, Choctaw, Oklahoma City, Chickasaw, Watonga, Wyandotte, Miami, Fairland, Quapaw, Afton, Pawhuska, Kiefer, Mustang, Okmulgee, Glenpool, Verden, Ponca City, McLoud, Pawnee, Wewoka, Earlsboro, Seminole, Yale, Tulsa, Tahlequah, Hulbert, Park Hill, Muskogee, Carnegie, Welling, Rose, Watts, Midwest City, Proctor, Soper, Tonkawa, Blackwell, Wellston, Newkirk, Norman, Burbank, Hominy, Fairfax, Wynona, Skiatook, Shawnee, Tecumseh, Tuttle, Ft. Cobb, Guthrie, Lookeba, Earlsboro, Enid, Stigler, Shawnee, Morris, Apache, Moore, Cyril, Konawa, Mountain View, Coyle, Stilwell, Beggs, Spiro, Salina, Weatherford, Bristow, and Mounds, Oklahoma. Also, the program has served Native families residing in Joplin and Rogersville, Missouri.

### **Innovation in Addressing Gaps and Championing Community Assets**

ONAC has championed culturally-relevant CSA models that build community assets. Program innovations include:

- Wichita and Affiliated Tribes administered a Wichita SummerSmart Youth Program where, in addition to building tribal pride through teaching Wichita history and culture and promoting good health practices, they offered savings accounts for the interns and youth participants as well as financial education classes. During the program, with the grant funds, they opened twenty-seven Children's Savings Accounts (including four accounts for their youth interns). The children learned about tribal presidents, aboriginal homelands of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, traditional foods such as corn, and their language. They were introduced to a wide variety of physical activities such as dodgeball, kickball, and other sports. They were also provided nutrition classes by their Food Distribution staff. A banker came and discussed with them the importance of saving money, and the children noted the things they would like to save for in the future. Wichita and Affiliated Tribes President, Terri Parton, also held a discussion with the youth to reemphasize the importance of saving for things that they wanted and needed.

As an expansion of their pilot project, on December 8, 2016, President Terri Parton hosted an ONAC CSA account opening event at the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes community center in Anadarko, Oklahoma. Thirty accounts were opened that night. The Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, hosted the CSA event at the tribal community center (complete with Christmas cookies and punch). The accounts were available to tribal youth, first-come, first serve. The tribe sent letters to eligible tribal members to alert them to this opportunity. During the event, ONAC worked with the parents and grandparents to open the accounts. Several youth participated in the art project and a few children took home art supplies to work further on a piece of art that illustrates their understanding of Native assets. President Parton greeted each family and added the children's names to the certificates celebrating their account. On August 2, 2018, President Parton worked with ONAC to host another account opening event. ONAC funded thirty-one accounts that day. On March 1, 2019, ONAC attended another account opening event and funded forty-four more accounts.



- The Mvskoke Loan Fund held a CSA opening event that coincided with a Muscogee (Creek) Movie Night at the Dome (where the tribe shows a full length children's movie). They opened 116 Children's Savings Accounts with Muscogee (Creek) parents/guardians through the Oklahoma 529 College Savings Plan. Building from Indigenous teachings that assets are not only money, the Mvskoke Loan Fund invited a Muscogee (Creek) artist, Daniel Wind III, to display his work. Muscogee college students volunteered to work with the youth attendees on artwork that the youth created to express their understandings of assets. The youth drew pictures of their families, homes, flowers and trees, food, and a person graduating and getting a job.
- The Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma opened a total of sixty-one ONAC Children's Savings Accounts for youth enrolled in a financial education program they provided, as well as for children who attend their Early Childhood Learning Center and summer program. In 2016 and 2017, they held a total of two College Savings Plan Nights at their Early Childhood Learning Center. During those events, they scheduled supervised playtime and dinner. At one of the events, they also offered storytelling and a Native arts project. Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma Chief Glenna Wallace's schedule allowed her to attend one of the events to support tribal staff and to encourage the parents and youth to deposit more funds in the account over the years.

### **Scalability and Replicability**

In Oklahoma, among the CSA partners, there is interest in 450 more accounts than ONAC has the funding to support. Additionally, there is interest in Native CSAs around the country from other Native communities.

ONAC is in a position to scale this CSA project nationally. The ONAC board has granted approval for ONAC to open CSAs in any state in the United States to meet the needs of our constituents as tribal citizens from Oklahoma-based tribes reside in numerous states. The board has also approved for ONAC to open CSAs in other states, with Native communities, if interest from other communities arises.

ONAC believes this CSA program is replicable. The coalition has shared information about the CSA models nationally via our newsletter and by presenting information about the program at national convenings. Also, in regard to replicability, ONAC has worked with child support contacts to explore alternatives to forgiveness of state assigned child support arrears as such forgiveness it is not allowed in Oklahoma due to the wording of the state constitution. This gap in arrears forgiveness and CSA development in Oklahoma, led ONAC, with the Cherokee Nation Office of Child Support Services, to arrive at an alternative option that tribally-administered child support programs may want to offer their clients. To add extra incentive for parents served by the Cherokee Nation Office of Child Support Services to deposit funds into their children's accounts, they will offer the custodial and noncustodial parents, who have establishment and enforcement cases, an offer for private mediation. If both parties are willing, and the non-custodial parent owes a custodial parent money, in order to work a good obligation, the non-custodial parent may deposit money into the CSA for the benefit of their child. This reduces the non-custodial parent's debt, and helps the child to have a bigger nest egg of savings. This ONAC CSA model, with an added debt reduction component, may be a replicable model for other tribally administered child support programs.



### **Contact**

For further information about ONAC and the CSA program, contact Christy Finsel, ONAC Executive Director, at [cfinsel@oknativeassets.org](mailto:cfinsel@oknativeassets.org). ONAC's website address is [www.oknativeassets.org](http://www.oknativeassets.org).

**All material is copyrighted and is not intended for reprint unless permission is specifically granted by Christy Finsel.**