



Notes from the Chief

What I'm working on for You



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Across America at least 95 percent of people incarcerated in state prisons will be released back into their communities at some point. Successful transitions are challenging, as reintegrating into life on the outside is hard for all parties and families. Difficulty securing employment and stable housing, combined with re-establishing healthy family relationships, can prompt severe anxiety without the proper support system.

Cherokee Nation is addressing the issue by helping our citizens get their life back after paying their dues. That investment is paying off for our people and for the state of Oklahoma. Since we initiated the Cherokee Nation's "Coming Home" program five years ago, more than 500 Cherokees have been assisted with employment, vocational training, counseling and other essential social services. Over half of those served are between the ages of 25 and 39 and we have helped citizens in all of our 14 counties of governmental jurisdiction.

We want to help our citizens succeed in this new chapter of their life. Everything we do helps ensure they do not end up back behind bars, and the success rate has been astounding. The program's budget is about \$130,000 per year, with the bulk of that funding going to direct client services. The jobs we have helped our citizens secure means our investment over the past five years has yielded more than \$3 million in tax revenue within the Cherokee Nation jurisdiction. The return on investment monetarily is significant but the investment in our people and giving them a second chance to succeed and live a meaningful and productive life is priceless. We are trying to make a difference, starting when former Cherokee inmates are released and continuing through the weeks and months that follow as they work to get their lives back on track.

National data shows that re-entry programs are effective at reducing recidivism and improving life circumstances for former prisoners, and the Coming Home program is proof of that. Oklahoma has a

27 percent recidivism rate, while Cherokee Nation's program has only a 10 percent recidivism rate. When you multiply that rate on the 500 Cherokees who have been through the Coming Home program, it represents a cost savings to the state of more than \$9 million, as the average cost to house a prisoner is \$24,000 per year in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma has some of the toughest criminal laws and harshest punishments in America, and we consistently rank as one of the highest rates for incarceration in the nation. If we want to reduce Oklahoma's continual prison overpopulation, ex-offenders need more compassion and understanding as they navigate the reintegration system so that re-arrests and re-incarceration trend down instead of up. Additionally, Oklahoma's elected policymakers must address our judicial sentencing inequities. Our corrections system and laws must be reformed so that we rehabilitate people, treat their mental health issues and provide non-violent offenders opportunities to be productive citizens. In addition to being the right thing to do, it's cheaper than simply locking a person away.

Working with Cherokee Nation citizens as they get that second chance is uplifting. As we help them ease back into society and reconnect them with home and family, it means we have fulfilled our responsibility. We can never give up on our people, especially those serving time for non-violent criminal offenses. Our Coming Home staff works long hours to help Cherokees with all of their needs. Some of our staff have been incarcerated in the past in their own life and know firsthand the uphill battle. Because they care and want to see fellow Cherokees succeed, Coming Home succeeds.

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