



## Media Award Nomination

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Mental Health Association Oklahoma nominates Jaclyn Cosgrove, health reporter for the statewide Oklahoman newspaper, for your prestigious Media Award.

This is why Jaclyn is not only the most dedicated and compassionate mental health reporter in Oklahoma, but also the nation:

When Jaclyn first visited the intake portion of the Oklahoma County jail, she stood wondering how life would be so much different for a woman who had committed a crime if Oklahoma's mental health system wasn't, as Jaclyn said, "a fractured, perpetually underfunded hodgepodge of services that left people with few options."

Looking around Oklahoma, Jaclyn realized hundreds of Oklahomans were on a waiting list to receive state-funded mental health and substance abuse services. But community mental health centers had to turn people away because they weren't "sick enough," even if they met the income criteria. This is like turning someone with chest pains away for services and telling them to come back when they are having a heart attack.

Seeing the need to tell this powerful story, Jaclyn applied for, and received, the prestigious 2015-16 Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism. Jaclyn's year-long series, "Epidemic Ignored," focused on low-income, uninsured Oklahomans diagnosed with mental illness and substance use disorders.

"This is an opportunity to shape policy through our storytelling," Jaclyn wrote in her fellowship application. "Until state leaders change their approach, too many Oklahomans will spend their nights chained to walls, rather than receive the treatment they need and deserve."

Jaclyn's yearlong Oklahoman investigation funded by the Carter Fellowship found her talking to individuals and families, advocates, people with power and those without any power at all. However, she could not talk to 51-year-old Benjamin Ferguson.

"Known as 'Benny' to his family, Benjamin was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 19," Jaclyn wrote in her story. "When he was on his medicine and receiving care, Benjamin was a kind, funny and thoughtful person. He was an attentive father."

Instead of knowing Benny, Jaclyn could only read the tragic documents that coldly laid out the timeline of events that chronicle how this father eventually died alone in his jail cell.

The question was: What set tragedies like this in motion?

“Years ago, when Oklahoma closed its large psychiatric hospitals, the state inadvertently turned patients into inmates,” Jaclyn wrote. “For decades, Oklahoma has spent among the least in the nation on its mental health system. Meanwhile, Oklahoma has one of the highest rates of adults with serious mental illnesses.”

In her story, Jaclyn revealed these gut-wrenching statistics:

- Only one of three Oklahomans who need treatment receives it. Oklahoma has, instead, chosen to spend its dollars on the least effective, costliest form of “treatment” — the criminal justice system.
- The cost of a year of state-funded mental health treatment: \$2,000. The cost of a year in prison for someone with serious mental illness: \$23,000.
- At last count, 60 percent of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections’ population, **Seventeen Thousand People**, have either symptoms or a history of mental illness. It’s the equivalent of jailing 20 percent of Edmond.

Reading statistics and hearing stories like Benjamin's made Emily Brandenburg, who serves on Mental Health Association Oklahoma’s Board of Directors, furious.

"Once I started reading all four chapters of 'Epidemic Ignored,' I couldn't put it down until I was done," Emily said. "Jaclyn's presentation and the stories from the families and jailers just painted the picture, and it's a picture that's hard to look at! It only fuels my drive to advocate for better solutions and helped me get a feeling of comradery with these families who struggle to get the right care for their loved one in a system that doesn't allow them to."

Halfway through Jaclyn's investigation, Jaclyn was asked what made her the most angry about Oklahoma’s broken mental health and criminal justice system.

“After the legislative session I was pretty angry because it just felt like reporters and advocates have been pointing out the solution is not that complicated: People need access to treatment,” she said. “I was very frustrated after this session because there was a lot of hope for progress, and it seemed like there was a feeling in the mental health community that there was momentum for change. Until we see that momentum from the public and from lawmakers and from the media, I think we’re going to continue to lose two people a day to suicide, and hundreds of people with mental illness and substance use disorders to jails and prisons. That is a tragedy that hurts everybody, and it hurts me to think about. Those are people we are losing every day.”

In the first of a four-part series, Jaclyn examined how four Oklahomans died in jails across the state. Their families shared a common experience: not giving up on the people they loved. Collectively, they've driven hundreds of miles across the state in search of care, and they've faced many of the same barriers. And despite their best efforts, they all got the same phone call. Chapter 1 online at: [www.mhaok.org/chapterone](http://www.mhaok.org/chapterone).

In the second "Epidemic Ignored" chapter, Jaclyn examined how "jails across the state have responded, or ignored, the needs of inmates with mental illnesses and substance use disorders." Chapter 2 online at: [www.mhaok.org/chaptertwo](http://www.mhaok.org/chaptertwo).

Chapter three was spent chronicling how "lack of accountability not only leaves thousands of jailed Oklahomans vulnerable to abuse, but also sets up taxpayers to finance the mistakes of jail staffs." Chapter 3 online at: [www.mhaok.org/chapterthree](http://www.mhaok.org/chapterthree)

For the final chapter, Jaclyn focused on solutions, because, as she wrote, "without change, many Oklahomans with mental illnesses and substance use disorders will funnel into jails and prison, the least effective and costliest form of 'treatment.'" Chapter 4 online at: [www.mhaok.org/chapterfour](http://www.mhaok.org/chapterfour).

At the end of the final chapter, Jaclyn quotes from an 80-year-old National Mental Hospital Survey Committee: "Whatever the future may bring, Oklahoma cannot look on itself with pride until provision is made for adequate care of its mentally helpless citizens."

And so Jaclyn left her readers with these final words:

"The future did not bring change. Instead, Oklahoma repeatedly has been cited as a state with high rates of mental illness and drug abuse — and little action.

"Already this year, at least 725 Oklahomans have died by suicide. That's almost two people per day.

"Suicide is preventable — when people can access treatment.

"Jail time is preventable — when people can access treatment.

"Homelessness is preventable — when people can access treatment.

"Whatever the future may bring, history and research show that Oklahoma cannot look on itself with pride until its lawmakers, state leaders and residents take responsibility for an epidemic ignored."

## **A Q&A with Jaclyn Cosgrove**

On Mental Health Association Oklahoma's blog, Jaclyn shared what she learned as she investigated and reported stories of what happens while Oklahomans wait for care they likely will never receive.

**Q: Throughout your reporting, what has surprised you the most about Oklahoma's mental health system?**

**A:** It's always been surprising to me how hard it is to get people the help they need. When you have any serious illness, it can be a challenge. But the challenges individuals face when trying to get quality and consistent care needed for their serious and persistent mental illness, especially when they don't have the money to pay for it, it's really alarming. I wish more of the public understood that, because they ask, "Why don't 'these people' get help?" Trust me, they would if they could. I went to a prison and was there for three days. I was meeting inmates and they were telling me their stories. It's honestly just gut-wrenching because if we would have helped these folks, I question whether they would have ended up in prison. In some cases, they have victims and that's what makes it even more sad -- when they hurt themselves or someone else. That's been really hard and surprising. I was also surprised that Oklahoma has never made a sustained effort to fund its mental health system. I just think the state has repeatedly dealt with the negative consequences of that.

**Q: What's the one piece of feedback you've received from a reader that has stuck with you?**

**A:** I talked to a father who has an adult son living with serious and persistent mental illness. The father told me that his son had called 911 six times saying that he was hearing voices and that he needed help. The operator had allegedly told him that because he didn't have a physical illness there was nothing that could be done for him. Shortly after that, he attacked both of his parents with a knife, but they both survived. It reminds me that there are all these tiny fractures in this thing we call the mental health system. They are a reminder that there isn't one thing to fix. People ask me, "What's the solution?" My answer is that we need a comprehensive mental health system that actively diverts people from jails and prisons and into treatment. It's not one answer. That's a mindset change that we just don't have right now because that's going to take public support, in terms of people calling their lawmakers. It's also going to take leadership and take politicians being interested and engaged beyond just saying they will do something about it.

**Q: You're presenting at Mental Health Association Oklahoma's 2016 National Zarrow Mental Health Symposium about the power of storytelling to combat the stigma of mental illness. What do you want your audience to remember the most?**

A: I want to show people that one of our biggest ways to combat stigma is to have people doing well in their recovery share their stories with the media, social media, blogs, etc. That's a story that doesn't get told enough. We don't see enough healthy people in the news. I'm not saying that we should use storytelling to create a positive image that's not true. I'm saying that we often focus on the negative, so we need to create a more well-rounded image of mental illness. Show the suffering. Show the pain. Show what happens when the system breaks down. But also show when the system does work and people do get the treatment they need. We need to show all sides to really combat stigma.

**Q: You started the Facebook group Oklahoma's Addiction and Mental Health Community a few years ago. Tell me about its rapid growth and how it has helped people seeking advice.**

A: I started that group in April 2014 because I wanted to have a Facebook group where people could talk about the issues they face and where we could get to know each other. Essentially, I wanted to see what would happen. The group has grown a ton. I was excited when we had 60 people in the beginning and now we have more than 1,500; most are from Oklahoma, which makes me really happy. The great thing about the group is I've seen people get connected to care, which has been amazing. We've had people post who were in a very vulnerable place and to see a stranger say, "I've been there before and it's going to be OK, I promise," that's been beautiful.