

Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty

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TOO MANY OKLAHOMA CHILDREN ARE DYING: PLEASE SUPPORT SB393

SB393 sends a clear message that all parents have a legal duty to provide medical care to their children when a reasonable, prudent person would do so. This bill is needed to prevent children from dying without medical care in faith-healing sects who believe that Oklahoma law allows parents to withhold medical care from sick children on religious grounds.

With no debate or discussion Oklahoma added a religious defense to felony neglect in 2010, the only state to enact a religious exemption to child abuse or neglect laws since 1997. While this may have been unintentional, it has dire consequences for Oklahoma children. **SB393** corrects the neglect law with language from the omission to provide statute.

Freedom of religion is a precious right, but it should not include a right to abuse or neglect a child.

Many Oklahoma children have died because of religious beliefs against medical care, and the state has rarely spoken up for these children. We know of only seven cases in Oklahoma history in which criminal charges were filed for deaths due to religion-based medical neglect.

In May, 2012, CHILD President Rita Swan walked through two Lincoln County cemeteries, Parkland and Flynn, which are used primarily by the Churches of the Firstborn. There she saw graves of 64 children and infants who had died since January 1, 1975.

Oklahoma has statewide data on the number of child fatalities and stillbirths for the years 1992 through 2007. During those years 549,157 Oklahomans died including the stillbirths. 1.8% of these or 9,689 of these were children 0-14 years old or stillbirths.

The Parkland and Flynn Cemeteries have 478 graves of persons who died during the years 1992 through 2007. Of those 5% or 24 are children 0-14 years old or stillbirths.

These children constitute a greatly disproportionate share of the graves there: nearly three times higher than the statewide proportion of deaths among children 0-14 years old and stillbirths.

Our data are for only two cemeteries in one county. A 2006 directory of Churches of the Firstborn lists 41 COF churches throughout Oklahoma, more than in any other state, and claims hundreds of families belong to them.

In 2009 Oklahoma's infant mortality rate was 7.9 per 1000 live births; the national infant mortality rate for 2009 was 6.4.

With so many babies dying, Oklahoma should at least send a clear message that all parents must provide their children with the necessities of life.

Oklahoma's current laws discriminate against children in faith-healing sects by depriving them of protections the state extends to others. Please support **SB393** to establish clearly that Oklahoma values all its children and therefore all parents have a duty to provide their children with the necessities of life regardless of their religious beliefs.