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Tulsa's Blue Team Builds Trust, Breaks **Cycle of Chronic Homelessness**

by **Ginnie Graham**

permanent shelter. (Rip Stell/Oklahoma Watch)

For nearly a decade, Staci Owens struggled to keep consistent shelter. The 53year-old had confrontations with landlords, friends and shelter providers

Staci Owens giggles at a question during her interview on Oct. 30, 2025. Owens was recently homeless but has been provided a room in a hotel and is making progress towards finding

but said she doesn't believe those affect her much. Things changed about two years ago when a member of the Blue Team, a newly formed outreach team at the Tulsa Day Center, developed a friendship with her. She was convinced to get off the streets, take medication regularly

Three months ago, Owens progressed enough to be placed in a unit at a

secured motel used as temporary housing by the Tulsa Day Center. She has

decorated its walls with art she made, keeps her medical appointments and

always returned and rebuilt. She was diagnosed with depression and anxiety

that resulted in bans from their properties. Her family relationships were

Owens lived in a tent under a bridge near downtown Tulsa that would

occasionally get swept away with all her possessions by city officials. She

strained, and a felony conviction complicated matters.

and work toward goals for permanent housing.

meets with the team at least once a week.

who do not recognize they are ill.

admissions for crisis care.

43 people meeting the criteria.

results.

Day Center.

up the work.

hope it worked

promise not to let me go homeless," Owens said. "I believe that. They did fight for me. They did stick up for me." The Blue Team is the first in the nation rooted in a method of outreach, shelter and treatment for people who are homeless, have a mental health

disorder and show signs of anosognosia, a condition referring to patients

"I trust these people with housing more than the others because they

While only 10% to 20% of the total homeless population are in this group,

In Oklahoma, about 1,000 residents fall into this category. It's this group

revolving doors of incarcerations, emergency room visits and involuntary

experiencing decades-long chronic homelessness and going through

they place the biggest demand on community resources.

In September 2022, the Tulsa Day Center created the Blue Team from training provided by the LEAP Institute, founded by psychologist Xavier Amador. He launched a field of research about 35 years ago, applying anosognosia to mental health.

The Blue Team released its first outcomes data, which shows promising

In the team's first year, they spent time educating their partners about this

new approach. Then, from September 2023 to Sep. 30, the team worked with

Of those, all but one remain in a stabilizing shelter. The group included 19 people finding long-term housing and treatment. The others are working toward goals to enter permanent housing but live in a motel room or at Tulsa

All have consistent check-ins from a Blue Team member. The one person

Blue Team Director Kellie Wilson, a retired commercial banker, said she

didn't want to put too much attention on the effort until the numbers backed

"I wanted solid data behind us," Wilson said. "When we set out to do this, the

one thing I said is that we are not going to be the flavor of the day. We aren't

going to go out there, be splashy and say, 'Let's do this or let's try that' and

"This is the real deal," she said. "We are continuing to learn. We haven't

figured it all out. But we have enough data now that tells us we are doing

The method resembles more of a toolbelt than a formula, focusing on

relationship building even when people are combative or resistant.

something right. And, it also tells me that this can be replicated."

who returned to homelessness has since come back into the shelter.

"This has allowed us to make a difference in places where we have been frustrated for years," Wilson said. "So for us to be able to make some headway is very important to us."

The critical piece of the Blue Team is understanding anosognosia. The term

was coined in 1914 by neurologist Joseph François Babinski to describe the

moved away from the belief that a person resisting treatment for a mental illness was doing so out of denial or stubbornness. Anosognosia has been part of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health Disorders by the American Psychiatric Association for 25

years. In 2000, Amador founded the LEAP Institute, which has trained

thousands of professionals internationally.

model. The technique validates a Members of the Blue Team pay a visit o Staci Owens. person's beliefs to reduce conflict Owens was recently homeless but has been provided a room in a hotel and is making progress towards finding and move toward a common goal. permanent shelter. (Rip Stell/Oklahoma Watch) Several studies indicate that

anosognosia affects about 60% of people with schizophrenia, 25% of those

with schizoaffective disorders and 50% of people with bipolar disorder.

training session for community members with a focus on mental health and criminal justice professionals, law enforcement, educators and families. More than 300 people completed the training.

Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. "The LEAP Institute training supports our students who intern in area agencies and, upon graduation, go on to work in the field of mental health as licensed professional counselors who encounter and address the devastating impact of anosognosia."

Oklahoma City doesn't yet have a team similar to the Blue Team, said Jamie

"We are seeing a definite need for coordinated higher level of care for some

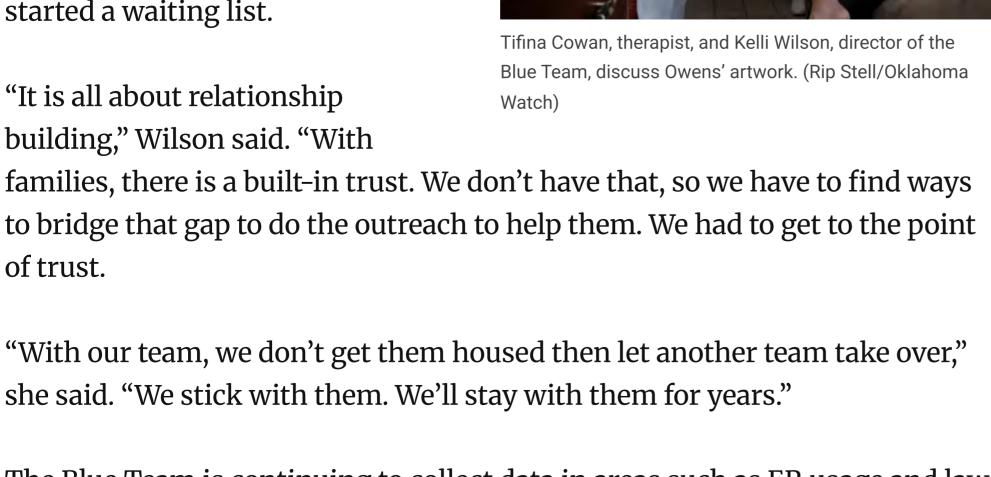
Caves, homeless strategy implementation manager for the Key to Home

Caves said estimates indicate about 5% of its unhoused population shows

The Blue Team keeps its caseload to one worker per eight clients to provide enough attention. The team

would be eligible for this case management. The team recently started a waiting list. "It is all about relationship building," Wilson said. "With of trust.

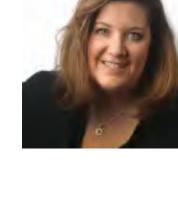
support everyone," Caves said.



In five years, Owens said, she sees herself in a tiny home. She plans to work on her health and would like to restore relationships with her family,

"I want to hang out with my kids more," Owens said. "I'm always thinking about having the holidays, and I used to have them. I wish I could have a

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In early September, the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa hosted Amador with a

The traditional approach focused on

convincing people they were sick

"The Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate degree program at OU-Tulsa specifically works with area mental health agencies, addressing issues related to anosognosia and its impact on individuals, families, and communities," said Linda Barnum, OU-Tulsa assistant professor in the

anosognosia. "Like most communities, we are still struggling to find effective tools to

"Our goal is not two years' sustainability but to see a five-year retention rate on these individuals," said Tulsa Day Center Executive Director Mack Haltom. "I'm pleased with the numbers. We have a frontline piece that is working."

including her two children and a grandchild.

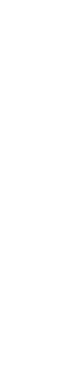
holiday where the kids would want to come to."







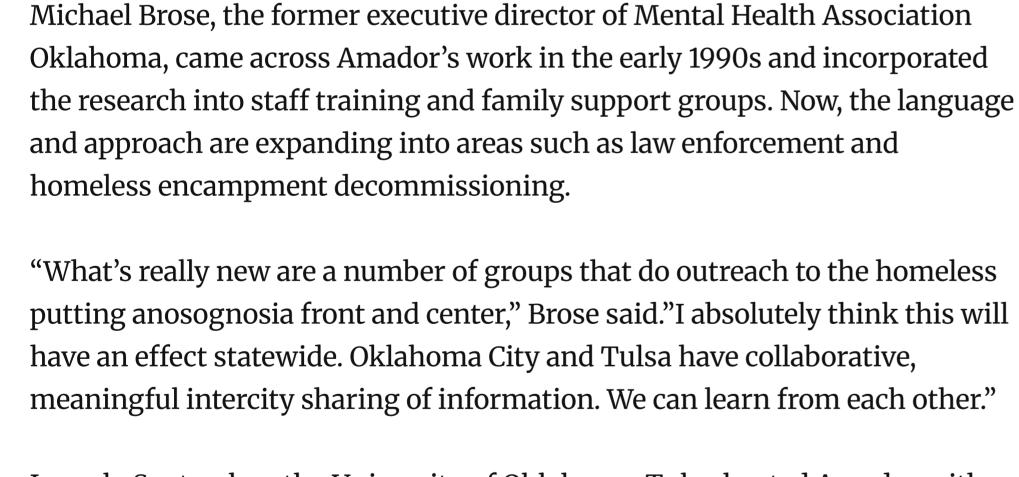




symptoms of patients unaware of their paralysis, such as slurring words or not seeing that their limbs were immobile. In 1991, Amador, a clinical psychologist on the medical school faculty at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York,

published a paper about anosognosia in patients with schizophrenia. That

and needed treatment. A person with anosognosia would often lash out, insisting they were fine and the problem lies with other people. The LEAP method follows a listen, empathize, agree and partner



Partnership.

individuals," Caves said. "We are just beginning to have conversations about what a complex case team could look like and how we could partner with other systems to provide better support. Next year, we will begin the work to design a complex case team and program model in Oklahoma City."

has six members. On any given day, there are between 70 and 80 people who are homeless in Tulsa who

