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SWOSU Included in \$55 Million Oklahoma Healthcare Workforce Plan



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The Oklahoma State Legislature has approved \$10 million in pandemic relief funds to assist Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU) with establishing a new rural healthcare center on the Weatherford campus.

SWOSU is included in a \$55 million healthcare workforce training plan recently adopted by the legislature and enacted into law. The plan aims at increasing the number of healthcare professionals in Oklahoma. SWOSU's funds are part of the \$1.8 billion American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding granted to Oklahoma and will assist in the building of the Jerry and Margaret Hodge Pharmacy and Rural Health Center.

"The legislature has asked our state's institutions of higher education to step up and help meet the healthcare workforce needs of Oklahoma," SWOSU President Dr. Diana Lovell said. "SWOSU views this charge as a core tenet of our public service mission and why we stand firmly on the Hilltop."

SWOSU will combine the \$10 million in ARPA funding with \$5 million in private support already received from SWOSU alumnus Jerry Hodge and his wife, Margaret, of Amarillo (TX). The Hodges' contribution, which was announced in 2021, represents the largest charitable gift in SWOSU history. An additional \$7 million in support will be provided via the Yes! Weatherford economic development sales tax extension initiative, which was approved by Weatherford voters in 2020.

The Hodge Center project will enable SWOSU's healthcare programs in nursing and allied health to substantially increase capacity and will significantly enhance the university's pharmacy doctoral program. The building will also expand the community health services of the SWOSU Center for Rural Health. The center will allow for more strategic partnerships with other higher education institutions that could lead to SWOSU students having access to a physician's assistant program and the possibility of a dual degrees program through the SWOSU College of Pharmacy.

"SWOSU has worked with our generous supporters in the city of Weatherford and with our involved, visionary philanthropic benefactors Jerry and Margaret Hodge—to whom we are abidingly and deeply grateful—to steward this pandemic relief funding in a way that will transform all of SWOSU's healthcare programs," Lovell said.

Upon enactment of the ARPA Act, Oklahoma received \$1.8 billion in pandemic relief funding for investment into projects that will benefit Oklahomans. To ensure funds are allocated in a responsible and transparent manner, the Legislature and Governor Kevin Stitt formed the Joint Committee on Pandemic Relief Funding. SWOSU's proposal for \$10 million in funding was unanimously approved by a Health & Human Services Working Group and subsequently by the Joint Committee. SWOSU's \$10 million in ARPA funding was included in the \$55 million healthcare workforce training plan adopted by the Legislature on May 27.

"Special thanks are certainly due to Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat and Senators John Haste, Chuck Hall, Brent Howard and Darcy Jech and Speaker Charles McCall and Representatives Kyle Hilbert, Anthony Moore, Mike Dobrinski and Todd Russ for their visionary leadership in delivering an historic investment to Oklahoma's healthcare programs," Lovell said. "We are also appreciative to our higher education governing board regents who took the time to learn about our Hodge Center proposal including A&M Regents Joe D. Hall and Jimmy Harrel and RUSO Regents Lake Carpenter, Connie Reilly, Amy Ford and Susan Winchester. Chancellor Allison Garrett and Oklahoma State University President Kayse Shrum have also been very helpful in this ongoing process. Weatherford Mayor Mike Brown has also been an invaluable partner as have all citizens of Weatherford who continue to support investment in the positive relationship between the Weatherford community and SWOSU. And my predecessor, former SWOSU President Dr. Randy Beutler, truly deserves high praise for commencing this important and impactful undertaking."

A groundbreaking date and ceremony for Hodge Center will be announced by the university.