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OCTOBER 2026

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The Economic Benefits of Paying Workers to Move

A new study finds that Tulsa's effort to lure remote workers with $10,000 has returned four times that investment back into the local economy.



Centennial Park in downtown Tulsa. *Photographer: DenisTangneyJr/iStockphoto via Getty Images*

FORTUNE MAR. 23, 2026

NEWSLETTERS • FORTUNE WORKPLACE INNOVATION

Tulsa paid workers $10,000 to relocate—and unlocked an $878 million talent boom

By **Kristin Stoller**
Editorial Director, Fortune Live Media

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March 23, 2026, 8:11 AM ET

FOX NEWS SEPT. 10, 2025

MEDIA

Remote California workers paid $10K to relocate to Oklahoma praise their new home state

The Tulsa Remote program has attracted hundreds of people from the Golden State

By Lindsay Kornick · Fox News

Published September 10, 2025 9:00pm EDT

NEW YORK TIMES OCT. 16, 2024

The New York Times

Can Remote Workers Reverse Brain Drain?

Researchers found that when remote workers were paid to move to Tulsa, Okla., everyone came out ahead.

LOS ANGELES TIMES AUG. 15, 2025

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Hundreds of Californians have been paid $10,000 to relocate to Oklahoma. Did they find paradise?

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Bloomberg News: The Economic Benefits of Paying Workers to Move

A new study finds that Tulsa's effort to lure remote workers with $10,000 has returned four times that investment back into the local economy.

By Rthvika Suvarna and Fola Akinnibi
May 29, 2025

Tulsa, Oklahoma has paid over 3,400 remote workers $10,000 each to move to the city since 2018, as part of a program to attract new residents and diversify the workforce.
A new study finds that the program has generated over $4 in local economic benefits for every dollar spent, creating new jobs, boosting incomes, and building the city's tax base.
The program's success is attributed to its social infrastructure, including networking and coworking spaces, which helps remote workers acclimate to the city and stay long-term, with 96% of participants staying for the year duration and 70% still remaining today.
When Kagan Conaway saw an Instagram ad offering remote workers $10,000 to move to Tulsa, Oklahoma, she thought it was a scam. The Indiana native had just returned to her home state after living in Wisconsin and was looking for a change. She'd never even been to Oklahoma.

Conaway, 25, was accepted into Tulsa's program and moved in July 2024 after a visit. "I fell in love with the city after just a few days," she said.

Tulsa has paid Conaway and more than 3,400 others to live and work in the city since 2018, as part of a push to attract new residents and diversify a workforce that's reliant on the oil and gas industry. Tulsa Remote is one of the first and largest of roughly 100 similar programs in the US.

Such programs rose in popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic, as some cities developed economic strategies that focused on attracting individuals rather than companies. But questions remained about their long-term impact on the local economies they're intended to benefit.

A new study finds that Tulsa Remote has generated more than $4 in local economic benefits for every dollar spent, boosting incomes for existing Tulsa residents and creating new jobs, while building the city's tax base. That's far more than the typical 2-to-1 ratio for traditional incentive programs to attract large employers, according to the study from senior economist Timothy Bartik at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

Those findings are instructive for cities looking at ways to attract jobs, said Bartik. Economic development programs that give big businesses tax abatements or other large cash benefits are expensive for cities and tend to subsidize corporate moves that were likely to happen anyway, Bartik added.

"Remote worker attraction is a relatively cheap way of bringing jobs to your city because remote workers are more footloose than the average business," Bartik said. He found that the cost per

job created was $36,000 for Tulsa remote, six times lower than the typical $218,000 cost for business incentives.

Now that the program has been in effect for almost seven years, Tulsa also has better data about whether people stuck around. Since 2019, 96% of participants stayed for the year duration of the program, and 70% still remain today. Many of those people also bring partners or kids with them; Conway has persuaded her mom to move to Tulsa with her and is lobbying her sister to join, too.

One emphasis of Tulsa's program that experts consider crucial to its retention is the social infrastructure it offers, including networking, social events and coworking space to help acclimate them to the city.

"Tulsa Remote created all of this intentional programming that engaged people in the real world," said Tracy Hadden Loh, a fellow at the Brookings Institution. Another factor is whether a city has the amenities to keep people there, something Tulsa has been investing in with attractions like The Gathering Place, a sprawling $465 million park.

For Conaway, the program connected her to past participants and volunteer organizations in the city. Mentors in the program helped her gain the confidence to leave her job for a new role in digital marketing, she said. And when she had a death in the family, the program connected her with a grief support group that she's remained close to. "The community here is so incredible and kind," she said.

In terms of its economic returns, Tulsa Remote creates what economists call multiplier effects as remote workers spend money at local restaurants, retail stores and service businesses. This direct spending generates additional jobs for existing Tulsa residents and boosts demand throughout the local economy. Bartik created an economic model that quantifies those effects as equal to $4.31 per dollar spent. Because the program targets high-skilled, high-income workers, increases in tax revenue can help pay for additional public services.

"They are targeting people with skills the local economy needs. They tend to be targeting people who are relatively high income," said Bartik. "That provides a much bigger boost to the tax base than traditional business incentive programs."

An influx of tech talent — 26% of the 2024 class worked in the industry — creates spillover effects by helping solve what Bartik describes as Tulsa's chicken-and-egg problem: The city couldn't attract high-tech jobs without high-tech workers, and vice versa. Remote workers with existing employment smooth that process by bringing those jobs and building the city's reputation in the eyes of employers. Bartik found that between 58% and 70% of program participants would not have moved to the city if not for the program.

For some jurisdictions, it makes sense to consider focusing at least some of their economic development dollars on attracting people, Bartik said. However, the Tulsa Remote experience isn't universal. The city has a housing market that's relatively elastic, meaning it can support an influx of new residents (although affordable housing supply remains a problem). Cities with restrictive housing markets can't afford to increase competition for housing without further pushing current residents to the margins.

Tulsa's program also has the benefit of being funded by a philanthropic organization based in the city, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, meaning it doesn't have to spend government money. The foundation plans to continue the program in the coming years; in past years it has taken 650 to 700 participants for each class.

Even for Tulsa, drawing too many outside workers would likely start to have adverse effects on costs, conceded Justin Harlan, managing director of Experience Tulsa.

Bartik's findings suggest remote worker attraction can be one cost-effective tool — if not the only one.

"Over 90% of economic development dollars go to business tax incentives," said Bartik. "States should be considering whether or not some of that money could be redirected to programs such as Tulsa Remote that focus on attracting people."

The New York Times: Can Remote Workers Reverse Brain Drain?

Researchers found that when remote workers were paid to move to Tulsa, Okla., everyone came out ahead.

By Emma Goldberg
Published Oct. 16, 2024

Business leaders and local officials in Tulsa, Okla., puzzled for years over how to fill the hole created when young people left for big coastal cities. What, they wondered, could keep professionals rooted in the heartland?

They ended up turning that premise on its head: Rather than fighting to hold on to native Tulsans, they decided to recruit outsiders. In recent years, the rise of virtual work opened up a new way of responding to the city's brain drain.

Five years after the George Kaiser Family Foundation began offering $10,000 to remote workers willing to move to Tulsa for at least a year, some 3,300 people have taken up the offer.

Steven Briggs, 55, was working remotely as a data scientist in Dallas when he applied for the program, Tulsa Remote. He and his wife moved to Tulsa in 2021, and he jokes that his new hometown embodies the flip side of the famous line about New York City: "What you can say about Tulsa is 'If you can't make it anywhere, you can make it here.'"

The sudden onset of remote work during the pandemic prompted plenty of cities and states — Topeka, Kan., and Savannah, Ga.; West Virginia and northwest Arkansas — to vie for new residents with programs offering cash incentives. Tulsa's program is one of the largest. Researchers at Harvard and other universities examined the effects of Tulsa Remote, wondering whether it was proving a good deal for the remote workers and the city itself.

Their research, released this month, surveyed 1,248 people — including 411 who had participated in Tulsa Remote and others who were accepted but didn't move or weren't accepted but had applied to the program — and found that remote workers who moved to Tulsa saved an average of $25,000 more on annual housing costs than the group that was chosen but didn't move. The relocations were also a boon for the State of Oklahoma and the City of Tulsa, bringing in some $14.9 million in annual income tax revenue and $5.8 million in sales taxes from the remote workers, the researchers estimated.

"Every heartland mayor should pay attention to this," said Prithwiraj Choudhury, an associate professor at Harvard Business School and the lead author of the study. "Because of remote work, a large part of the work force is able to relocate, and there is the possibility of reversing brain drain."

Figuring out how to keep professionals has long been a challenge for midsize, non-coastal cities. Tulsa was losing roughly 1,000 more college-educated people than it was absorbing each year from 2015 to 2019. During that period, people who moved to Oklahoma were nearly all over the age of 45 and mostly had incomes below the state average, according to data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.

Local philanthropists pondered how to recruit new Tulsa residents. Around 2011, they began to notice that some people who had moved there because of Teach for America, which places recent college graduates into communities for two-year teaching stints, continued living in Tulsa. If other kinds of knowledge workers were given a reason to try out life in the city, they, too, might decide to stay.

“It was a lightbulb moment, that if we could incentivize folks to come here for a year, we could keep them around to contribute to the city and economy,” said Justin Harlan, managing director of Tulsa Remote, who previously worked at Teach for America.

The president of Tulsa’s regional chamber of commerce, Mike Neal, recalled being skeptical. “When they first mentioned the idea to me, I was like, ‘Have you lost your mind?’” Mr. Neal recalled. “‘There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell this thing is going to work.’”

Mike Neal in a blue suit looks out a window where tall office buildings can be seen beyond.
Mike Neal, the president of Tulsa’s regional chamber of commerce, was skeptical that paying people to move to the city would work. Credit...Melissa Lukenbaugh for The New York Times
But when remote work jumped to 43 percent of the country’s workers, in spring 2020, from just 4 percent, the prospect of drawing young professionals to Tulsa became far more viable. That year, 380 people moved to Tulsa for the program, and in 2021 the number climbed to 939. Last year, 643 remote workers moved through Tulsa Remote.

Oklahoma more broadly saw an influx of younger, working-age people and high earners during the pandemic, according to the Kansas City Fed. Since 2020, 40 percent of those moving to Oklahoma were between the ages of 25 and 44.

Program managers at Tulsa Remote sifted through applicants to select remote workers who seemed interested in contributing to the community by volunteering or starting businesses. Nearly three-quarters of participants who have completed the program are still living in Tulsa. The program brings them together for farm-to-table dinners, movie nights and local celebrity lectures to help build community, given that none have offices to commute to. (The George Kaiser Family Foundation has said it will continue to fund Tulsa Remote “so long as it demonstrates to be a community-enhancing opportunity.”)

Jasmine Renae Ball, 32, is part of Tulsa’s pandemic-era wave of remote-work migrants. She had been living in Los Angeles, doling out advice as a financial planner and dogged by the sense that she should take her own counsel and save up to buy a home. That didn’t feel feasible in Los Angeles.

In 2020, once her client meetings moved to Zoom, she applied to Tulsa Remote. She bought a three-bedroom home in Tulsa for roughly $185,000, one-third of the cost of smaller apartments she had been looking at in Los Angeles. Ms. Ball also persuaded her retired parents to move from Northern California to Tulsa, along with her younger sister.

“Everything was very expensive,” Ms. Ball said of her life in California. “It all added up to where you’d have to either pick and choose and not necessarily live the life you wanted, or people would go into debt trying to create the lifestyle they wanted.”

Plenty of cities across the country have experienced this cycle in recent years. Fed-up young professionals from expensive cities parachuted in and sent local costs soaring. In Spokane, Wash., home prices rose 60 percent between 2020 and 2022. Austin, Texas, and Portland, Ore., have similarly seen housing costs jump because of an influx of residents. Tulsa isn’t immune to these challenges. The median price of a home in the Tulsa area has risen 9 percent since last year, while nationwide the median home price is up 3.2 percent.

Mr. Choudhury, at Harvard, noted that other cities across the country had seen a large jump in housing prices, and that the influx of residents through Tulsa Remote had so far been too small to significantly affect local costs.

“Gentrification is the concern,” Mr. Choudhury said. “But the scale right now is not concerning to me. In a city of one million people, there are 3,000 new knowledge workers.”

Some of Tulsa’s new residents have acknowledged that they don’t yet feel fully part of the culture — so how long they will stay remains unresolved.

“I’m definitely still Wisconsin at my core,” said Tricia Jimo, 45, whose move to Tulsa, through the program, was partly inspired by having pushed through too many frosty mornings shoveling snow out of her driveway before heading to work in the suburbs outside Madison.

“In my mind, I was coming to Tulsa for a year, and then I could always boomerang back if it wasn’t a fit for me,” she added. “Four years later, now the conversations I’m having are more like, ‘Are you staying in Tulsa forever?’ Maybe.”

The Los Angeles Times: Hundreds of Californians have been paid $10,000 to relocate to Oklahoma. Did they find paradise?

By Hannah Fry
Aug. 15, 2025

Cynthia Rollins doesn't hate California — far from it.

The sun-drenched shores of San Diego, the vibrant desert oasis of Palm Springs and the hustle of San Francisco all held special places in the California native's life story.

But in 2020 — at the height of the pandemic — Rollins' typically serene Ocean Beach neighborhood became crowded with people desperate for an outdoor place to congregate. She couldn't leave her 650-square-foot apartment without worrying about finding a parking spot when she got home. She was isolated working a remote job for a tech company, but still overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people around her.

Tulsa, Okla., had never been on her radar. But months earlier she read about a program, Tulsa Remote, that pays remote workers to relocate to Oklahoma's second-largest city for at least a year. She decided to give it a shot and visit. By November 2020, Rollins was a full-time resident in the Sooner State.

Lynsi Snyder, the owner, and granddaughter of founders Harry and Esther Snyder, sits outside the Colorado Springs In-N-Out restaurant before it opened Friday, Nov. 20, 2020. The first two locations in Colorado opened Friday, the other one in Aurora. (Christian Murdock/The Gazette via AP)

Tulsa Remote has attracted more than 3,600 remote workers since its inception in 2019. More than 7,800 Californians have applied to the program and 539 have made the move, cementing California as the second-most popular origin state behind Texas. More Californians have moved to Tulsa through the program than those hailing from other coastal states such as Florida and New York.

Similar programs have popped up in Alabama, Kansas, Arkansas, West Virginia and other states looking to reverse population decline. The programs, which are a boon to small and medium-sized towns in the middle of America, highlight a troubling, years-long trend of Californians uprooting their lives and relocating to less expensive locations. The transition to remote work following the pandemic has made leaving the Golden State even easier.

From 2010 through 2023, about 9.2 million people moved from California to other states, while only 6.7 million people moved to California from other parts of the country, according to the American Community Survey.

A Public Policy Institute of California survey conducted in 2023 found that 34% of Californians have seriously considered leaving the state because of high housing costs.

Politics might also play a role for some who decide to leave, with conservatives more likely to contemplate leaving than liberals. Republicans make up more than 52% of registered voters in Oklahoma compared with roughly 25% of California's registered voters.

"I definitely had people ask me, what's in Tulsa?" Rollins said. "And I was like, 'I have no idea. Who knows what's in Tulsa? But I'm going to find out'."

Unsurprisingly, it's less expensive to live in Tulsa than it is in a major metropolitan area in California. The lower cost of living was a huge bonus for Zach Meincke and his wife, Katie, when they decided to make the move three years ago.

They went from a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment for $2,400 on L.A.'s Westside to a five-bedroom, three-bathroom house for just a few hundred dollars more.

It ended up being fortuitous timing for the couple, who discovered they were expecting their first child — a daughter named Ruth — just weeks after they decided to move.

"When we were first considering Tulsa, I was Googling the city trying to figure out if it was a great place to live, and there was this blurb that came up right at the top that said Tulsa is a cool place to live. If you're young, you might live here for a while and you might get a little bored. But if you're a parent, this is the perfect place to raise your kid," he said. "And that couldn't have been a more true answer."

Meincke used to spend his days running along the beach, but now his time is focused on taking Ruth, who is almost 3, to explore Tulsa's parks and the Discovery Lab, an interactive kids' science museum.

The couple are expecting their second child in December. It's a life milestone that Meincke says may not have happened in Los Angeles. In California, it costs nearly $300,000 to raise a child to 18. In Oklahoma, researchers estimate, it costs about $241,000, according to a LendingTree study this year.

"There was no way we were going to move into a house in Los Angeles unless we had roommates, and that's not an ideal situation," he said. "We were 37 when we left Los Angeles and it felt like we were at a point that if we wanted to have all those other things in life — children, a house — we need to make that shift."

While remote work brought Rollins and Meincke to Tulsa, they've both since launched their own businesses. Meincke started a creative strategy and storytelling firm and works with companies across the country, and Rollins opened a consulting business.

“When I was [in California], I was so consumed with the process of day-to-day living — the traffic, getting places, scheduling things,” Rollins said. “Here there’s so much more space to think creatively about your life and to kind of set it up the way you want.”

Business leaders and local officials had struggled for years to come up with a way to keep college-educated workers in America’s heartland. A “brain drain” plagued the state for the better part of the 2010s as the educated workforce migrated to larger, coastal cities for higher-paying jobs.

Rather than focusing solely on keeping Oklahoma natives rooted in the state, Tulsa Remote — funded by the George Kaiser Family Foundation — sought to recruit new residents to diversify the city’s workforce, which was largely reliant on the oil and gas industry. They ended up creating one of the largest relocation incentive programs in the country, offering $10,000 for remote workers to move to the state for at least a year. The program also provides volunteer and socializing opportunities for new residents and grants them membership at a co-working space for 36 months.

“We really were looking to attract knowledge workers to the city of Tulsa, which we knew would help create an economy that was resilient for the future and prepared for what’s ahead,” said Justin Harlan, managing director of Tulsa Remote. “It was also this desire to really put Tulsa on the map for people, and if it’s the $10,000 that gets folks’ attention, that’s OK with us.”

Applicants must be at least 18 years old, be authorized to work in the United States, have full-time remote employment outside of Oklahoma, have the ability to relocate within 12 months and have lived outside the state for a full year before applying.

And the program isn’t just looking for people who see Tulsa as a stop on their way to somewhere else. It wants applicants who want to build a life in the city, Harlan said. As of 2024, 96% of Tulsa Remote members stayed longer than a year and 70% have remained in the city since 2019.

The program has proved to be beneficial for Tulsans too. For every $1 spent attracting remote workers, the program returns more than $4 to Tulsans through local spending, job creation and increased tax revenue, according to a recent economic report from the Upjohn Institute.

“The George Kaiser Family Foundation has really taken the mantle of place-making and more what I think my line of work considers nontraditional economic development,” said Andrew Ralston, who previously worked at the Tulsa Regional Chamber of Commerce. “The answer is never just recruit businesses and grow businesses locally. It’s always to do the work to make sure people want to live here, to make sure people are being recruited to bring a new population and new tax base in, and that, I think, was the principle behind it.”

Sunny but expensive: Thousands more workers left California than arrived during a stretch last year. Here’s where they went.

For Rollins, she can finally answer the overarching question that people asked her before she moved: What's in Tulsa?

For her, it's fewer logistical challenges, a chance to build community, get involved and, ultimately, find love.

After five months in Tulsa, Rollins met her significant other at a trivia night set up by mutual friends. Her partner, whom she now lives with, made the journey from California to Tulsa for school during the pandemic.

"He grew up in Santa Cruz and was living 10 minutes from me down the road in Pacifica, but we never met in California," she said. "We met in Tulsa."

FORTUNE: Tulsa paid workers $10,000 to relocate—and unlocked an $878 million talent boom

By Kristin Stoller
March 23, 2026

Seven years after Tulsa Remote began paying workers $10,000 to move to their Oklahoma city, the experiment has become a case study in how relocation incentives can bolster a local economy and widen the workforce employers can tap. More than 4,000 workers relocated, contributing some $878 million in economic impact.

That success paved the way for Tulsa's next act: helping employers tap global talent. Since launching in 2022, the Tulsa Visa Network has helped nearly 100 people from 34 countries secure visas, offering a practical model at a moment when costly H-1B visa fees and a more complicated immigration environment are forcing many employers to rethink how they recruit internationally.

Stan Khrapak, who leads the Tulsa Visa Network, says his program has seen steady demand this year from both individuals seeking visa support and small to midsize companies trying to navigate an increasingly complex system. Roughly half of those the program has helped are in STEM, he says, though the network is also supporting hiring in fields like finance and accounting.

Justin Harlan, managing director of parent program Experience Tulsa, says Tulsa Remote has attracted professionals whose remote jobs strengthen the community without displacing local workers—and that the Visa Network is built on the same premise.

"It's highly skilled folks coming in [for roles] that companies often have a hard time filling at a local level, and it makes it very hard to argue whether this is adding something to the community."

The bigger lesson for HR leaders is that Tulsa's strategy is not really about cash incentives alone. It is about designing an employee experience that makes people want to live somewhere, stay, and build a life there, Harlan adds.

The Experience Tulsa program has expanded its offerings well beyond the original $10,000 and visa assistance. Participants now receive a $200 monthly health and wellness stipend, access to a free coworking space, and a remote-work certification course developed in partnership with NYU.

The organization also hosts community building events such as movie nights and dance lessons. That, Harlan says, is where many employers still fall short. Companies, especially

those with hybrid or remote workforces or those trying to attract global talent, need to think intentionally about how employees experience life outside the office.

“Oftentimes, HR departments will give that lip service or do the quick and easy things that we’re accustomed to,” Harlan says. “But when companies do go out of their way to go above and beyond, I think it’s noticed and can make a big impact in terms of the quality of life that somebody has.”

FOX News: Remote California workers paid $10K to relocate to Oklahoma praise their new home state

The Tulsa Remote program has attracted hundreds of people from the Golden State

By Lindsay Kornick Fox News
Published September 10, 2025 9:00pm EDT

An Oklahoma relocation program paid Californians $10,000 to move to the state, and some say they have never looked back, according to a Los Angeles Times report last month.

The paper spoke with former California residents Cynthia Rollins and Zach Meincke about their decision to leave the state through the Tulsa Remote program. Both said they were initially uncertain but have since grown to love their new home.

"When I was [in California], I was so consumed with the process of day-to-day living — the traffic, getting places, scheduling things," Rollins said. "Here there's so much more space to think creatively about your life and to kind of set it up the way you want."

Meincke, who moved himself and his wife to Tulsa three years ago, told the Los Angeles Times he was motivated not only by affordability but by the chance to raise a family.

"There was no way we were going to move into a house in Los Angeles unless we had roommates, and that's not an ideal situation," Meincke said. "We were 37 when we left Los Angeles, and it felt like we were at a point that if we wanted to have all those other things in life — children, a house — we need to make that shift.

"When we were first considering Tulsa, I was Googling the city trying to figure out if it was a great place to live, and there was this blurb that came up right at the top that said Tulsa is a cool place to live. If you're young, you might live here for a while, and you might get a little bored. But if you're a parent, this is the perfect place to raise your kid. And that couldn't have been a more true answer."

Launched in 2019, the Tulsa Remote program offers remote workers a $10,000 grant to move to the city for at least one year.

The Los Angeles Times reported more than 7,800 Californians have applied to the program, with 539 relocating to Tulsa. Applicants must be at least 18 years of age, work full-time remotely outside Oklahoma, be able to move within 12 months and have lived outside the state for at least a year before applying.

Tulsa Remote's website says 76% of participants who completed their first year have stayed in the city.

In a statement to Fox News Digital, a Tulsa Remote spokesperson said the program has welcomed more than 3,700 remote workers to the city.

"While we're proud of the program's ability to attract applicants from every state across the country, what stands out most are the common themes in their applications: people want a true sense of community, affordable housing, access to great restaurants and culture and beautiful parks for their kids. We're grateful to have helped so many build the lives they envisioned and to have created a program that has delivered so much for Tulsans," the spokesperson said.

Fox News Digital also reached out to the city of Tulsa for comment.

California has repeatedly ranked among the top states for outbound migration, according to U.S. Census Bureau data and moving company surveys, with many citing high living costs and liberal policies.