

ADVOCATES GUIDE TO THE 2012 ELECTIONS

Questions to ask about the issues that matter



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After-school and summer programs

Closing the addiction treatment gap

Juvenile justice reform

Tax and budget/poverty

Pre-K

Immigration

Education

Public health



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The Arkansas legislature faces unprecedented territory when they reconvene in January 2013 for the 89th General Assembly. While each session creates new opportunities, this Assembly must immediately deal with a challenge—bridging what some believe is a \$400 million shortfall in the state’s Medicaid budget. Constitutionally mandated revenue stabilization (aka, a balanced budget) requires lawmakers to fund the coming fiscal year without a deficit. Without additional state revenue, lawmakers may be forced to cut funding to areas like child care, the state’s foster care and child abuse division, or other essential services in order to balance the budget. Child advocates need to be prepared to ask candidates running for the legislature where they stand on these issues. This guide is designed to help you—the voice for Arkansas’s children—ask the right questions on behalf of our state’s kids.

Please help Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families and the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition learn from what you find in the field. Ask the candidates running for the state house and senate about the issues that concern you most. Then let us know what you learn. Let your friends, networks, and colleagues know too. If we are all better informed we all stand a better chance of successfully advocating on behalf of Arkansas’s children and families. Send your thoughts to Brett Kincaid at (501) 371-9678 x110 or email them to bkincaid@aradvocates.org.

Check out our website, www.aradvocates.org, throughout the campaign season and into the legislative session for the latest news on children’s issues. Let us know if you would like us to come to your community to host a policy discussion, legislative briefing, or town hall meeting in order to discuss issues important to the kids and families in your community. Above all—get active, get informed, and get to the voting booth. Your voice and your vote matter. Arkansas’s children are depending on you to speak for them.

Key Dates

Last day to register for general election: October 6, 2012*

General election day: November 6, 2012

*You can learn more about local elections and candidates by visiting the Arkansas Secretary of State’s website at <http://bit.ly/ARVOTES> Find out who is running for offices in your county.

After-school and Summer Programs

- ★ An overwhelming majority of state legislators in 2011 voted to establish a framework for quality afterschool and summer programs. *What should the legislature do in order to fund and operate this program?*

Closing the Addiction Treatment Gap

- ★ Based on the FY08 budget, Arkansas spent \$1.15 billion on expenses related to substance abuse and addiction. More than 80% of those cost—almost \$1 billion—went to prosecutors, corrections, and juvenile justice programs. *How do you believe the state should utilize the resources for substance abuse and addiction?*

Juvenile Justice Reform

- ★ Community based programs that serve non-violent, low-to-moderate-risk youthful offenders cost less money and have been proven more effective than incarceration for young people. Arkansas continues to put these kids in prison, though, due to a severe lack of quality programs. *How do you propose the state address this gap?*

Tax & Budget/Poverty

- ★ The most recent poverty data shows that roughly 25 percent of children in our state live in households at or below the federal poverty line. That means a household income at or below roughly \$23,000 per year for a family of four. The data clearly tells us children living in poverty are less likely to graduate from high school, attain a college degree, or live above the poverty line as adults. *What should the state do to address the child poverty epidemic in Arkansas?*
- ★ Budgets for state agencies have largely been flat or reduced during the economic downturn. Lawmakers have demanded state agencies “do more with less” without addressing the obvious need for additional state revenue. *Understanding the agencies cannot continue to cut their budgets without affecting essential services, how do you believe the state legislature should address the lack of tax revenue?*

Pre-K

- ★ Since the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program was created in 1991 the state has seen noticeable gains in language and math skills from students that participated in ABC. We know that those kids are better prepared to learn, leading to a better-educated workforce. The system has reached its financial capacity despite only serving 29 percent of eligible three year olds and 59 percent of eligible four year olds. *How can the legislature work to expand access to pre-k?*

Child Welfare

- ★ Child abuse and neglect continues to plague Arkansas. Last year the state confirmed more than 8,500 cases of abuse and neglect involving almost 12,000 children. The majority of these were cases of neglect by parents, which we know can be addressed through preventive services and programs. *What role can the government play in reducing child abuse and neglect?*
- ★ From FY10 to FY11 the State Division of Children and Family Services reported a six percent increase in the number of children in the foster care system. Almost 8,000 children were in the foster system during that timeframe. DCFS was also forced to shed its budget during that time, further straining an overwhelmed system. *What role can you and other lawmakers play to address this developing crisis?*

Immigration

- ★ Arkansas has the opportunity to extend ARKids First health coverage to all lawfully residing immigrant children that meet the coverage requirements. *How should the state government respond to this opportunity?*
- ★ The U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled that states cannot create unique immigration laws that conflict with federal law. *Given this criteria, what role should state government play in immigration policy?*
- ★ The number of undocumented children graduating from high school continues to grow in Arkansas. An overwhelming number of these kids came to our state as very young children and have gone to Arkansas public schools their entire lives. Thirteen states, including neighboring Texas, allow these graduates to attend state-funded colleges and universities while paying in-state tuition just like their fellow graduates. *How can the state government act to remain competitive with states like Texas?*

Education

- ★ According to a recent nationwide assessment only 3 out of 10 Arkansas 4th graders rate as “proficient” readers at their grade level. Low-income and minority children score below this already troubling static. An Annie E. Casey Foundation study identified 1) lack of school readiness, 2) summer learning loss, and 3) chronic absence as three obstacles to grade-level reading. *What do you believe the legislature should do to address these problems?*
- ★ A recent AACF study found that very few school districts appropriately spend money that is specifically designated to help low-income students close the grow-

ing achievement gap between themselves and their more affluent peers. Strategies like quality Pre-K,, quality afterschool/summer programs, and school-based health programs have proven to be highly effective in closing that gap. *What role should the legislature play on making sure schools spend this money on proven programs?*

- ★ If you believe the legislature should play a role in establishing a Students Bill of Rights *what should be included in this document that would outline what students and parents should expect from their school districts?*

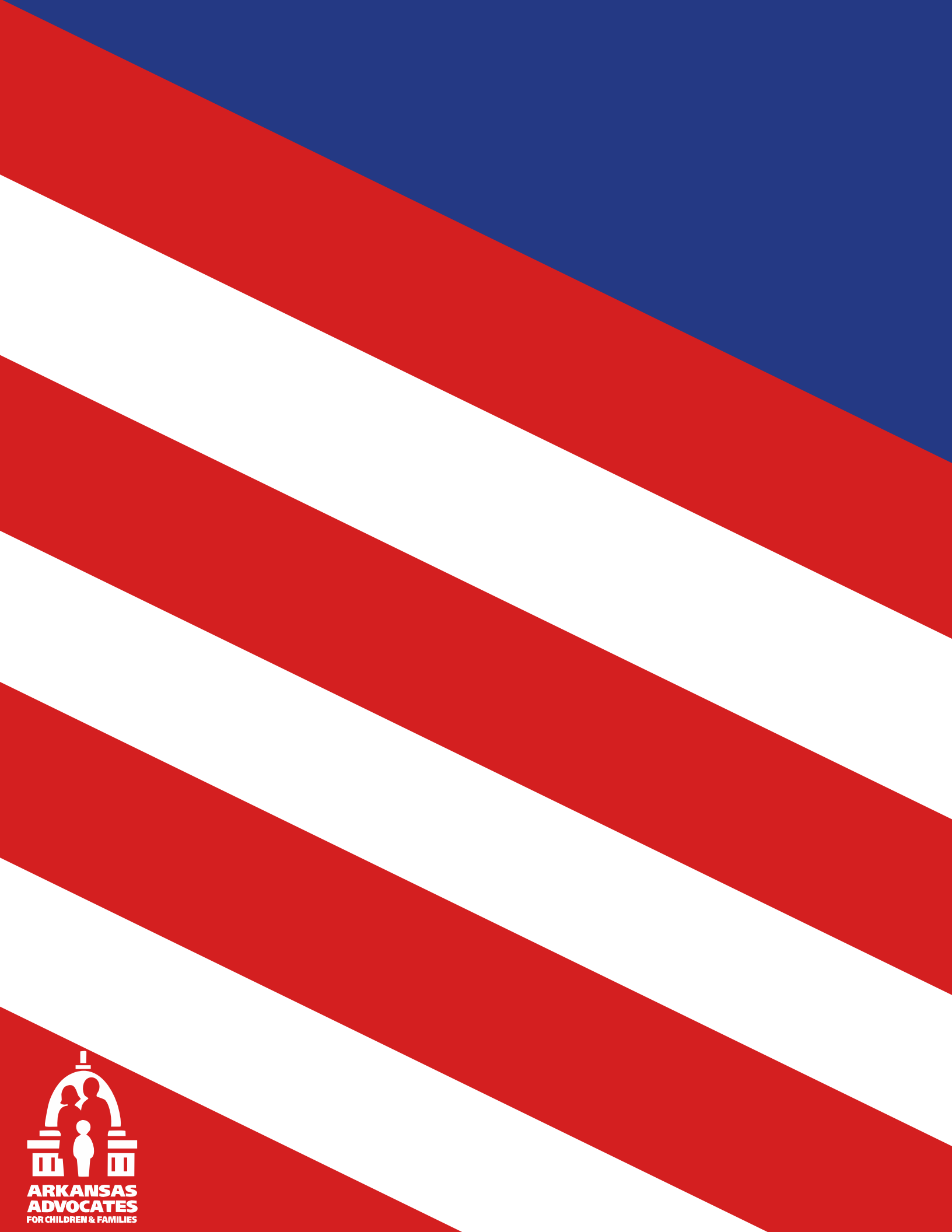
Public Health

- ★ Since ARKids First was established 15 years ago, Arkansas has become a national leader when it comes to providing health coverage to children. The state has seen the uninsured child population shrink from 22 percent to 7 percent since 1997. As a result child health indicators have improved markedly. *What should the legislature do to reduce the numbers of uninsured kids?*
- ★ Credible research continues to indicate Arkansas would benefit financially by extending Medicaid services to those who now qualify under the Affordable Care Act. In addition to providing coverage to roughly 250,000 uninsured Arkansans the state stands to generate considerable economic activity under the new rules. The new health insurance marketplace established by the Affordable Care Act also promises to make coverage more affordable. *How should the state proceed in this new environment?*
- ★ The state continues to face a very tight budget even with increased federal aid for health care. *Given these limitations, how should the state government prioritize spending on programs that allow Arkansans affordable health care and coverage?*

For more information on these and other issues that affect children and families in our state, visit www.aradvocates.org.



The mission of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential. We serve as a voice for children at the Arkansas State Capitol and in Washington, D.C.; gather and analyze data to support public policy that serves all children and families; and organize coalitions of diverse groups to drive change.



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