



Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families 2023 Legislative Agenda

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. Through conversations with partners, advocates and young Arkansans, and through our policy research, we have identified a series of policies that research has proven will improve the well-being of Arkansans. With the help of your advocacy at the state Capitol, we can ensure issues impacting children and families are *the* top priority for the General Assembly.

Equity and Democracy

What a child looks like or where they come from should not determine their outcomes in life. Arkansas should be a place where each person is able to fully participate in our democracy and where racial equity isn't just an aspiration, it is a reality. But to accomplish that we must address, head-on the structural racism that is embedded in our culture and in our public policies. The failure to address it, thus far, is causing lifelong disparities that affect opportunities and outcomes for many of Arkansas's children, especially BIPOC children (Black, Indigenous and other People of Color). But there are proven policies that can advance equity that we, in partnership with advocates like you, can push for at the State General Assembly.

AACF is committed to promoting policies that protect democracy and civil rights for all Arkansans and to oppose policies that take our state backward.

P-12 Education

The future of Arkansas's well-being depends upon the education of our state's children. Every child in Arkansas should be able to have a free, world-class education. But, while Arkansas has made progress to improve its education since the Supreme Court's 2002 Lake View Decision, major gaps remain and worsened during the pandemic, among racial and socioeconomic groups, students with special education needs, and English language learners. If equity gaps are not addressed immediately and over the long-term, current and future generations of Arkansas students will face major competitive disadvantages in their efforts to succeed in school and in life.

AACF is committed to promoting proven solutions to address these equity gaps, which will require a continued commitment to adequately and equitably fund public education. We hope you will use your voice to help us speak up for children's education at the state Capitol.

Food Security

Everyone should have access to nutritious food. And for children, their diet is critical to their overall health and well-being, including their ability to focus at school. But in Arkansas, 444,130 people are struggling with hunger; 138,410 of those are children, meaning one in five of Arkansas's children is at risk. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's largest anti-hunger program. In 2021, SNAP reached more than 324,000 Arkansas residents. But our state-level SNAP policies make it more difficult than it has to be for families to put food on the table. To qualify for SNAP assistance in Arkansas, family assets must fall below \$2,250, or \$3,250 if the household includes someone older than 60 or a person with a disability.

AACF is committed to promoting eligibility and access to the programs available to lessen the burdens of hunger and food insecurity for families in Arkansas. We look forward to working with you to make sure essential hunger relief programs like WIC and SNAP are easier, not more difficult, for families to access.

Health Care

Affordable medical care is an important part of overall health, and every Arkansan should have access to health care. Historically, Arkansas has done a great job of recognizing the need to improve access to health care for children. But Arkansas suffers high rates of maternal mortality and low-birthweight babies. The looming end of the public health emergency threatens to expel hundreds of thousands from Medicaid coverage. And even before the pandemic, the decline in children's Medicaid was of grave concern.

AACF is committed to promoting coverage and access to services through Medicaid, ARKids First, Medicaid Expansion, and the Affordable Care Act, which are proven ways to improve child and family health. Advocacy from Arkansans like you will help make sure that legislators know how vital these programs and services are to many Arkansans.

Juvenile Justice

Major reforms have been made to Arkansas's juvenile justice system in recent years. But there is still work to do. Future improvements to the juvenile justice system in Arkansas should focus on the welfare of our kids. However, youth and their families can be charged fees for counsel, probation supervision, diversion and treatment services, miscellaneous court costs and judicial services, and more. These fees can be a barrier to the successful completion of probation requirements, triggering an additional set of consequences.

AACF is committed to addressing the harm our system-involved youth and families face by improving rehabilitation, decreasing recidivism and improving racial equity within the system. Together we will make sure children in the juvenile justice system have a voice at the Capitol.

Tax, Budget, and Family Economic Security

Arkansas should be a place where each person and family has the opportunity to thrive. And the state government needs adequate and sustainable revenue to make sure our economy is working for everyday Arkansans. But because many Arkansas jobs pay wages that are too low to meet the needs of families, many families in the state live in poverty and rely on social safety net programs. We need tax revenue to make the public investments necessary to support children in reaching their full potential. Yet Arkansas has pursued a series of tax cuts over recent years that have reduced annual revenues by hundreds of millions of dollars, putting critical programs for families at risk.

AACF is committed to promoting ways to raise revenue, not cut revenue, so we can have the kind of public services that promote economic growth that's shared by everyone, and to promoting a tax system that works for everyday Arkansans. Advocate with us to make sure that our state legislators are centering the needs of Arkansas's families in their decisions about the state budget.