



Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

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Advocacy Matters



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A SOUPerb Year for Kids!



Longtime Central Arkansas Soup Sunday participating chef Dave Williams (seated, left) attended with his family.

This year's Soup Sundays marked a record-breaking success, drawing more than 2,000 attendees across both the Northwest and Central Arkansas events and raising a combined \$432,000 in support of Arkansas's children.

In Northwest Arkansas, Early Bird Catering earned the Golden Ladle for the fourth time with its signature Calcasieu River Crawfish Chowder. In Central Arkansas, SO Restaurant received the inaugural Dave Williams Golden Ladle Award for its Smoked Gouda Green Chile Soup.



Early Bird Catering with their fourth Golden Ladle award at Northwest Arkansas Soup Sunday.

In total, 73 restaurants, caterers, and bakeries contributed soups, breads, and desserts. Attendees enjoyed music, silent auctions, and opportunities to connect with the community and our mission to advance equity and opportunity for all Arkansas families.

This year's auctions featured exciting items, including getaways, local experiences, and unique gifts donated by generous partners throughout the state. The lively and welcoming atmosphere at both events reflected a shared commitment to making Arkansas a better place for children.



AACF Board Member Dr. Sheldon Riklon and Board President Xochitl Delgado Solorzano at Northwest Arkansas Soup Sunday.



SO Restaurant team received the Dave Williams Golden Ladle Award at Central Arkansas Soup Sunday.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families extends its deepest gratitude to the sponsors, volunteers, and attendees who made these events possible. Your participation directly supports our work to advocate for children's health, education, and economic security.

For more Arkansas Advocates event photos, visit [flickr.com/photos/aacf/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/aacf/).

SAVE THE DATE

Children's Policy Summits

Join the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition for our Children's Policy Summit series. We will be traveling around the state to update you on which laws passed, or didn't, and how news laws will impact the children and families of our state. Register at [aradvocates.org/events](https://www.aradvocates.org/events).

FAYETTEVILLE 6/10
HOT SPRINGS 6/23
LITTLE ROCK 7/10
FORT SMITH 7/28



CHILDREN'S POLICY SUMMITS

Friends of Children Annual Luncheon

October 21 in Little Rock. Save the date; details soon!



Arkansas Advocates and Soup Sunday have made the finals in the Arkansas Times Best of Arkansas readers poll in the Best Nonprofit and Best Charity Event categories!

Arkansas Advocates Issue Areas

Arkansas Advocates focuses on key issue areas to help improve child well-being in Arkansas.

- Child welfare
- Economic security
- Early childhood and K-12 education
- Health care
- Hunger
- Immigrant children and families
- Juvenile justice
- Racial equity
- Tax and budget

Arkansas Advocates 2025 Board of Directors

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POLICY NEWS

A Big Win for Kids



Arkansas took a meaningful step toward addressing child hunger with the signing of Act 123, which provides free school breakfast to all public school students, regardless of household income. This landmark policy is the result of sustained advocacy from Arkansas Advocates for Children

and Families and the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, whose No Kid Hungry campaign played a vital role. With the state leading in child food insecurity rates, this legislation ensures more students begin their day with the nutrition they need to thrive academically, socially, and physically.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Pete Gess Economic Policy Director

Pete Gess joined Arkansas Advocates in January 2024 as Economic Policy Director, bringing extensive experience in public administration, policy analysis, and higher education.



He spent over 16 years at Hendrix College as a Professor of Politics and Environmental Policy, serving in key administrative roles including Department Chair and Associate Provost. Pete has taught courses in public administration and Arkansas politics, and has provided training in ethics, budgeting, and finance to public officials across the state.

Previously, he served at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute, managing governance training programs throughout Eastern Europe and Asia. He holds a doctorate in public administration from the University of Georgia. Pete resides in Little Rock with his wife, Jennifer, and their two dogs. Their son attends Kenyon College, and their daughter is graduating from LSU.

Kids Count Day at the Capitol

On February 10, the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition held Kids Count Day at the Capitol, which was a big success! From toddlers to retirees, more than 100 people came to speak up for children. We kicked off the day with a rally in the Capitol rotunda, with inspirational speakers, including Gibbs Magnet Elementary fourth-grade student Olivia Stallings.

Participants met with legislators and attended committee meetings throughout the day. Children had the chance to make cards for or spend time shadowing legislators. Lunch included an advocacy Q&A session.

The grand finale was witnessing the passage of House Resolution 1016, which recognized February 10, 2025,

as Kids Count Day and recognized the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition for its advocacy on behalf of the children of Arkansas.

We are thankful to the steering committee members, the speakers, and the Arkansas Education Association who helped make the event possible.



Ethan and Olivia Stallings with Rep. Tara Shephard, sponsor of HR1016.

Why Budgets Matter – At Every Level

While Arkansas's general revenue budget often captures public attention, federal funds play a significantly larger role in sustaining essential public services. In fiscal year 2023–24, federal revenue accounted for \$12.2 billion—more than 30 percent of the state's total budget—while general revenue made up only 16 percent.

These funds are critical for education, health care, infrastructure, and more. Medicaid alone comprises nearly \$7 billion of Arkansas's federal funding, covering 41 percent of births, 47 percent of children, and 67 percent of nursing home residents.

However, proposed federal cuts of up to \$2.5 trillion to Medicaid jeopardize access to care for vulnerable populations, especially low-income families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities. The repercussions would be especially severe in rural communities, where providers already operate with limited resources.

Arkansas does not have the fiscal capacity to offset losses of this magnitude. Cuts of this scale would destabilize our health care system and increase costs for all residents.

Federal and state budgets are interdependent. To maintain a stable and equitable future for all Arkansans, we must continue advocating for robust public investment and resist harmful cuts that undermine the programs our communities rely upon.

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