



2023 ANNUAL REPORT



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LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

What a year 2023 was!

I came on as Executive Director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families in February, and it was an amazing first year.

Since the Arkansas General Assembly held their general session in 2023, much of what you will read in this report is focused on our policy advocacy efforts. I'm so proud of our staff who helped get six bills from our legislative agenda introduced. During the regular session alone, Arkansas Advocates staff testified 23 times before legislative committees!

We faced disappointments for sure, like the erosion of oversight measures intended to protect our state's youngest workers. But we were encouraged by the stiffening of penalties for employers who violate child labor laws.

Many of the programs we know help improve the lives of Arkansas's children and families depend on a robust state budget. Unfortunately, both during the regular session and during a special session later in the year, the Legislature chose to reduce state revenue in the form of tax cuts where the largest benefit flowed to the wealthiest in our state with very little returning to the majority of Arkansans. As a result, we expect to see reduced investments in the programs and services truly needed to improve our communities and address the needs of our children.

Thankfully, we remain encouraged by our relationships with fellow advocates, the agencies and policymakers, the coalitions and partners with whom we work to move Arkansas forward, and our supporters.

As I reflect on my first year at Arkansas Advocates, I am awestruck by the dedication of our grassroots and community partners and our staff. I spent much of the year meeting many heroes across the state and I am truly honored to work with those whose very drive is to make Arkansas a better place to be and raise a kid.

At AACF, we will continue to uplift our mission 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 remain committed to lifting up Arkansas families and working with the individuals and organizations who work tirelessly to improve our state. Thank you for your continued support and for the belief in a better future for Arkansas.



Keesa Smith



LETTER FROM OUR DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Dear Friends,

Thank you for sharing our bold vision of an economically and racially just Arkansas. More than **1,500** donors provided gifts of all sizes in 2023 that directly contributed to our advocacy efforts. Every child deserves access to quality healthcare, education and a safe environment. Arkansas's children face some of the highest rates of poverty and food insecurity in the country. One out of every five kids in Arkansas lives in poverty. With your help, we are advocating for proven policies to make life better for families.

Arkansas Advocates is committed to raising awareness of the inequities that too many of our friends and neighbors are experiencing. Our policy work matters and is making an impact. Our research, analysis and advocacy are helping change policies so that kids in Arkansas will grow up with more resources, not less.

When we as a state decide how to spend public dollars, children and families should be at the top of the priority list. With your help, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families advocates for policies that ensure a strong start in life for all our children.

Remember, your support has the power to transform lives. Together, we can build an Arkansas where every child has a bright future.

Thank you for your support and belief in our mission.

Fran Carter
Development Director

Esther Schroeder*
Northwest Arkansas Development Director

YOUR SUPPORT MATTERS

Annual unrestricted funding gives AACF the flexibility to work on new and emerging issues as they arise. It also provides more resources for building coalitions, hosting outreach events around the state to recruit new advocates and lobbying on behalf of children at the state Capitol. Your support positions us to be even more effective advocates for Arkansas's families.

** Esther Schroeder joined Arkansas Advocates as our new Northwest Arkansas Development Director in May, 2024. Find her bio at aradvocates.org/staff.*

SOUPER VOLUNTEERS

Soup Sunday is often the first entry for new donors to Arkansas Advocates. It's SOUPER important to have engaged volunteers, ticket buyers, restaurant participants and sponsors. And we especially love it when longtime Soup Sunday fans bring friends!



CENTRAL ARKANSAS SOUP SUNDAY CHAIRS ELLEN AND NATHAN COULTER

Longtime Soup Sunday fans Ellen and Nathan Coulter co-chaired Central Arkansas Soup Sunday in 2023. They are amateur foodies who love being involved in their community, so this is one of their favorite events. They live in Little Rock with their son James and their dogs, Calvin and Knox. Nathan grew up attending Soup Sunday with his family, and they brought James to his first Soup Sunday in March 2023.



NORTHWEST ARKANSAS SOUP SUNDAY CHAIRS NICOLA AND RANDY WILBURN

Nicola and Randy Wilburn chaired Northwest Arkansas's record-breaking 2023 Soup Sunday event. They not only recruited new restaurants and attendees; the entire family volunteered throughout the event. Randy, who hosts the "I am Northwest Arkansas Podcast," shared this about why they support AACF:

"We don't look at it as Republican or Democrat, but we think about how to get food on the table, or transportation to get people to and from work and affordable housing. I think that based on what they're able to do, AACF stands in the gap making sure everybody benefits within the Natural State."



*Left to right:
Laura Kellams,
Randy Wilburn,
Nicola Wilburn,
Keesa Smith,
Riley Brantley.*

2023 HIGHLIGHTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

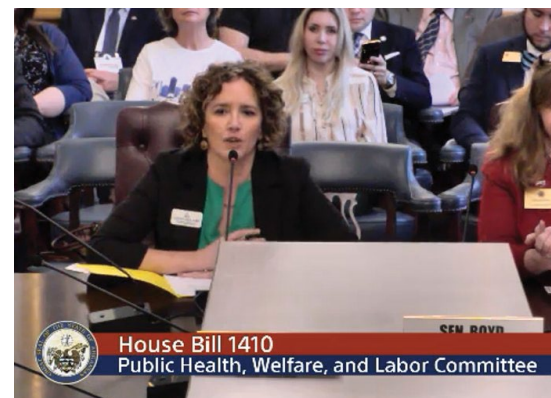
LEGISLATIVE SESSION

AACF and our partners – and many of you – worked tirelessly to advocate for better children’s policies during the 2023 regular session of the Arkansas Legislature. We worked to make the case for state investment in an adequate and equitable education for every child in Arkansas, for better health coverage for new parents, for a more balanced tax system, and for so much more.

As is often the case, we spent a lot of our time advocating defensively against proposals that would undermine many of those goals. State leaders continued to prioritize tax cuts in the highest-income tax brackets, which will reduce state

investments that could help our kids and communities. Those tax cuts – one in the regular session and one in a special session – increased the unfairness already existing in our upside-down tax system. We also worked, unsuccessfully, to defeat efforts to transfer public dollars to private schools that lack accountability measures.

We and dozens of our partner organizations helped defeat legislation that would have dismantled state efforts to address historic racial and ethnic inequities in policy and practice. We advocated against weakening our child labor laws. While the Legislature did make it easier for employers to hire younger workers without the permission of a parent or guardian, the attention our advocacy brought to the issue resulted in stronger civil and criminal penalties for violations of child labor laws. There were



bright spots for children, including a new law that provides free school meals to any child who qualifies for reduced-price meals.

These issues – from taxes and education to health and equity – will continue to be at the forefront of public debates in 2024 and beyond.

STORYTELLING

In 2023, AACF continued its storytelling efforts for Medicaid: The Lived Experience. Through this project, we highlighted stories from families around the state enrolled in Medicaid. During this story collection round, AACF’s primary focus was to learn how

*Governmental Affairs
Director Val Habrock
got “Dolled up” in
support of a bill that
passed to create the
Imagination Library
of Arkansas, part
of Dolly Parton’s
Imagination Library
network.*

*Northwest
Arkansas Director
Laura Kellams (left)
testified against
the bill that puts
Arkansas’s kids at
risk of child labor
exploitation.*

the unwinding of the Public Health Emergency was impacting Arkansans. This year, we collected stories from 200 individuals and families. We partnered with Brandon House Cultural & Performing Arts Center to video record Medicaid participants who shared their experiences with the state's hasty redetermination process.

Many people who shared their stories identified wrongful terminations for themselves and their children. They also mentioned difficult administrative barriers and long wait times to restore coverage. We used these findings and stories to encourage the state to review cases and pause redeterminations.

Unfortunately, the state continued its process. However, local and national media outlets shared several of these stories. Amplifying stories brought much-needed attention to problems with the process and, in some cases, helped us advocate for families to have their cases reviewed.

AACF also engaged the state's Medicaid populations (applicants, enrollees, and community groups). We learned about their experiences with Medicaid to find what they believe works well and where the program can be improved. AACF examined the health inequities for people of color and rural communities due to systemic racism and persistent poverty. We continued our partnerships with organizations and community leaders within the Marshallese, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latine, and rural communities.

We also collected stories with organizations working to improve maternal outcomes for Black women and other women of color in Arkansas. These partnerships and our robust storytelling will be crucial to protect Medicaid from potential attacks on funding in 2024 and 2025.

RACIAL EQUITY

In 2023, we worked with partners to combat a slate of anti-equity legislation, including a voluminous amount of proposed (and some eventually passed) legislation targeting historically excluded groups of people including: Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC); LGBTQIA+ individuals; transgender children and adults; and women.

Senate Bill 73, which attempted to eliminate Affirmative Action by eliminating programs that specifically target BIPOC teachers to work in high needs areas like the Delta, failed. But other truly hurtful legislation passed, such as bills effectively banning books deemed "obscene" by criminalizing



Race Equity Director Maricella Garcia testified against a bill that would have ended affirmative action programs in state institutions, including public schools.

*By the
Numbers:*

*AACF staff
gave **32**
presentations
with **1,225**
attendees.*

*We hosted
36 events
with **1,214**
participants.*

librarians and requiring transgender children to use the bathroom corresponding with their gender assigned at birth. These laws are dangerous and do not make our communities safer or more equitable.

However, one bill was designed to do just that. Representative Jamie Scott and Senator Breanne Davis co-sponsored Act 514, making Arkansas one of the 23 states to have passed the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act. The Crown Act prohibits discrimination based on an individual's natural, protective or cultural hairstyle and adds those protections to the state Civil Rights Act. This is a major win for Black people in Arkansas who have been legally discriminated against for the way their hair grows.

HEALTH

It was a challenging year for health care coverage and access in Arkansas. Arkansas law required the state to complete Medicaid and CHIP (ARKids First) recertifications in six months at the end of the federal Public Health Emergency. This process resulted in the removal of around 427,000 people from the programs. This massive, hasty process led to a net decline of about 78,000 children in ARKids First. It is one of the highest total losses of children's Medicaid coverage in the country.

AACF was a leading voice in calling for the state to reverse – or at least slow – its course, especially with children losing coverage at such a high rate. We collected stories of affected families. We shared those stories to ensure that Arkansas's public officials were aware of the policy and administrative remedies that would make the process work better for children and families.

Our work prompted the state to correct issues with outreach materials and review several cases of families who wrongfully lost coverage. We also partnered with service providers and nonprofit organizations throughout the state to gain insight. We learned more about the crisis and the best approaches the state could take to ensure fewer eligible families lost coverage.

In addition to helping families keep coverage, we also worked to change Medicaid policy to improve health outcomes. We wrote a strong opposition letter to the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services against the state's attempt to create a back-door work requirement in Medicaid. We advocated for pregnant women to be eligible to receive Medicaid coverage with little or no wait time to avoid unnecessary delays in their prenatal care.

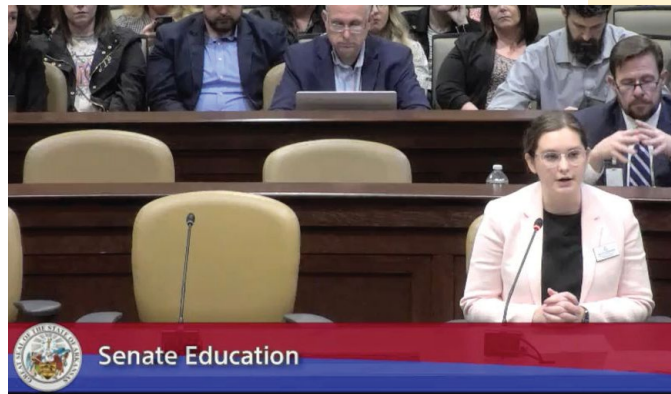
We also worked for better maternal health policy with partners, including the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, the Arkansas Minority Health Commission, and others. Our coalition of health advocates from diverse political backgrounds helped push for Arkansas to extend pregnancy coverage from two

months to a full year. Still, the state chose not to approve that option in 2023. Despite these challenges, we have strengthened our coalitions and our determination to ensure that our state prioritizes maternal health.

EDUCATION

In 2023, the LEARNS Act, Governor Sanders' education overhaul legislation, dominated the education landscape in Arkansas. LEARNS both passed and began implementation in 2023, so there was a lot to monitor. While AACF supported elements of the LEARNS Act, we could not support the full legislation because it included a move to an unlimited voucher system over the next three years. We testified against it twice in committee, citing the detrimental effects it could have on our state's public education system. But the implementation of LEARNS is far from over; the true cost and long-term impacts are still unknown. Over the next several years, AACF will be working to collect data and analyze how LEARNS will affect our state's budget, as well as our local schools and the communities they serve.

Also in 2023, AACF and advocates in the early childhood education space pushed for a workforce tax credit for early childhood educators. The compensation, recruitment, and retention crises facing the early childhood workforce require us to act quickly to ensure that access and affordability to high quality childcare is improved, not worsened, for Arkansas families. Although our efforts in 2023 were unsuccessful, we are taking the lessons learned and expanding on our previous ideas to create a new legislative push in 2025. We will do this hand in hand with external partners, and we hope we can really begin to move the needle on some of these issues that have plagued the early childhood sector for years.



*Education
Policy
Director
Olivia
Gardner
testified before
the Senate
Education*

*Committee, in
opposition to the
LEARNS Act.*

TAX AND BUDGET + ECONOMIC SECURITY

One saying you will hear repeatedly from AACF staff is that "our state's budget should reflect our values." In 2023, with our partners in the Arkansas Coalition for Strong Families, we advocated for a state budget that centers the well-being of our state's families. The state Legislature focused on investing public dollars in tax cuts that mostly benefited a select few. We advocated for investments in our care workforces, better health care for pregnant and new moms, making voter registration more accessible for people with disabilities, and more. While the tax cuts passed, we shifted the debate to talking about the tradeoffs between investing in cuts and investing in our communities.

FOOD SECURITY

In 2023, food insecurity affected many families in Arkansas. Around 1 in 5, or 134,690 children are hungry in Arkansas. Arkansas has been ranked as the state with the highest rate of food insecurity in the nation. That is a tragedy in a state rich in agricultural products. However, in 2023 we saw a major success for Arkansas's hungry kids, led by our partners at the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance. Act 656, sponsored by Senator Johnathan Dismang and Representative DeAnn Vaught and signed by Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, allows children from families who qualify for reduced-price school meals to receive those meals for free. We will continue advocating in 2024 and beyond for policies that help make sure that all kids in Arkansas have enough food to eat.

PROGRESS IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

We celebrated the 15th anniversary of our Northwest Arkansas office in October at an event in which we honored Laura Kellams as the founding (and still at it!) regional director. Since the office opened in 2008, we've built a strong regional presence for AACF alongside our board members, fellow advocates and community partners. Across a national network of policy advocacy organizations, AACF is one of the few that operates a regional satellite office.

It's important to maintain a strong presence in Northwest Arkansas, not only because of the region's growing population and political clout, but also because our local advocacy highlights unique policy challenges. For example, in 2023 we reported on how Marshallese citizens in Arkansas are unfairly excluded from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. With an event in Springdale to release our report, *How Federal Policy Makes Hunger Worse*, AACF and the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese called on Congress to fix this enduring injustice in federal law.

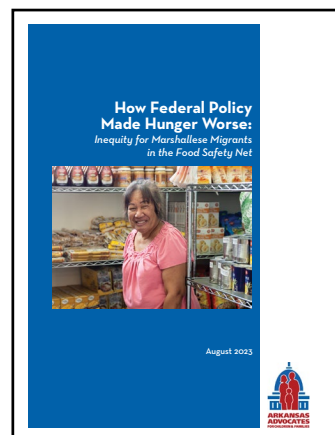
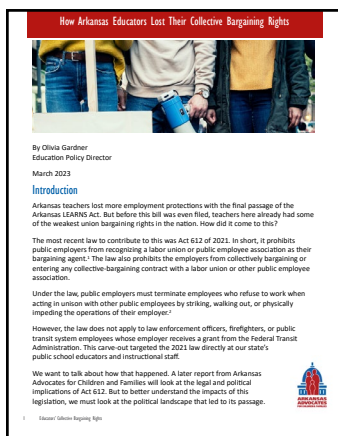
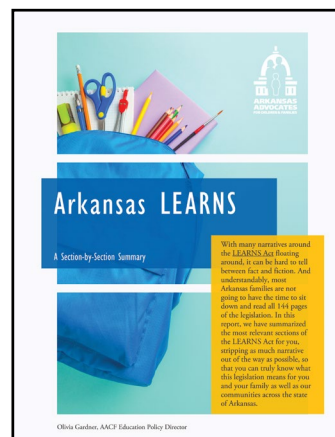
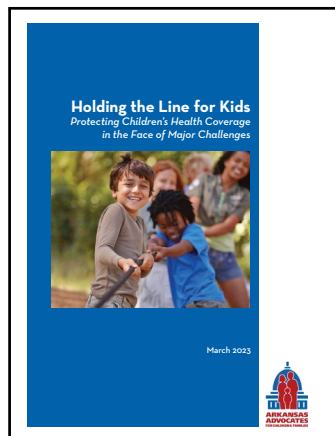
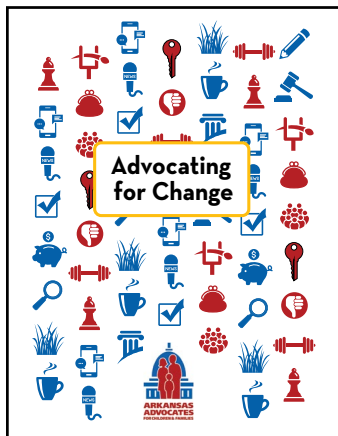
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We had a great start to the year with the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition's Kids Count Day at the Capitol on Valentine's Day. More than 100 advocates, ranging from toddlers to retirees, met at the Capitol for a day of advocacy. We rallied, shared Valentines with legislators, attended committee meetings, and had lunch with elected officials.

Coordinating with our partners to achieve big policy wins is an important part of our work. AACF leads five coalitions and participates in more to advocate for policies that improve the lives of kids and families in our state. In 2023, we founded the AACF Sexual Health Education Coalition to address the state's high teen birth rate, which for more than 10 years has been the highest rate in the country.

COMMUNICATIONS

In 2023, AACF published 57 blog posts, sent 47 press releases, and sent 172 emails to our followers and supporters.



2023 Digital Followers

X (Twitter)

6,459

Facebook

12,520


Instagram

1,965

FOLLOW US ON OUR SOCIAL CHANNELS

 facebook.com/aradvocates

 twitter.com/aacf

 [@aradvocates](https://www.instagram.com/aradvocates)

2023 EVENT PHOTOS

CENTRAL ARKANSAS SOUP SUNDAY



Ryan Davis and Loretta Alexander volunteered at Soup Sunday.



Kids of all ages enjoyed the Kid Zone at Central Arkansas Soup Sunday.

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS SOUP SUNDAY



Photo above: Keesa Smith (center) with AACF board members Dr. Chad Rogers, Dr. Susan Sullivan Miller, Dr. Sheldon Riklon and Xochitl Delgado Solorzano.

Photo at right: Children danced under the limbo pole, held by dancers from Ozark Ballet Theater.



FRIENDS OF CHILDREN ANNUAL LUNCHEON



2023 Friend of Children Honorees Christie Erwin (left) and Jay Barth (right), with Adrienne Lewellen, daughter of the late Senator Bill Lewellen (center).



Talk Business and Politics' Roby Brock facilitated a Q and A session with Keesa Smith during the luncheon.

KIDS COUNT DAY AT THE CAPITOL



Dozens of advocates, including some of the state's youngest, urged lawmakers to keep children's issues top priority during the legislative session.



AACF NORTHWEST ARKANSAS 15TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Left to right: Fayetteville Mayor Lioneld Jordan, Rep. Denise Garner and her husband and AACF Board member Hershey Garner.



KEESA SMITH'S WELCOME RECEPTION

*Left to right,
Kasey Porchia,
Regina Taylor,
Keesa Smith, and
Little Rock Mayor
Frank Scott.*



CHILDREN'S POLICY SUMMITS

Photo at left: Sean Brooks, Dalen Brooks, Branden Shipley, Savanna Sexton, Sadie Kirk and Rhys Shipley received Champion for Children Awards for successfully advocating for the new Safe Seizure Act.

Policy summits around the state highlighted new laws, missed opportunities and key victories for kids in the 94th General Assembly.



AFTERSHOCK: DOCUMENTARY SCREENING

*Left to right:
Pastor Glenn Hersey;
Pastor John C. Richards, Jr.;
Keesa Smith; Dr. Creshelle Nash
and Dr. Sam Greenfield.*

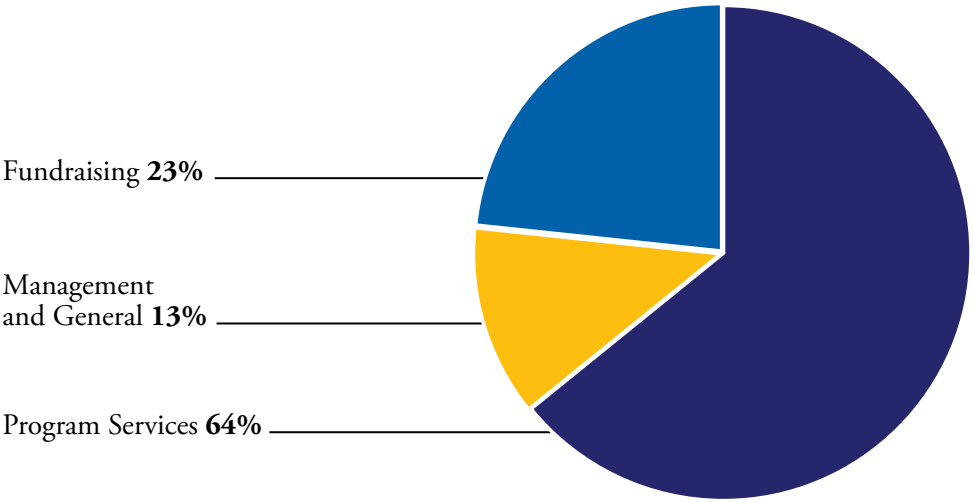


2023 FINANCIAL INFORMATION

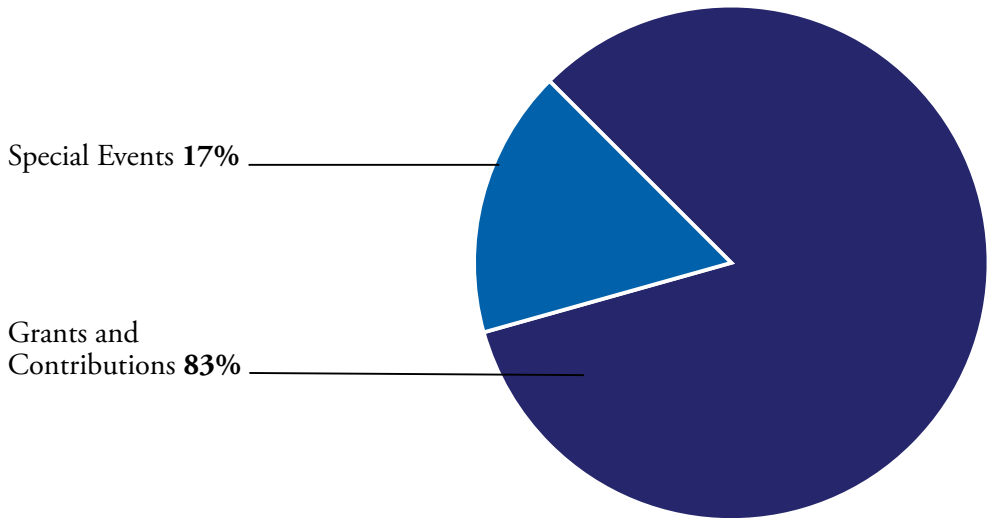
Total Revenue & Support.....	\$2,147,815
Total Expenses.....	\$2,119,168
Increase in Net Assets without Donor Restriction.....	\$28,647
Increase in Net Assets with Donor Restriction.....	\$505,219
Increase in Total Net Assets	\$533,866
Net Assets, Beginning of Year	\$2,277,550
Net Assets, End of Year.....	\$2,811,416

For the Year Ended December 31, 2023
From audited financials prepared by Landmark PLC

EXPENSES



TOTAL REVENUE & SUPPORT



2023 FUNDERS

Thank you

to all funders whose generous investment in our work helps us serve children and families in Arkansas.

*If you would like to make a donation, please visit our website at **aradvocates.org/donate.***

\$5,000+ FUNDERS

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Arkansas Children's
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Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care
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 the Arkansas
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*For more
on issues
important
to children
and families,
visit
aradvocates.org.*



Back row, left to right: Rebecca Zimmermann, Lindsey Lamb, Takari Glover, Cara Neal, Jennifer Ferguson; Front row, left to right: Laura Kellams, Olivia Gardner, Keesa Smith, Val Habrock, Fran Carter, Missy Darwin Kincaid



Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

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Northwest Arkansas Office:

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Springdale, AR 72764
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