



Better Data Means Better Decisions

*Part of a series exploring issues
from The Community Foundation's
Aspire Arkansas report.*

The **ACTION** we are taking
for a better Arkansas...
Working hard in
school.

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AspireArkansas.org Gives You Information for Action



In May, Arkansas Community Foundation launched an expanded online version of the *Aspire Arkansas* report at **AspireArkansas.org**. Our hope is that better access to county-by-county data on education, healthcare, families and communities will help you take action to improve your community.

Since the inception of *Aspire Arkansas* in 2011, Community Foundation

affiliates throughout our state have been able to make grants and build partnerships to address the areas identified through the *Aspire Arkansas* data and analysis. Statewide organizations and government entities have used the combined statistics to better understand issues and provide smarter answers to those they serve.

All the data on **AspireArkansas.org** has been previously published by trusted, existing sources cited on the website. We believe that by aggregating this information in an accessible format, it will be easier for you to have a clear picture of where your community is today and what actions need to be taken to improve life in your hometown.

On the **AspireArkansas.org** site, community indicators help determine strengths and weaknesses and focus efforts to improve Arkansas. *Aspire Arkansas* also provides commentary that interprets the indicator information through maps, graphs, summaries and charts.

You can use the “Dashboard” button at the top of the **AspireArkansas.org** homepage to put together information specific to your needs, download the information and share it with others. The knowledge you gain can be a catalyst for choosing the most important local priorities to support with time, funding and advocacy.

Spend some time on the **AspireArkansas.org** site. You’ll find information that can help you understand where your community stands and what actions you may take to move it forward!

Heather Larkin
President and CEO



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On the cover: Youth from *El Centro Hispano* were invited to share an action they could take to make their community a better place to live.



Three Ways Data Helps You Improve Your Community

If you’ve ever owned a Fitbit or other fitness tracking device, you’ve already experienced how data can motivate change. Fitness advocates recommend that adults take at least 10,000 steps per day; if your fitness tracker indicates you’ve only taken 1,000 steps by lunchtime, you’ve got some choices to make. Will you take the stairs instead of the elevator? Will you park your car farther from the supermarket entrance? Will you go for a walk around the neighborhood after dinner?

Simply knowing your step-count can’t improve your health. But taking action to increase your step-count can!

The same is true of community-level data. Measuring a community’s rate of tobacco use or average elementary school test scores doesn’t automatically improve these issues, but using this data to guide individual and collective action can. Here’s how:

ASSESS THE NEED. Some community needs are pretty obvious: the dilapidated ballpark in need of repairs, the shuttered storefront where there was once a thriving business. Other needs aren’t so visible. For example, you might have a sense of the quality of your local schools, but do you know how students are performing on standardized tests, and how their scores compare to kids from



other districts? And what about prenatal care rates, housing affordability and voter participation in your area?

Each data point adds another brush-stroke to the complete picture of your community. At **AspireArkansas.org**, you can find 40 different quality-of-life indicators to help you assess the areas where your community is leading the way or falling behind. You can use this information to determine where to invest your resources and attention.

Some questions you might ask are:

- How does Arkansas compare to the nation on a given issue?
- How does my community compare to others across the state?
- Are there any gaps or disparities when the numbers are broken down by race or gender?
- On which issues is my community leading the way? Are there any issues where we're falling behind?
- How does my community fare with regard to the issues that are most important to me, personally?

DIG DEEPER. The numbers are a great starting point, but there's more to explore. If you're excited about recent increases in the physical activity level among adults in your community, you might want to find out what's behind the increase and how you can help keep the momentum going. Is there a parks and trails organization you could support? Is your town making investments in public exercise and recreation facilities? Who else is supporting this issue, and how could you get involved?

Once you've identified a few key data points that are important to you, some questions you might ask are:

- Who's working on this issue in my community?
- Are there any successful programs, strategies or interventions working in other communities that might be effective here?
- Who else needs to know about this? Who else is affected by this issue?
- Is there any research that might help us understand the issue more clearly?
- Who can help?

TRACK PROGRESS. To use our resources most effectively, we have to know if our efforts are making a difference. Tracking data year after year can reveal important patterns and alert us when positive change is occurring...or not. It can take many years to see consistent, noticeable change on some of the education, health and economic issues on **AspireArkansas.org**. Sometimes it might be necessary to change our approach or re-evaluate the issue if the numbers aren't moving in the right direction.

Some questions you might ask are:

- How are the numbers trending over time?
- Has there been any forward progress since the last time this data was updated?
- If not, what factors might be preventing positive change?
- If so, what factors might be contributing to positive change?

Data is only useful if it motivates action. So, whether you're considering where to spend your volunteer time, how to use your charitable dollars or which local policy issues you'll support and advocate for, you can use **AspireArkansas.org** to understand your community more fully and start working toward positive change.



Aspire Arkansas Data Already at Work

Nonprofits, business organizations and economic development agencies agree that the data compiled in **AspireArkansas.org** is a valuable tool.

"How else can we measure our progress?" said Laura Kellams, Northwest Arkansas Director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

Nonprofits throughout the state use indicators from **AspireArkansas.org** not only to see whether they're making progress, but to choose what issues to tackle in the first place.

"When we see these trends, they can and should direct the way we do our everyday work. Good nonprofits use hard data to establish the fact that there really is need — rather than just collecting anecdotes about what they see happening around them. Good

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"I've already started using AspireArkansas.org. The statistics there have helped me support a compelling case for funding on a grant I'm preparing."

— Delia Anderson Farmer, CCAP, Executive Director
Economic Opportunity Agency of Washington County



nonprofits figure out how they can address a need, or a whole set of needs, through the unique services they provide.”

Many nonprofits struggle to explain clearly and concisely the problems they work to address and their ability to help their community solve those problems. With **AspireArkansas.org**, nonprofits can easily seek the status of indicators that are essential to their mission, obtain commentary on how these indicators affect their community and use the data to ask questions and take actions that bring about needed change.

“We might not feel good about all the information in the report,” Kellams said. “But our best work is done starting with information that can be useful in steering the course toward change.”



Some of the tools on the site most helpful to Kellams include the arrows and infographics that help make data easy to digest. For instance, when an indicator is moving in a positive direction, whether that number is increasing or decreasing, it is coded green. Indicators that are moving away from their target are in red. It is easy to see that although there is much room for improvement in education in our state, all the indicators are coded green, meaning that we are making progress together.

Another key tool is the county-by-county maps that include school district-by-school district data for education. “When organizations like Arkansas Advocates look at statewide data, we see that certain counties stand out,” Kellams said. “We can start to ask questions like what is different in that county? Is it economics? Is it a policy that needs to be changed? The data can help us pinpoint hot spots and not so hot spots.”

The online data shows Arkansas ranked last in the nation in access to early prenatal care. Sixty percent of babies were born to mothers who got prenatal care during their first trimester — which is a key

indicator in whether a baby will be born healthy or not. The national average is 75 percent. That data is directly related to Arkansas’ high infant mortality rate.

The report also shows that within Arkansas’s low ranking, there are huge racial and ethnic disparities. Only 29 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander babies were born to mothers who sought prenatal care during the first trimester.

“Washington County is below the already low state average with 58 percent of babies born to mothers who had access to prenatal care,” Kellams said. “Using the data, Washington County nonprofits and agencies can determine who to target, and in what language, to promote early prenatal care.”

Randy Zook, President and CEO of the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce, used the previous *Aspire Arkansas* printed reports to obtain information of interest when he spoke to members at Chambers of Commerce meetings throughout the state. He plans to share the accessible, local data available on the new **AspireArkansas.org** website with the 1,200 businesses who are Chamber members. That number represents 75 percent of the non-farm payroll in the state.

“Reading levels are one big push we’ve worked on with local businesses,” Zook said. “We ask local Chamber leaders to meet monthly for coffee or lunch with their school boards to discuss progress. Information in this report can help.”

Aspire Arkansas data also can be very useful to communities working on economic development issues. “When responding to queries from potential industries, economic developers often have to do a lot of research to respond. This resource saves them chasing down all the data by compiling it in one location. When a site prospect asks for a profile of their community, this information is spot on to paint the picture,” Zook said.

“I’ve already started using **AspireArkansas.org**,” said Delia Anderson Farmer, CCAP, Executive Director of the Economic Opportunity Agency of Washington County. “The statistics there have helped me support a compelling case for funding on a grant I’m preparing.”

Farmer said she believes *Aspire Arkansas* data will inform presentations and conversations in addition to grant proposals for her organization. “Arkansas Community Foundation said they want us to make better decisions and create positive change with this



“Using the data from **AspireArkansas.org**, Washington County nonprofits and agencies can determine who to target, and in what language, to promote early prenatal care.”

— Laura Kellams, Northwest Arkansas Director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

data. I’m already seeing that while it previously took me longer to put together the right data, much of it is available on the site right now.”

The data is easily accessible and user friendly, according to Farmer. She found the data stories and trends information on **AspireArkansas.org** directly relates to the work EOA does for children and families in Washington County.

Strategies for how to get hunger relief to those who need it most can be informed by data from *Aspire Arkansas*. Camille Coker Wrinkle, CEO and Executive Director of the Harvest Texarkana Regional Food Bank, works with 10 counties in southwest Arkansas.

“The percentage of those living in poverty, the percentage of childhood poverty and the percentage of childhood food

insecurity are directly related to priorities we set at the food bank,” Wrinkle said. “The data tells us where support is needed most.” The food bank is judged by its national affiliate organization on its ability to provide food to 50 percent of those who are in need. “A few years ago, two of our 10 counties were meeting that 50 percent target. Now we’ve reversed that, and eight of our 10 counties are meeting the 50 percent mark,” she said.

Because of data like the information in *Aspire Arkansas*, food banks can determine where support is most needed. But the information isn’t just numbers. To the staff at Harvest Texarkana Regional Food Bank, the data reflects the people they serve.

“People like Emily, a second grader who told us her favorite part of the Backpack for Kids program is sharing the food with her brother,” Wrinkle said. “Data is important to help Emily, so it’s important to us.”

Individuals Commit to Take Actions for a Better Arkansas

What happens when Arkansans are equipped with important information about the needs in their community? They're prepared to take action.

When prompted on Aspire Action Day, May 3, hundreds of people committed to taking a specific action to make their communities better places to live. Prior to the launch of **AspireArkansas.org**, Arkansas Community Foundation asked community members statewide to post a selfie including an action they would take to improve their community. The responses were widespread and inspirational.

The intention was to prepare communities for the release of *Aspire Arkansas*, an online county-by-county indicators report about the quality of life in Arkansas. What do you get when you have better information? The opportunity to provide better solutions.

AspireArkansas.org is an informational tool created to help people across our state better understand local needs so that local people can feel empowered to act to meet those needs.

Aspire Action Day provided a platform for Arkansans to post selfies with bold action statements. Hundreds of these selfies, which included #AspireArkansas, poured into social media streams statewide. The prompt was simple: **What ACTION will you take to improve your community?**

Local news personalities, including THV11 staff, committed to using their platforms to spread awareness about topics like grade-level reading scores, important community programs that prevent bullying or homeless shelters.

Goodwill Industries, a statewide nonprofit, invited employees to participate in the social media action day. The organization's mission is to change lives through education, training and employment with the hope that those served will have improved skills that provide long-term employment and a better standard of living.

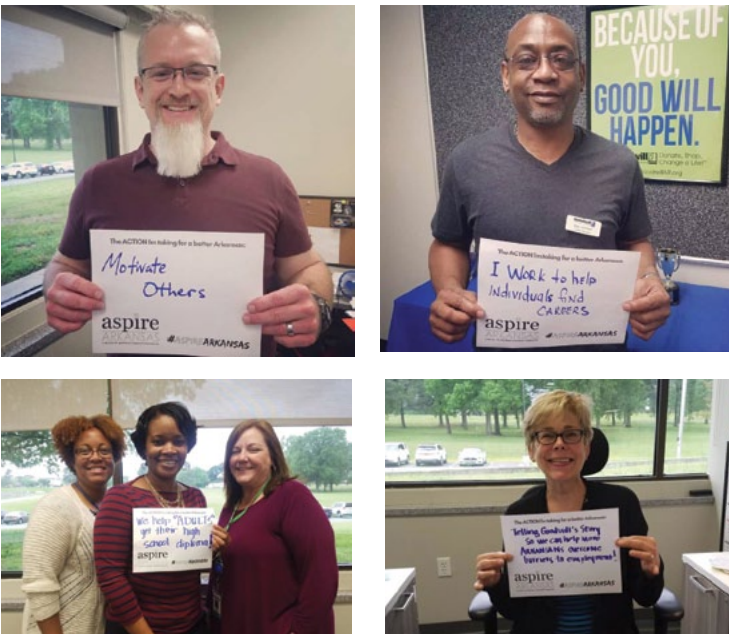
Many Goodwill staff selfies included statements like "Telling Goodwill's story so we can help more Arkansans overcome barriers to employment" or "Helping 'adults' get their high school diploma!"

Not only did nonprofits get involved, but most action selfies were shared by individuals who wanted to join the conversation. Tiffany Henry of Little

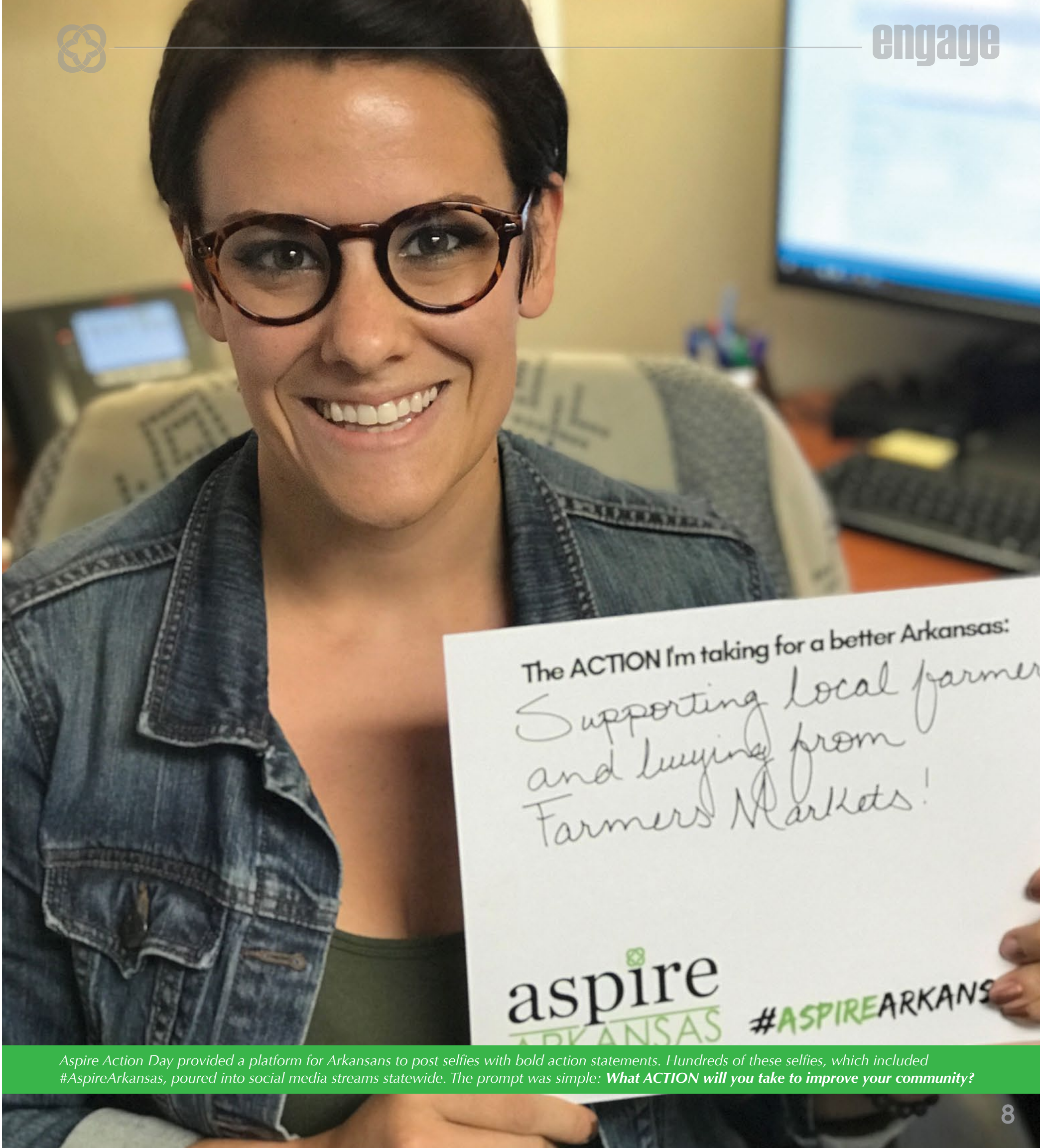
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Tiffany Henry



Goodwill Industries of Arkansas Employees



Aspire Action Day provided a platform for Arkansans to post selfies with bold action statements. Hundreds of these selfies, which included #AspireArkansas, poured into social media streams statewide. The prompt was simple: **What ACTION will you take to improve your community?**



Rock committed to supporting startups in Arkansas.

"Arkansas is an amazing state and a leader in agriculture, coding education and business. I am a champion of the Arkansas entrepreneurial ecosystem and am very proud of our progress in research, innovation and startup support," Henry said.

Henry participated because Aspire Action Day was a great way to celebrate the many successes in Arkansas and showcase the advocates of our state who work hard every day to make it the best it can be.

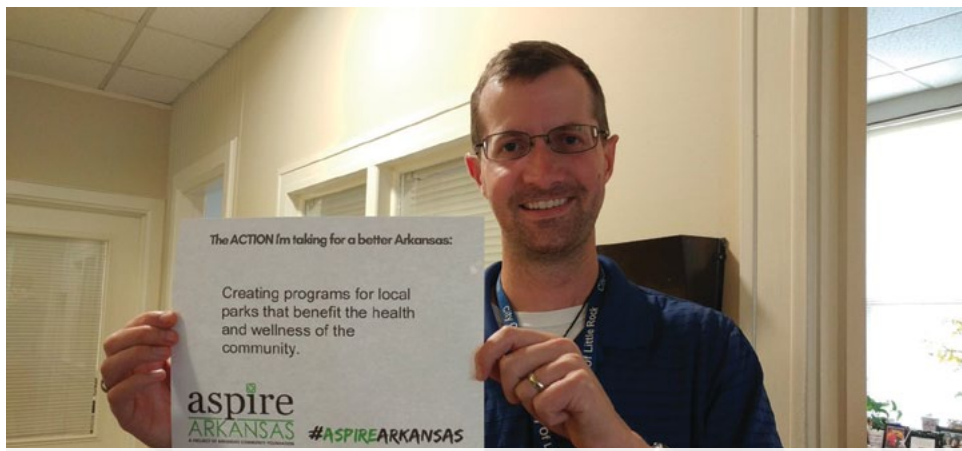
Other nonprofits like El Centro Hispano, a nonprofit in northwest Arkansas, invited those they serve to participate. El Centro Hispano helps the region's Hispanic community by providing

leadership opportunities that improve the quality of life and supports youth enrichment.

Youth were invited to share their action of "working hard in school" to make their community a better place to live. When asked why they participated, they answered, "Because we believe in making Arkansas a better place."

"The purpose of the day was to invite Arkansans to think of one action they could take to improve their community and commit to making it happen," said Arkansas Community Foundation CEO Heather Larkin. "While our great state may face many different challenges, one thing remains to be true: Arkansans are generous when it comes to helping. If every Arkansan is equipped with valuable information, then every Arkansan is better prepared to take action for stronger Arkansas communities."

The ACTION I'm taking for a Better Arkansas



"Creating programs for local parks that benefit the health and wellness of the community." — Grant

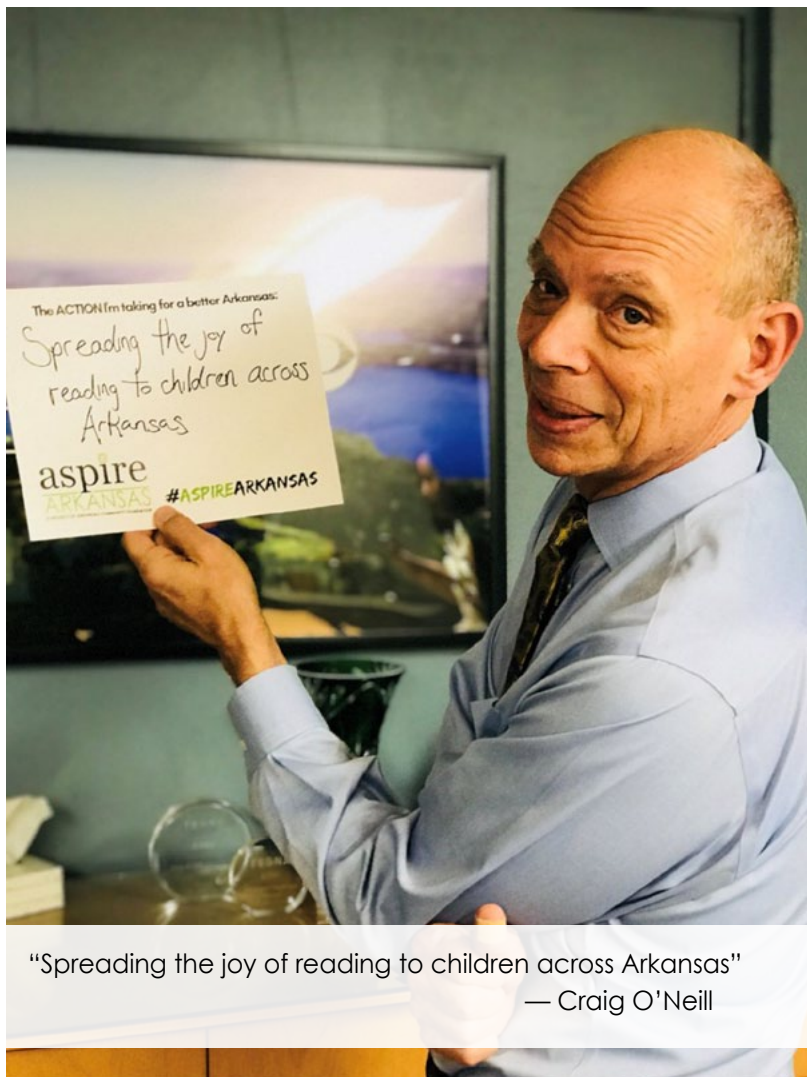


@RMHCArkansas

"We help critically ill children by keeping families close." — Ronald McDonald House Charities Staff

"Advocating for quality health care for all Arkansans regardless of income of where you live." — Marquita

"Increase access to higher education!" — Christy



"Spreading the joy of reading to children across Arkansas" — Craig O'Neill

"Help end childhood hunger & help improve grade-level reading!" — Molly



ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS

What did you learn from the *Aspire Arkansas* data that can be used to help improve our communities?



By Charlotte Green, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of Teaching and Learning
College of Education
University of Central Arkansas



By Darrin Williams
CEO, Southern Bancorp, Inc.

The overall data reveals Arkansas is going in the right direction, but there is much room for improvement. Student performance is up across the state in essential academic areas, such as third grade reading, eight grade math, access to preschool programs and graduation rates.

Although there is improvement to celebrate, there is still reason for great concern. Increasing the number of children reading at grade level is a goal for Arkansas educators and community leaders, because 63 percent of students not reading at grade level is not the Arkansas we desire or deserve.

What can Arkansans do to address this concern? Eighty-five percent of brain development occurs before a child starts the school system. Realizing the impact adults have on children's outcome at such an early age, speaks to the importance of programs that help build stronger children.

One prominent means to address this is Arkansas Imagination Library, which is an Arkansas literacy program that supports families to build strong children. Building family capacity creates the foundation in the home that helps children have strong brain development. It also teaches parental advocacy to equip families to help their children and hold schools accountable for student learning. Targeted investment in programs that build family capacity, such as Arkansas Imagination Library, will assist Arkansas in moving beyond the current modest gains we see in student achievement.

Aspire Arkansas data indicates that 9.7 percent of Arkansans are unbanked (have no bank account) and 22.6 percent are underbanked (have a bank account but rely on non-bank, high costs financial products and services). These statistics mean that Arkansas once again exceeds national averages (7 percent unbanked, 19.9 percent underbanked).

Reasons for not having an account with a financial institution range from not trusting banks because of "surprise" fees to believing they don't have enough money for an account, suggesting that financial institutions should do a better job of creating products to serve the unbanked and underbanked.

And that is why I am excited about BankOn Arkansas+ (BOA+). The goal of BOA+ is for all Arkansans to have a safe, trusted and affordable banking option in order to save for themselves, build wealth for their families and improve their quality of life.

Lead by the Arkansas Asset Funders Network, Arkansas has initiated the first-ever statewide BankOn coalition. It has tremendous promise, but to reduce the unbanked and underbanked stats by the next Aspire Arkansas report, we need broad based support from local, state and federal governments; banks and credit unions; and community organizations across Arkansas. The opportunity for change is no longer a dream of the future, it's a reality today, right here in the Natural State.



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community foundation

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EDUCATION



22% of Arkansas adults have a bachelor's degree or higher.



Only 37% of Arkansas third graders can read on grade level.

HEALTH



83% of adults had a routine medical checkup within the past two years.



33% of adults not recently participating in leisure-time physical activity.

FAMILIES



Arkansas is ranked 14th in the nation for unemployment rate.



Of every 1,000 Arkansas children, 12 suffer from maltreatment or abuse.

COMMUNITIES



Arkansas is ranked 3rd in the nation for charitable giving.



Arkansas is ranked 44th in the nation for voter participation.

