ARKANSAS ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

AFFECTING POLICY AND PROGRAMMING
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For over 35 years, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has invested in improving the lives of Arkansans. With our nonprofit partners, we are engaged in the long-term, complex, and essential work of helping people and places move from poverty to prosperity. The Foundation is deeply grateful to our nonprofit partners who engage so thoughtfully with us in setting and monitoring outcomes, learning from experience, and grappling with tough questions and challenges.

We are often asked about what we are learning through our grantmaking, investments in nonprofit capacity building, and mission- and program-related investments. This monograph is the first in a series we have named Partners in Progress where we will share grantee stories and our collective lessons learned. We are publishing these reports in the spirit and practice of transparency, which is a core value of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. We also want to document our grantmaking investments continuously to capture, reflect on, learn from, and adapt to the most effective charitable investment process. Documentation allows all stakeholders, not just grantees, to reflect on their ability to impact, influence, and leverage resources for positive change in Arkansas.

In the pages that follow, we tell the story of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) and WRF’s relationship that began in 1977. We attempt to capture, share, and encourage conversation around some of the challenges and lessons learned in AACF’s evolution as an anchor institution in Arkansas. What do we mean by anchor institution? It is the statewide, multi-issue advocacy organization with the prime and important focus of public policy that affects the welfare of children and low-income families in Arkansas. AACF takes on the tough issues in the state. The organization has influenced public policy that has positively improved the lives of children and families. From juvenile justice reform, to child welfare reform, to education reform, and more, AACF has successfully brought public attention and education to numerous areas affecting low-income families and children in Arkansas.

This is not a story that has a precise and clear ending, nor universal answers. Long-term strategic investing for positive change through grants and capacity building is an ever-evolving process. It is our hope that sharing this journey will reinforce the idea that it’s philanthropy’s responsibility to understand how its investments are playing out in homes, on the street, and at the policy-making tables.

The Foundation will continue to engage deeply with grantees on defining, monitoring, and learning from their progress and setbacks. Over time, we hope to create a comprehensive map of the impact, lessons, and changing conditions in our state that will guide the recalibration of the Foundation’s overall strategic direction, as appropriate.

As always, we welcome comments, questions, challenges, and wisdom from you regarding this report and our ongoing work. We also welcome new partners in the work of helping people and places in Arkansas move out of poverty. Contact me at swest@wrfoundation.org.

Sherece Y. West, Ph.D.
President and Chief Executive Officer
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families (AACF) was founded by a group of concerned citizens and community leaders in 1977 to ensure that children and families had an independent voice and advocate at the state capitol when important decisions were being made.

AACF’s partnership with the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has changed with the times to reflect the changing needs of children and families and the changing public policy agenda in Arkansas and the United States. As a result of this partnership, Arkansas’s children and families, especially the state’s most vulnerable children and families, have benefited from new public policies and services in areas ranging from health care, education, juvenile justice, child welfare, and economic support. This would not have been possible without the support of the Foundation.

This publication provides a comprehensive and candid picture of AACF’s history, its role in identifying and calling attention to emerging issues, and its role in conducting research and advocacy to promote good public policies that have improved the lives of countless children and families. Just as important, it also provides a frank discussion of the challenges the organization faces in being a government watchdog on issues affecting children and families while at the same time working to develop collaborative partnerships with officials inside and outside of state government and the Arkansas legislature.

The support of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation was critical during the early years of AACF’s development and has enabled AACF to respond to emerging public policy issues affecting the state’s most vulnerable children and families over the last four decades. It has enabled AACF to become a nationally recognized leader among state child advocacy organizations. More important, it has helped lay the foundation for future public policies that will help AACF accomplish our mission of ensuring that all children and families have the resources and opportunities they need to lead healthy and productive lives and realize their full potential.

Sincerely,

Richard Huddleston
Executive Director
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
PARTNERS IN PROGRESS

A Report for the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Volume Two
Prepared by Frontline Solutions, Inc. / Written by Shannon Collier-Tenison, Brian Baughan, Marcus Littles, and Bianca C. Williams / Major Photography: © Tara Manthey, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. Other photography: AmyJo Brown and Jamaica Woodyard Gilmer / Edited by Brian Baughan

Background and Methodology

For 35 years, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) has been committed to promoting and engendering systemic change in the areas of education; economic development; and economic, racial, and social justice. Dedicated to bringing to life the vision of its founder, Winthrop Rockefeller, and transforming the lives of all Arkansans, WRF continues to use grantmaking and other forms of strategic investments as tools for empowering local communities.

In an effort to assess the progress the organization is making in these endeavors, and to gain insight from best practices and persistent challenges, this series of publications examines several of the foundation’s long-term investments. Volume Two of Partners in Progress profiles Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF), a public policy advocacy organization dedicated to doing research and engaging in statewide, multi-issue advocacy. For over 30 years, WRF has invested in AACF, providing support for the foundation’s endeavor 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.”

For this publication, WRF engaged Frontline Solutions, a national research organization committed to supporting organizational learning and development of philanthropic and nonprofit organizations. Frontline acquired the assistance of an Arkansas-based researcher, Shannon Collier-Tenison, an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, in order to understand fully the impact that WRF’s investments in AACF are making in Arkansas.

Collier-Tenison gathered the data for this report through face-to-face and phone interviews with past and present members of WRF and AACF; by analyzing the foundation’s reports and internal documents; and by acquiring community responses and assessments through external books and archived newspaper articles. In this profile, Collier-Tenison discusses the best practices, challenges, and lessons learned from WRF’s investments in AACF so as to provide insight into the best strategies for improving the lived experiences and educational and economic outcomes of Arkansas residents.
Here are some highlights from Collier-Tenison’s findings:

**Best Practices**

*Effective policy change navigates political realities*

AACF’s successes in public policy advocacy have been a product of its capacity to both engage partners as well as strategically target opposing interests. Sometimes, policymakers, state agencies, and/or elected officials are key allies to AACF’s advocacy efforts; in other instances, they are the targets of the organization’s advocacy campaigns. In its years as an anchor institution in advocating for policy change that benefits the life outcomes of Arkansas children and families, AACF has had to be ambidextrous in its relationships.

*Research-based advocacy*

In contrast to ideology-based advocacy, AACF’s desire to supplement vision with research has led to an increased understanding of all the moving parts that comprise social and economic problems and their solutions. This gives AACF the ability to provide hard facts to institutions and policymakers who are responsible for making policy changes. Doing this type of extensive research establishes AACF as an expert on the issues it is working to solve, subsequently crystallizing the organization’s position as an anchor institution in the public policy arena in Arkansas.

**Challenges**

*Data access and distribution*

AACF has faced a significant challenge that is familiar to many institutions trying to make community change happen, which is gaining access to appropriate data and distributing it among various institutions and sectors when that data is not readily available. Furthermore, encouraging state institutions to consistently undergo research and archive data on pertinent factors, such as race, has also been a challenge. Obstacles to obtaining accessible, accurate, and disaggregated state-level data have arisen in the work of AACF.

*Documenting impact*

AACF finds it somewhat difficult to document the direct impact its advocacy has had on the communities served, particularly when it comes to showing the impact of long-term struggles for public policy change. Since much of the work completed by AACF is initiated by long-term investments in communities and is geared toward systemic change (instead of short-term gains), documenting the results can be hard to do. This sometimes makes it challenging for WRF to fully realize the impact its strategic investments in AACF are making in Arkansas. Although AACF plays a significant role in the network of organizations working to make change, its dedication to collaboration and the fact that its successes are
often realized over a long period of time make it difficult to document the direct impact of its work.

Lessons Learned

*Foundations have the power to build institutions, instead of just making grants

WRF made the initial investment in AACF; three decades later, the Foundation’s contribution comprises less than 10 percent of AACF’s budget. WRF not only provided the seed funding for AACF, but has continued to support the organization for over 30 years. The vital role of AACF as an anchor policy institution on behalf of low-income children and families in Arkansas has been supported by a consistent local foundation investor and champion in WRF. The Foundation’s willingness to continue to support AACF has been a significant factor in the organization’s growing ability to attract more resources from an array of local, regional, and national sources.

*Policy change in 3D: Developing New Policies, Dismantling Existing Policies, and Disseminating Policy Implications to Key Stakeholders

AACF’s definition of “policy work” is crucial in attempting to understand its capacity to advocate for and influence policy change. AACF has affirmed a theory of change that deems it necessary to develop new policies that better protect the interests and well-being of low-income children and families; to dismantle existing policies (e.g., tax policy, juvenile justice and education policies, and so on) that create barriers for low-income children and families; and to disseminate relevant data and analysis that inform proposed policy changes and help educate key community and institutional stakeholders.
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation’s Partners in Progress offers the Foundation an opportunity to examine its ongoing investment in grantees, as well as to better understand the ways in which these grantees have affected the quality of life for Arkansans. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF), a public policy advocacy organization, is one of these grantees. In order to assess the influence of AACF on public policy in Arkansas, this profile provides an in-depth view of the organization, including mission, strategies, funding, and outcomes. Drawing on a systems perspective, in which entities are viewed in relationship with other interacting systems instead of as isolated parts, this overview analyzes AACF through a lens of WRF funding, public policy, and the state as an overarching system. Multiple sources of data were used to create a holistic picture of the organization and its work. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Rich Huddleston, AACF Executive Director; Jennifer Ferguson, AACF Deputy Director; and Paul Kelly, AACF Senior Policy Analyst, provided a wealth of data about AACF, as well as about the relationship between AACF and WRF. Many additional resources, including historical materials, grant concept papers, and final reports, contributed to a better understanding of the impact of WRF grants on AACF’s public policy advocacy in Arkansas.
AACF has worked to influence public policy on behalf of children in the state of Arkansas for over 30 years. For much of this time, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has provided critical support of the organization, from helping with its first staff and director appointments in 1977, \(^1\) to its recent research and advocacy on tax policy, the impact of crystal methamphetamine (commonly known as “crystal meth”) on the child welfare system, and after-school policy enhancement.

As a statewide, multi-issue advocacy organization, AACF fills a unique role in the state with its strong focus on public policy that affects the welfare of children and low-income families. Also unique is the organization’s commitment to public policy advocacy at the state capitol that is based on research and data rather than ideology. Its use of research and data provides important support and credibility to the organization as it takes on the tough issues. As Executive Director Rich Huddleston points out, AACF has chosen “to be out front on unpopular issues, and to be a voice for children and families when they [have] no other voice to advocate for them.” AACF “advocates for policies that research suggests would be most effective in improving lives for children and families.” \(^2\)
The number of children served in community-based programs for youth offenders continues to rise, increasing 15% since 2005 to almost 8,800 youth each year.

The following mission statement guides the organization:

_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. AACF serves as a voice for children at the Arkansas State Capitol and in Washington, D.C.; gathers and analyzes data to support public policy that serves all children and families; and organizes coalitions of diverse groups to drive change._

AACF fulfills its mission through the promotion of good public policy development and implementation. The core values of the organization ensure that efforts are child-centered and research-driven, and hold those who use public resources accountable. Inclusiveness is another key value in AACF’s approach to public policy and one that prods AACF to take the lead in bringing “everyone to the table through partnerships and coalitions to accomplish [their] vision and mission.”

This collaborative approach extends even to state agencies. Before AACF considers making a government actor the target of an advocacy campaign, the organization first tries to work in partnership with that actor to promote positive change, only moving to a more public advocacy stance when these “behind the scenes” attempts do not work. Moreover, while AACF often plays a leading role in developing coalitions, it is also very willing to step back and allow other groups that are already actively working on an issue to take the lead. This approach allows AACF to offer support in terms of research and data for various efforts, but, strategically, to concentrate its energies on other important initiatives that might not otherwise be addressed.
EVOLUTION OF THE ORGANIZATION

With the support of WRF, AACF was founded on the issues of juvenile justice, child welfare, and poverty. These issues, in addition to health, welfare, and education, have driven AACF’s efforts for many years.6

As with any organization, AACF’s priorities have evolved with internal leadership changes and shifts in policy foci and funding sources. One such event came in the form of the 1996 passage of federal welfare reform legislation. In response, AACF called a meeting of Arkansas groups concerned with the potential consequences of the legislation on low-income families. From this initial meeting came a set of recommendations highlighting access to critical supportive services for children’s well-being, education and training options for low-income parents, and support for measures for collecting intensive data and monitoring the effects of welfare reform on low-income families. Many of these recommendations were incorporated into Arkansas’s state welfare law in 1997.7

That initial meeting also resulted in the establishment of the Arkansas KIDS COUNT Coalition, a broad-based, statewide coalition of more than 40 groups and 2,000 individuals. The Coalition promotes public awareness of children’s policy issues as well as identifies policy options to “improve the well-being of children and families.” In addition to adding a new policy voice, the creation of this coalition shifted AACF from an “insider based lobbying group to one that helped start and build statewide coalitions to advocate for children’s issues in the state.”8

Similarly, receipt of a multi-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in the late 1990s assisted AACF in creating a formal structure of engaging local groups and partners in various regions of the state around the issue of children’s health care while working to decrease the number of uninsured children in Arkansas. Work stemming from this grant led to increased enrollment in ARKids First and an expansion of the program even before it was required by federal mandates.9

In 2001, AACF took on a new initiative to increase funding for quality pre-K education. Led by then–Executive Director Amy Rossi, AACF “led the charge to organize and engage the early childhood community in legislative advocacy.”10 According to AACF Deputy Director Jennifer Ferguson, Rossi was “a bit of a visionary” who followed the research on early child development closely, recognizing that pre-K education would be an important factor in early brain development, and moving AACF in this direction even before there was funding available. Subsequent work on educational issues, particularly with a high-profile case disputing the level of funding for the Lake View School District, highlighted the need to explore policy options for reforming Arkansas’s tax system to promote fairness for middle- and low-income families.

In the last 10 to 12 years, in part due to the hiring of Rich Huddleston as Executive Director in 2004, AACF has expanded its involvement on tax and budget issues and decreased its focus on juvenile justice and child welfare, a shift that has been questioned by some outside the organization. This shift is due to some extent to a lack of available funding in these policy areas.11 This move is also purposeful, however, because, as Jennifer Ferguson explains, “if you don’t understand the tax
and budget systems [of child welfare], you cannot advocate for the programs.” There will be increased attention on issues such as the minimum wage and creating a fair tax system that does not penalize middle- and low-income families. However, Executive Director Rich Huddleston believes that in order to build public and political support for these types of innovative public policy initiatives, AACF will have to address “the anti-tax sentiment that exists among the general public (and the opposition to progressive taxes by powerful special interest groups) that makes realizing positive public policy change that much more difficult.”

While the organization has responded to shifts in leadership over time, as well as to federal and state policy issues affecting priorities for child welfare and low-income populations, its focus on Arkansas’s children has never wavered. With only four executive directors in the agency’s 32-year history and great stability in terms of board and staff involvement, AACF has provided consistent leadership in statewide advocacy for children’s issues in Arkansas. According to Huddleston, AACF’s willingness to challenge special interest groups and large corporations when necessary, to “take on the biggest fights,” means that they may lose more than they win. However, when they win, “they win big,” which means that Arkansas children and low-income families win big as well. These successes may be somewhat unexpected by those outside the organization, but not to those on the inside who are daily preparing to challenge policymakers to “do the right thing for children and families,” even at the risk of potential criticism and political reprisals. This ability to tackle poverty and similar issues that others are reluctant to address directly, as well as an eagerness to confront policymakers, state agencies, and entities like them, uniquely positions AACF for public policy advocacy at the state level.

When asked to describe Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Senior Policy Analyst Paul Kelly chose the word *intrepid* to represent the combination of courage and firm grounding in the research that exemplifies this organization. Kelly added, “We want to be courageous but also backed up by credible evidence; that not only is it the right thing to do, but it has worked before and it is possible, and then to be a bit unrestrained in advocating for it. We want to be unafraid of controversy and be mindful that our integrity is what we’ve got and [integrity] is our strongest ally.” Combining this sense of integrity with the support of Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, which attacks poverty head-on and champions social and economic justice through its advocacy funding, has allowed AACF to do what it does best: serve as a strong voice for children in Arkansas.
WRF AND AACF: A Successful Partnership for Public Policy Change

One key factor in AACF’s success in impacting public policy in Arkansas is its ability to form coalitions and to collaborate with others actively working on the same issues. Like AACF, WRF greatly values coalitions, which it bolsters through strategic investments advancing youth- and family-centered policy. AACF staff note that WRF not only encourages bringing in other groups, but also will strive to ensure the presence of a good advisory committee. For AACF, the most recent evidence of this collaborative approach lies in its participation in the Arkansas Legislative Taskforce on Reducing Poverty and Promoting Economic Opportunity. WRF backing helped further this taskforce’s mission to support and promote “the development and adoption of public policies to reduce poverty and move the needle for Arkansas’s vulnerable populations.”

With Rich Huddleston as co-chair of the committee, AACF will be an active presence with this initiative as the taskforce develops poverty reduction targets, solutions, and legislative recommendations for the state. AACF collaborates with a range of partners across the state to provide research and communication efforts to directly usher the issues of poverty and economic development into public discourse.

AACF has a long history of research-fueled public policy advocacy in Arkansas, as well as establishing or leading statewide coalitions and groups, from the long-standing Arkansas Kids COUNT Coalition to the newly established Arkansas Legislative Taskforce on Reducing Poverty and Promoting Economic Opportunity. AACF’s capacity and willingness to use available data and research to determine which public policy issues will (or should) be prioritized is an enduring part of the organization, and it has successfully brought public attention and education to numerous areas affecting low-income families and children in Arkansas. It is this research-driven spotlight on community engagement and public education about the issues, most notably poverty and economic opportunity (or the lack thereof), that generates the greatest influence on public policy. A few WRF-supported efforts are highlighted below.

Between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, WRF and AACF collaborated to make an impact in the largely neglected field of juvenile justice research. AACF’s work led directly to public policy changes improving conditions in the juvenile justice system in Arkansas, especially for low-income children and families. The organization concentrated its research specifically on how the Arkansas juvenile justice system has had a negative impact on its youth and how community-based justice models can serve as a viable alternative.

The initial research that AACF published unearthed rampant abuses in secure juvenile justice detention facilities and led to advocacy for alternative, therapeutic placements for juveniles. This new approach was centered on best practices that addressed the needs of juvenile offenders using diversion, effective interventions, and legal representation.

AACF was later prompted to respond to major legislative changes from 1989 to 1994 that increased the number of crimes for which juveniles ages 14-15 years old could be tried as adults. Then, in 1994, federal legislation was enacted that allowed 13-year-old juveniles to be tried as adults under
special circumstances. Because Arkansas did not have a coordinated data system, AACF recognized that the impact of these legislative changes was unknown. In 1995, the organization began reviewing existing juvenile justice legislation and identifying the areas in which there was inadequate data about juvenile offenders in the adult system.\textsuperscript{20}

The research results showed the changes in the numbers of juveniles entering the justice system as well as the racial disparities within the system.\textsuperscript{21} The results also highlighted the need for a responsive data system that could be used across law enforcement systems in the state and thus had great practical application, serving as one of the “start-up activities that led [Arkansas] into the 21st century in monitoring recidivism, chronic delinquents, and the degree of sequential criminal activities.”\textsuperscript{22} The inclusion of legislators in the advisory groups established through this effort, which also included agency personnel and juvenile justice experts, provided a strong incentive for agency leaders to begin to address many of the problems identified in this study.\textsuperscript{23}

All of these activities have delivered positive changes in the area of juvenile justice, both in new legislation and improved outcomes. AACF’s reputation for research and expertise helped earned the organization a lead role in crafting the “extended juvenile jurisdiction” legislation, enacted into law in 1999, to protect young offenders from prematurely entering the adult criminal justice system.

For the youth offender population, the number of children served in community-based programs continues to rise, increasing 15 percent since 2005 to almost 8,800 youth each year. Additionally, between March 2009 and March 2010, more than 40 beds were closed in secure detention facilities.

AACF will continue to remain a driving force for juvenile justice reform, notably through the leadership of Paul Kelly, a juvenile justice expert and the vice-chair of the oversight committee for the state’s Comprehensive Juvenile Justice Reform Plan, 2009–2014.

In the area of education advocacy, a judicial ruling over funding for Lakeview School District informed the research and advocacy agenda that AACF undertook. The ruling confirmed what many individuals had contended for years: that the school funding formula in Arkansas at the time was not only inadequate, but also was unfair to the state’s poorer school districts. In 2003, AACF conducted a major study, in collaboration with HISTECON Associates and the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, to identify how potential changes in the local and state tax structure might impact “the economic well-being of families with children”\textsuperscript{24} as well as the effects on other non-educational programs in the state.\textsuperscript{25} This case provided AACF with the opportunity to analyze the potential economic effects of changes in school funding on low-income families.\textsuperscript{26} Data from this study was used to educate policymakers on the need to improve the tax system, particularly for low-income families, and to advocate for a more progressive tax option for funding education in Arkansas.\textsuperscript{27}

Together WRF and AACF disseminated this research and convened key players to discuss the need for tax fairness for low-income families, resulting in a commitment from many legislators to find new, less regressive, ways of funding education in Arkansas.\textsuperscript{28} While the resulting school financing strategies adopted by the state legislature included a regressive \( \frac{7}{8} \)-cent sales tax, legislators also mitigated some of the effects of the sales tax increase and lessened the burden on low-income families by incorporating an increased corporate franchise tax and redirecting money from other funding streams.\textsuperscript{29}
Other signs of success in AACF’s tax-fairness campaign became clear in 2006, the year that both candidates for governor cited the state’s high sales tax burden on low-income families and made commitments to provide low-income tax relief. State lawmakers responded by reducing the state grocery tax from 6 cents to 2 cents over the course of the 2007 and 2009 legislative sessions. In addition, during the 2007 session, Arkansas enacted laws exempting or reducing low-income families from state income taxes. These measures essentially removed 68,500 income tax returns from the tax rolls and provided reduced taxes for another 115,000 returns—impressive numbers for a state that before 2007 had one of the country’s highest tax burdens for low-income families.

Another outcome of AACF’s Lake View education reform efforts was the expansion of pre-K education for three- and four-year-olds in Arkansas. AACF’s legislative advocacy, in conjunction with many partners in the early childhood community and legislative allies, was a driving force in gaining strong support for quality pre-K in Arkansas. Even though it was not constitutionally mandated by the Arkansas Supreme Court, this support resulted in an increase from $10 million to $111 million for the Arkansas Better Chance Program (ABC). This funding helped increase the number of at-risk three- and four-year-olds below 200 percent of the poverty level in the ABC program from 7,000 to about 21,000. As a result, pre-K services have enough funding to provide for nearly 70 percent of all at-risk three- and four-year-olds below 200 percent of poverty.
Various national reports and studies also show that the AACF push for expanding pre-K education in Arkansas is achieving positive results. Along with reporting the state’s increased funding and enrollment at the pre-K level, the 2009 *State of Preschool Yearbook* found that Arkansas was one of a small group of states that met at least 9 out of 10 quality benchmarks.32 Similarly, a 2008 longitudinal study by the National Institute for Early Education Research reported significant impacts by the ABC program, as reflected in language, math, and early literacy measures recorded at the end of the kindergarten and first-grade years.33 Finally, an *Education Week* “Quality Counts” report in 2010 gave early childhood education in Arkansas a perfect 100 percent score in its “Transitions and Alignment” category, an indicator of the extent to which assessments are aligned to state standards.34 All of these outcomes indicate that, through its research and advocacy, AACF is helping to provide Arkansas children with a much better chance of succeeding in school later in life.35

After-school policy is yet another area in which AACF has employed the critical support of WRF to make instrumental changes by pushing for best practices and higher state standards. Through the provision of research and ongoing staff support for the Arkansas Out-of-School Network (AOSN) and the Governor’s Taskforce on Best Practices for After-School and Summer Programs, AACF directly contributed to the development of an advocacy network for increased access to after-school and summer programs. Through the AOSN and required funding partners, AACF was able to lead the taskforce, create a demand study for services, and present essential recommendations for further steps upon the acquisition of additional funding.36 Following another recommendation from the Governor’s Taskforce, Governor Mike Beebe committed an additional $500,000 in Child Care Development funds for professional development and increased quality of summer and after-school programs. Senator Blanche Lincoln has also proposed legislation promoting investment in rural after-school programs, utilizing AACF-provided research on the unique set of problems faced by rural communities.37
AACF has a long history of research-fueled public policy advocacy in Arkansas, as well as establishing or leading statewide coalitions and groups, from the long-standing Arkansas KIDS COUNT Coalition to the newly established Arkansas Legislative Taskforce on Reducing Poverty and Promoting Economic Opportunity. AACF’s capacity and willingness to use available data and research to determine which public policy issues will (or should) be prioritized is an enduring part of the organization, and it has successfully brought public attention and education to numerous areas affecting low-income families and children in Arkansas. It is this research-driven spotlight on community engagement and public education about the issues, most notably poverty and economic opportunity (or the lack thereof), that generates the greatest influence on public policy.
CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

As successful as the partnership between WRF and AACF has been in terms of impact on public policy in Arkansas, there are also clear challenges. Even for a statewide, anchor institution well positioned to address the rigors of public policy advocacy, engaging in data-based advocacy on poverty issues presents a unique set of complexities. While many organizations focus on direct services for low-income children and families, far fewer are willing to address the underlying issues that lead to poverty. In order to tackle these hard issues, AACF must walk the fine line between maintaining relationships with the state and governing bodies that often control the data resources and to whom policy recommendations are directed, and pushing for change in these same institutions. The following is a discussion of the different challenges AACF faces.

Availability of Disaggregated Data

For an organization with a strong concentration on research and evidence-based advocacy, one of the major challenges for AACF is dealing with the low availability and poor quality of data from the state and other sources. Data availability has been particularly problematic in two WRF-funded activities.

One of these initiatives stemmed from AACF’s concerns about racial inequality. In 2006, AACF requested funding to study the impact of racial disparities in the state child welfare system, specifically on African-American children. WRF requested that AACF expand its scope to include more areas of diversity. AACF agreed, but shortly after beginning found that it was much more data-intensive than expected. The expanded scope of the effort, coupled with the quantity and complexity of the data and the difficulty of accessing Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) data, evidenced the need for additional resources. The data turned up unexpected results. There were few disparities found in the analysis of ten critical decision points affecting children; however, there was a significant new finding: the data indicated that children living in cities were less likely to receive a timely response from child welfare investigators than children in towns and rural areas. Moreover, AACF found that the child welfare system as a whole was performing poorly for children in Arkansas. Consequently, resulting recommendations prompted the interim DCFS director to move unfilled positions from rural areas to urban areas with higher population densities in an attempt to address the geographic disparity in the system.

Data Should Direct Priorities… Not the Other Way Around

A second AACF venture illustrated the lack of quality data another way, uncovering a different set of problems. The study originated from a 2006 request by the WRF president for AACF to look into the impact of crystal meth on the Arkansas child welfare system. The issue was a good fit with AACF priorities, as well as an opportunity to draw serious media attention at the time. Once AACF began to investigate, it found that there was much less data on the impact of crystal meth than expected, and that accessing large-scale data from a state agency was challenging. However, the
research revealed that the broader issue of substance abuse in Arkansas had a huge impact not only on the child welfare system, but also on juvenile justice and related issues. As AACF looked more deeply into the data, it was pushed in a new direction, one that it might not have addressed if not for the crystal meth study. This is a good example of AACF’s reliance upon the evidence to direct its priorities. Based upon its findings, AACF expanded its lens to address the effect of substance abuse in Arkansas on the child welfare system, identifying the need for additional funding of substance abuse treatment and for increased state accountability on these issues.

This example demonstrated that in some (perhaps many) cases, grantmakers have a choice to be either myopic or receptive to input from their grantees and the relevant research in determining grantmaking priorities. It is a challenge sometimes for foundations when the data doesn’t say what is expected. However, these instances are opportunities to be nimble, responsive, and pursuant to strategies that meet the real needs of foundations’ constituencies.

**Communicating Outcomes**

Because AACF is an organization that does not provide direct services, the impact of its policy advocacy is sometimes difficult to measure. Often, the primary outcomes of AACF’s grant-funded efforts are data analysis and policy recommendations, which will be effective only if properly disseminated and heeded by legislators and state agencies. When communication systems are not in place or other issues overshadow policy initiatives in the media, they may be tabled until a later time or even disregarded altogether. There is very rarely quick turnaround, as public policy change happens only over time. Thus, AACF must plan for short- and longer-term dissemination of results, in order to keep these issues in the public eye and to best position its advocacy to influence public policy. Additionally, WRF must be a partner with AACF and other policy and advocacy institutions to tell their stories and communicate the outcomes of their policy and advocacy work.

**Challenges of Collaboration and the Importance of Supporting Bridge Builders**

Another challenge for AACF is related to its collaborations with other organizations and state programs. While forming alliances and working in coalition with others on a common cause is in many ways a strength of AACF; this process consistently presents a fair level of difficulty as well. If one partner is not timely in the presentation of data or resources that others need, an entire endeavor may suffer delays. Further, it is frequently difficult to convince all parties to trust AACF as a partner even though they often share the same underlying goals. According to AACF staff, there is typically tension in the organization’s relationship with the state due to AACF’s role in promoting government accountability. This often means that AACF has to determine how much and when to push the state to move forward, negotiating dual roles as both reliable partner and vigilant watchdog. AACF must continue to seek this fine balance between working in partnership and pushing for accountability.
WRF’s 30-plus years of investment in AACF have been instructive, revealing how important it is for foundations, specifically ones that fund specific city, state, or metropolitan regions, to invest in anchor institutions that develop the capacity to convene coalitions and build bridges. WRF prides itself on having an array of partnerships and strong working relationships with various nonprofit, public, and private sector organizations in Arkansas. It also realizes that the role of philanthropy is not to be the connector, but rather to be one among many partners. WRF has made investments in AACF to support its capacity to bring parties together, to lead through connecting and building bridges. This has been and continues to be integral to WRF’s capacity to Move the Needle in Arkansas.

Although 90% of AACF grant funding comes from national organizations, support from WRF is essential for AACF.
WRF GRANT FUNDING AND AACF: Impacting Public Policy in Arkansas

Although 90 percent of AACF grant funding comes from national organizations, support from WRF is essential for AACF. WRF funding indicates to national entities that AACF has state support and often serves as an initial door opener for partnerships and additional funding, functioning as a vital bridge to other resources for the organization. In addition to funding, WRF often provides advice and suggestions about the framing or scope of proposed research and, occasionally, has requested that AACF address an issue that is of concern, such as the impact of crystal meth on the state’s children. From Executive Director Rich Huddleston’s perspective,

*Having the support of WRF definitely enhances the prestige of the issue and gives us greater credibility with policymakers and others as we do the work. WRF support has improved our ability to successfully complete research and more effectively utilize the findings.*

Jennifer Ferguson adds that WRF does a great job of staying within its mission, funding only efforts that fall “within the scope of social justice, economics, [and] education,” recognizing that AACF is fortunate that much of its mission touches these areas. AACF views its partnership with WRF as an opportunity to build the small advocacy community already active in Arkansas and to step up its innovative efforts, presenting Arkansas as a national leader in the fight to end poverty. As Senior Policy Analyst Paul Kelly says, “We’re grateful that WRF took on the ‘easy’ task of eliminating poverty. All points...lead to here. Income inequities have to be dealt with. This will be an important focus [for us] as an agency, but also as a democracy.”
OVERVIEW OF AACF IMPACT

Through a potent mix of coalition-building, legislative advocacy, and research, AACF has achieved numerous gains for the state’s children and low-income families. The AACF track record is a long series of specific policy wins as well as coalition-building efforts that have been—and will continue to be—critical to sustaining success on issues that matter most to Arkansans. The following is a list—by no means exhaustive—of the organization’s achievements as advocates and coalition builders.

**Juvenile Justice**

- More responsive data so that the state system can address issues like recidivism and chronic delinquency
- Extended juvenile jurisdiction legislation that protects young offenders from prematurely entering the adult criminal justice system
- Since 2005, almost 8,800 youth offenders each year served by community-based programs, an increase of 15 percent

**Tax Fairness**

- Tax reduction—over the course of multiple legislative sessions the state grocery tax was reduced from 6 cents to 2 cents
- More progressive taxation for funding education—AACF analysis of the economic effects of school funding led to a less regressive school financing strategy that benefited low-income families
- New laws exempting or reducing low-income families from state income taxes

**Early Childhood Education**

- Expansion of Arkansas Better Chance (ABC)—annual pre-K funding for three- and four-year-olds increased by more than $100 million, reaching thousands of children at or below 200 percent of the poverty level

**Coalitions**

- Invest Early Coalition
- Arkansas KIDS COUNT Coalition
- Arkansas Out-of-School Network
- Governor’s Taskforce on Best Practices for After-School and Summer Programs
- Arkansas Legislative Taskforce on Reducing Poverty and Promoting Economic Opportunity
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE INVESTMENT

The need for public policy advocacy in Arkansas is great. Low-income families and children are struggling even more in the current economic climate. As federal money becomes more restrictive, social welfare in the form of education, health care, and anti-poverty initiatives for at-risk populations is in danger of being overlooked. With so many disparate entities lobbying for state support or consideration, the impact of policy decisions on those with little or no voice is likely to go unnoticed. Through AACF, WRF has invested in public policy advocacy for children and low-income families for more than 30 years. This type of long-term investment is essential in policy change, which only occurs over time. A shift in one system—funding streams, political leadership, social welfare—can reverberate throughout multiple, overlapping systems with tremendous consequences.

In a climate of preferential support for organizations that provide direct services, it is important to view the problems addressed by these organizations, regarding poverty, discrimination, or lack of educational opportunities, within their political and policy contexts. To effect change for disadvantaged populations as a whole, these problems must eventually be addressed at a macro level. Public policy is the overarching system within which solutions to these social issues will be located.

WRF and AACF play a unique role within Arkansas, with a partnership founded on social and economic justice for children and minority populations and the use of new initiatives, many of which rely upon local, community leadership, to truly address poverty statewide. By working in partnership with other organizations and helping to secure matching funds for grant money, WRF has fostered a collaborative approach to public policy advocacy that works. Even when few other foundations fund poverty-centered public policy advocacy, WRF’s ability to leverage its resources in support of these efforts has the potential to create new funding streams. Because WRF is such an influential force in the state, it has a unique ability to bring many different people to the table, to influence public perception, and to create strong networks of people and organizations striving toward the same ends. Through these organizational resources and funding of a public policy advocacy organization such as AACF, WRF can continue to have an important impact on the quality of life for Arkansans.
Endnotes


4. Ibid.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


24. Ibid., p. 3.


31. Ibid.


39. Ibid.


41. Ibid.


44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

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Paul Kelly, AACF Senior Policy Analyst
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