



Arkansas's
**ROADMAP TO
OPPORTUNITY**
— **2025** —

*Maintaining momentum
for the next generation*





● TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|----|---|
| 04 | Overview |
| 06 | <i>Pathway to Opportunity:</i> A STRONG SAFETY NET |
| 10 | <i>Pathway to Opportunity:</i> A 21ST CENTURY WORKFORCE |
| 14 | <i>Pathway to Opportunity:</i> A WORKFORCE-READY NEXT GENERATION |
| 18 | <i>Pathway to Opportunity:</i> GOVERNMENT REFORM |
| 22 | <i>Pathway to Opportunity:</i> FAMILIES FIRST |
| 26 | <i>Pathway to Opportunity:</i> LAW & ORDER |





OVERVIEW

When Opportunity Arkansas published its first *Roadmap to Opportunity* in November 2022, our state was in desperate need of homegrown ideas for real change.

Record numbers of Arkansans were trapped on welfare. The state's top tax bracket was one of the highest in the region. Violent crime had

soared off the charts. Broken families and homes had little hope for change.

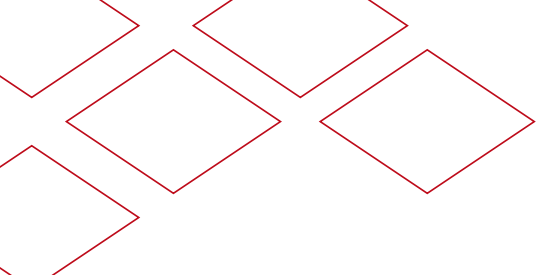
But we also had a brand new horizon before us: A new, conservative governor had just been elected, along with a new class of reform-minded state legislators—and they had a mandate for change. *And did they ever seize the moment.*

IN LESS THAN TWO YEARS' TIME, STATE POLICYMAKERS HAVE:

- ◆ Reduced state income taxes by **nearly \$1 billion**, lowering the top rate from 4.9 percent to 3.9 percent
- ◆ Enacted universal education freedom through the **LEARNS Act**, allowing Arkansas families to choose the education options that work best for them
- ◆ Passed the historic **Protect Arkansas Act**, which curtails the failed, dangerous “catch-and-release” policies of our corrections system
- ◆ Eased training requirements for foster families **by half** to ease burdens on Arkansans who want to serve as foster parents and help kids in need
- ◆ Reformed welfare by reducing dependency on cash benefits while rejecting further wasteful expansions of **Medicaid and food stamps**
- ◆ Begun the process of **right-sizing state government**, starting with a regulatory and hiring freeze

No doubt, the rate of conservative progress in the last 24 months is unlike anything Arkansas has ever seen.

In total, 27 of Opportunity Arkansas's policy recommendations have been adopted in just the last two years.



It was not that long ago that these accomplishments—and certainly this break-neck pace—would have been unimaginable. But thanks to the courage of state leaders and Opportunity Arkansas’s efforts, we are making progress. We are solving generational problems.

Now, two years later, the biggest threat facing Arkansas is not one of courage but of *complacency*.

It would be easy for state policymakers to step off the gas and relish in this historic success, rather than continuing the march toward opportunity. But our sincere hope is that the last two years of unprecedented victories for the people of Arkansas are the beginning, not the end, of this journey.


And it is clear Arkansans want us to keep going: The conservative landslide in the 2024 election is not only a mandate but also brings a new landscape for cooperation between states and the federal government. Arkansas should punch above its weight and lead the way, just like we have so many times before.

Despite our progress, there is still much work to be done. Our labor force participation rate remains among the country’s lowest, with more than a quarter of the state’s working-age population out of the labor force.¹ Violent crime rates remain high, well above the national average.² And we are facing a generational dependency crisis that threatens opportunity for every Arkansan.



TO MAINTAIN OUR HISTORIC CONSERVATIVE MOMENTUM, WE MUST:

- ◆ **Build the strongest welfare system**—especially our Medicaid program—in the country that prioritizes work for able-bodied adults and moves the truly needy to the front of the line
- ◆ Continue moving toward **elimination of the work-punishing income tax** to make Arkansas more competitive with neighbors like Tennessee and Texas
- ◆ Strengthen our nation-leading Education Freedom Accounts program and **expand accountability in public education**
- ◆ Improve the child welfare system to **better protect and preserve families**
- ◆ **Simplify state government** by imposing fiscal restraint and improving transparency



The *Roadmap to Opportunity 2025* is our blueprint for achieving these goals. A sequel to our 2023 edition, this roadmap outlines new, homegrown ideas for accomplishing our shared mission, presented within our six Pathways to Opportunity.

What you will see are not cookie-cutter reforms, pulled from a catalog of model legislation. To the

contrary, these are *Arkansas-specific solutions to Arkansas-specific problems*, crafted carefully through hours of research, conversations, and pressure testing.

And if adopted, these solutions will supercharge the momentum we have already generated, finally taking Arkansas to the top—where we have always deserved to be.

Pathway to Opportunity: **A STRONG SAFETY NET**



THE JOURNEY:

Slowing the growth of dependency

Despite longstanding struggles with long-term dependency, Arkansas has made some significant strides in recent years by rejecting additional welfare expansions.

In 2023, thanks to the leadership of **Rep. Rebecca Burkes** (R-Lowell), Arkansas's cash welfare program was reformed by reducing the time that able-bodied adults can remain on the program (from 24 months to 12 months).³ This now ties Arkansas with the lowest, pro-work time limit in the nation.⁴

Policymakers have also rejected repeated attempts to expand welfare and exacerbate the state's dependency crisis even further: During the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers rejected a sneaky attempt to radically alter the Arkansas "Work Pays" program. The program is an off-ramp for able-bodied adults in the cash welfare program, but the bill would have changed it into a new on-ramp and increased dependency.⁵ After Opportunity Arkansas raised these concerns, the bill was pulled from consideration and never brought up for a floor vote.⁶

Other efforts to massively expand food stamp dependency by raising the program's liquid asset limits were also soundly rejected for the second session in a row, after Opportunity Arkansas sounded the alarm.⁷⁻⁸

And policymakers rejected attempts to expand all sorts of Medicaid expansions, including an expansion of postpartum Medicaid coverage that was heavily pushed by the Biden administration.⁹⁻¹⁰

These are all indications of progress: Even though some policymakers want to continue down the path of dependency that has failed our state for generations, the majority of Arkansas policymakers are waking up. They are realizing that more dependency is not the solution to Arkansas's problems—it *is* the problem.

But simply slowing the expansion of dependency is not enough. We have to reverse it. We have to start changing course and actually start *reducing welfare dependency* if we want to take Arkansas to the top.

THE ROADBLOCKS AHEAD:

An outdated, overgrown Medicaid program

Unleashing opportunity for the next generation is not possible without significant Medicaid reform. The program controls too much of the state’s budget and entraps too many of our neighbors. And when compared to Arkansas’s other major welfare programs, Medicaid is a clear outlier.

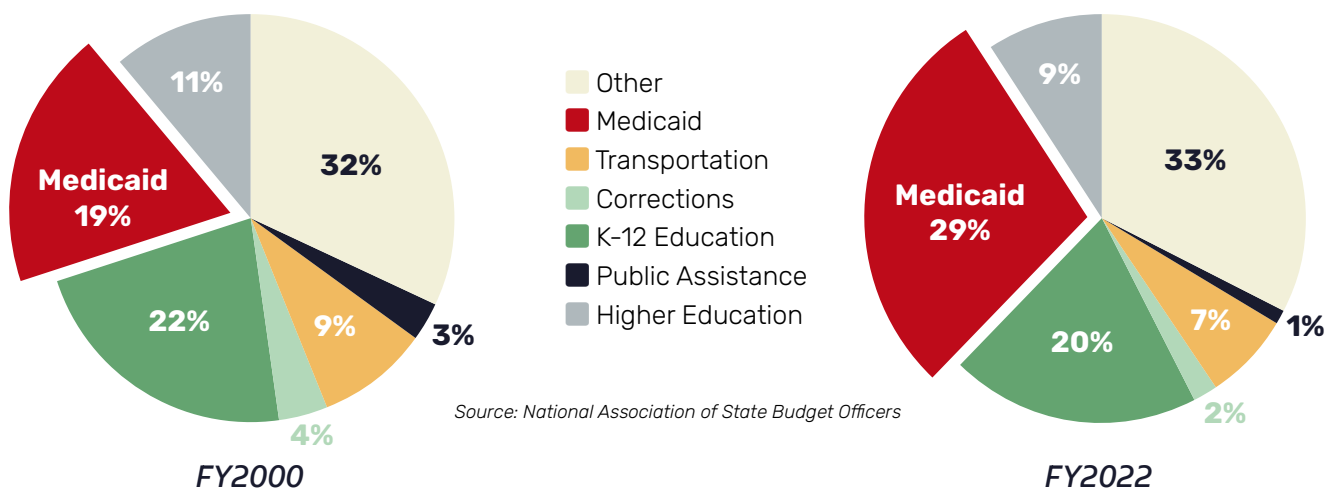
MEDICAID IS STRAINED AND INEFFICIENT COMPARED TO OTHER ARKANSAS WELFARE PROGRAMS—AND IT SHOWS

| | Medicaid | Food Stamps | Unemployment Insurance |
|---|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Work Requirements for Able-Bodied Adults | No | Yes | Yes |
| Time Limits | No | Partial | Yes |
| Welfare Enrollees Per 100,000 Arkansans³⁰ | 28,636 | 8,058 | 283 |
| Welfare Spending Per 100,000 Arkansans³⁴ | \$317.9 million | \$22.2 million | \$2.5 million |

In nearly every other major welfare program, for example, work requirements and time limits help keep enrollment among able-bodied adults at reasonable levels. Not so in Medicaid, which has consumed the state’s budget as nearly 900,000 Arkansans remain trapped on the program.¹¹

MEDICAID IS CONSUMING ARKANSAS’S BUDGET

Arkansas budgetary expenditures



Arkansas's Medicaid crisis has been made worse by the state's failed approach to its Obamacare expansion program.

Originally pitched as a "conservative" alternative to conventional Medicaid expansion, the so-called "private option" model has led to higher costs, more dependency, and skyrocketing premiums.¹²

Strong welfare systems are essential to opportunity across the board. To rejuvenate the workforce, preserve resources for the truly needy, and phase out the income tax, Medicaid reform is vital.



**MORE THAN 1,700 TRULY
NEEDY ARKANSANS ARE STUCK
ON MEDICAID WAITING LISTS.**

OUR HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS:

Modernize Medicaid & restore the safety net for the truly needy

Medicaid was intended to be a safety net for the most vulnerable, not a taxpayer-funded benefits package for able-bodied adults. Our guiding principle is to make Medicaid work more efficiently by promoting commonsense, work-focused reforms while protecting resources for the truly needy.

With the change of administrations in Washington, the time is now for policymakers to modernize the state's Medicaid system. Some estimates suggest

that just moving from the private option approach to conventional Medicaid expansion could save taxpayers nearly \$80 million per year.¹³

When coupled with other meaningful reforms, Arkansas has the opportunity to modernize Medicaid, creating the most efficient Medicaid system in the country that promotes work for those who can work and preserves the safety net for those who truly need it.



GPS *Guiding Principle Statement:*

**Those who can work should work
and those who truly need help
should get it.**



Homegrown Ideas for Real Change

- ◆ **Ditch the state's failed private option experiment and transition to conventional Medicaid expansion**
- ◆ **Require able-bodied adults on Medicaid to work, train, or volunteer at least part time in order to promote self-sufficiency**
- ◆ **Implement a three-year lifetime limit for Medicaid expansion enrollees in order to break the cycle of long-term welfare dependency among able-bodied adults**
- ◆ **Lock out Medicaid fraudsters who fail to report changes to their income that could impact their eligibility from the program in order to preserve resources for the most vulnerable**
- ◆ **Eliminate retroactive eligibility for the Medicaid expansion group to avoid cost-shifting onto taxpayers**
- ◆ **Cap Medicaid expansion enrollment at reasonable levels to protect taxpayers and truly needy Arkansans**
- ◆ **Move from a first-come, first-serve approach to a priority-based approach for management of the state's Medicaid waiting lists to reduce the size of the waiting lists and ensure that those with the most severe disabilities receive care quickly**
- ◆ **Require electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards for food stamps to have photo identification to deter fraud**
- ◆ **Ban taxpayer-funded "food stamp trucks" that travel around Arkansas, signing individuals up for welfare**
- ◆ **Require able-bodied applicants for cash welfare to prove they are searching for work at the time of application to reduce dependency**



Pathway to Opportunity: A 21ST CENTURY WORKFORCE



📍 THE JOURNEY:

Major tax and unemployment reform

Two years ago, Arkansas's top state income tax rate was one of the highest in the region at 4.9 percent. Since that time, state leaders have correctly and courageously returned state surpluses to hardworking taxpayers, rather than siphoning those funds toward additional government spending.¹⁴ They did this not once, not twice, but *three times* from January 2023 through June 2024.

When coupled with reforms requiring voter approval for local advertising and promotion (A&P) taxes (also known as food and lodging taxes), the tax burden on Arkansans has been significantly improved.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

But that is not all: **Arkansas also adopted the most ambitious reforms to the state's unemployment insurance (UI) system in the nation, reducing the maximum duration of benefits while improving work search requirements to ensure the program operates as a springboard back into the workforce, not a long-term welfare program.**¹⁷

Opportunity Arkansas was proud to help lead the charge on these efforts.

● JANUARY 2023

4.9% → 4.7%

(retroactive to January 2023)

● JANUARY 2024

4.7% → 4.4%

(effective January 2024)

● JUNE 2024

4.4% → 3.9%

(retroactive to January 2024)

ARKANSAS'S UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM IS BECOMING EVEN MORE PRO-WORK

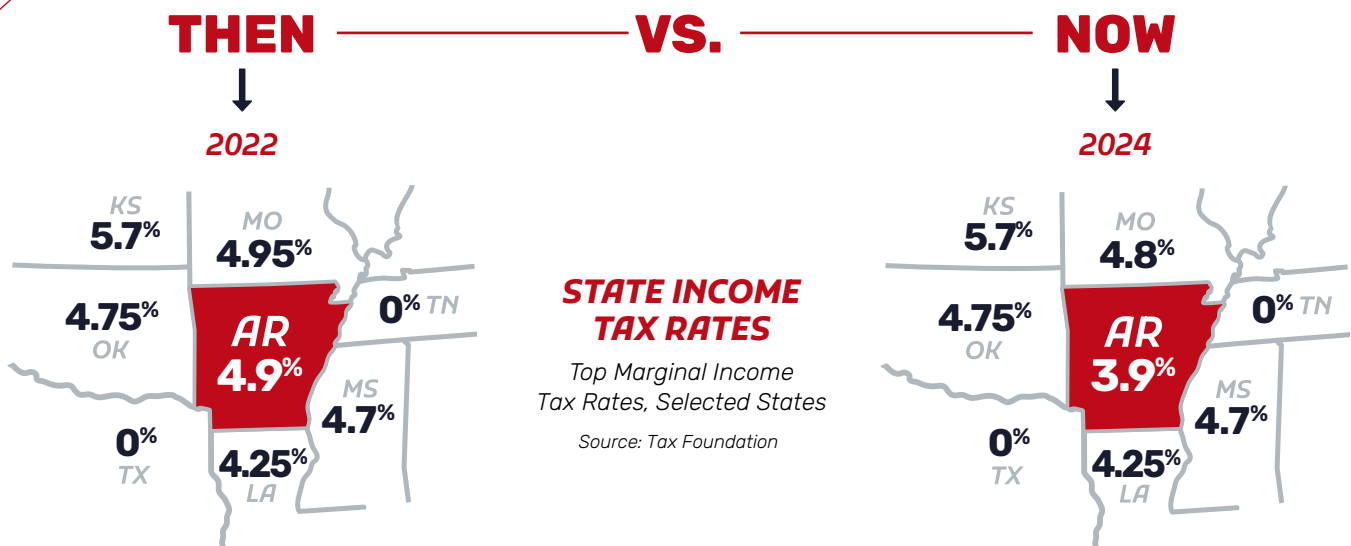
| | Q1 2022 | Q1 2024 | Change |
|---|-----------------|------------------------|-------------|
| New Weekly UI Claims* | 1,717 | 1,585 | -8% |
| Maximum Duration on UI | 16 weeks | 12 weeks | -25% |
| Average UI Tax Rate (Per \$100 of Wages) | \$2.60 | \$1.60 | -39% |
| UI Trust Fund Balance | \$848.2 million | \$919.5 million | +8% |

*Measured on the first week of the calendar year

Source: Employment and Training Administration

As a result, Arkansas's unemployment insurance program is now one of the most well-funded in the nation, with the fewest dependent UI recipients in the country. The

reforms have also resulted in a significant reduction in unemployment taxes paid by Arkansas employers, reducing the tax burden on small businesses in the state.



And finally, in the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers rightly rejected numerous additional special interest tax carve outs, proposed in the form of sales tax exemptions. These exemptions are bad tax policy because they provide preferential treatment to well-connected special interest groups, rather

than broad, equal relief for Arkansans across the board—and, even worse, they siphon away revenue that could instead be applied toward eliminating our state income tax. Lawmakers did the right thing by rejecting so many of them in 2023 and instead paving the way for more income tax relief.

THE ROADBLOCKS AHEAD:

Record state spending and an onerous overall tax burden

Looking ahead, the work of tax relief is far from done. Indeed, Arkansas is the 14th most heavily taxed state in the country.¹⁸ Income taxes are still too high—higher than 13 states, including two neighboring states with no state income taxes—and there is no mechanism in place to return surpluses to taxpayers whenever state government collects more than it needs.¹⁹

Arkansas also remains as one of the only states that has a state-level grocery tax, which

punishes consumers (especially low-income Arkansans) and a franchise tax that punishes entrepreneurs simply for operating within the state borders.²⁰⁻²¹

Additionally, many of our neighboring states—including Mississippi, Louisiana, and Oklahoma—have conservative majorities that are also pursuing major income tax reduction and/or elimination.²²



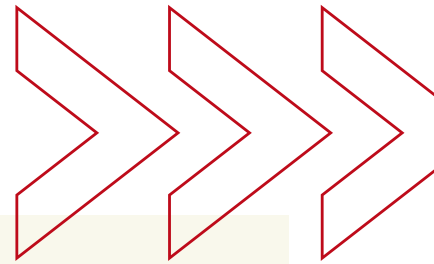
OUR HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS:

Provide relief for entrepreneurs, reward workers, and reduce the cost of living for Arkansans

The state income tax remains the single greatest punishment on Arkansas workers. Policymakers should continue pushing toward eliminating it as quickly as possible or risk being surpassed again by neighboring states. To accelerate this process, policymakers should adopt income tax reduction triggers like many states around us have and reject special interest tax giveaways that push income tax elimination further out of reach.

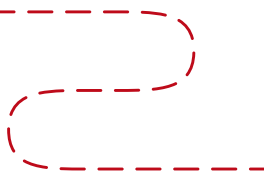
Arkansas should end its grocery tax once and for all and rein in out-of-control local food taxes, both of which raise the cost of food for Arkansans. These reforms would provide much-needed relief for low-income Arkansans from the harmful effects of inflation.

Finally, policymakers should ease burdens on entrepreneurs by removing unnecessary red tape to help our economy accelerate.

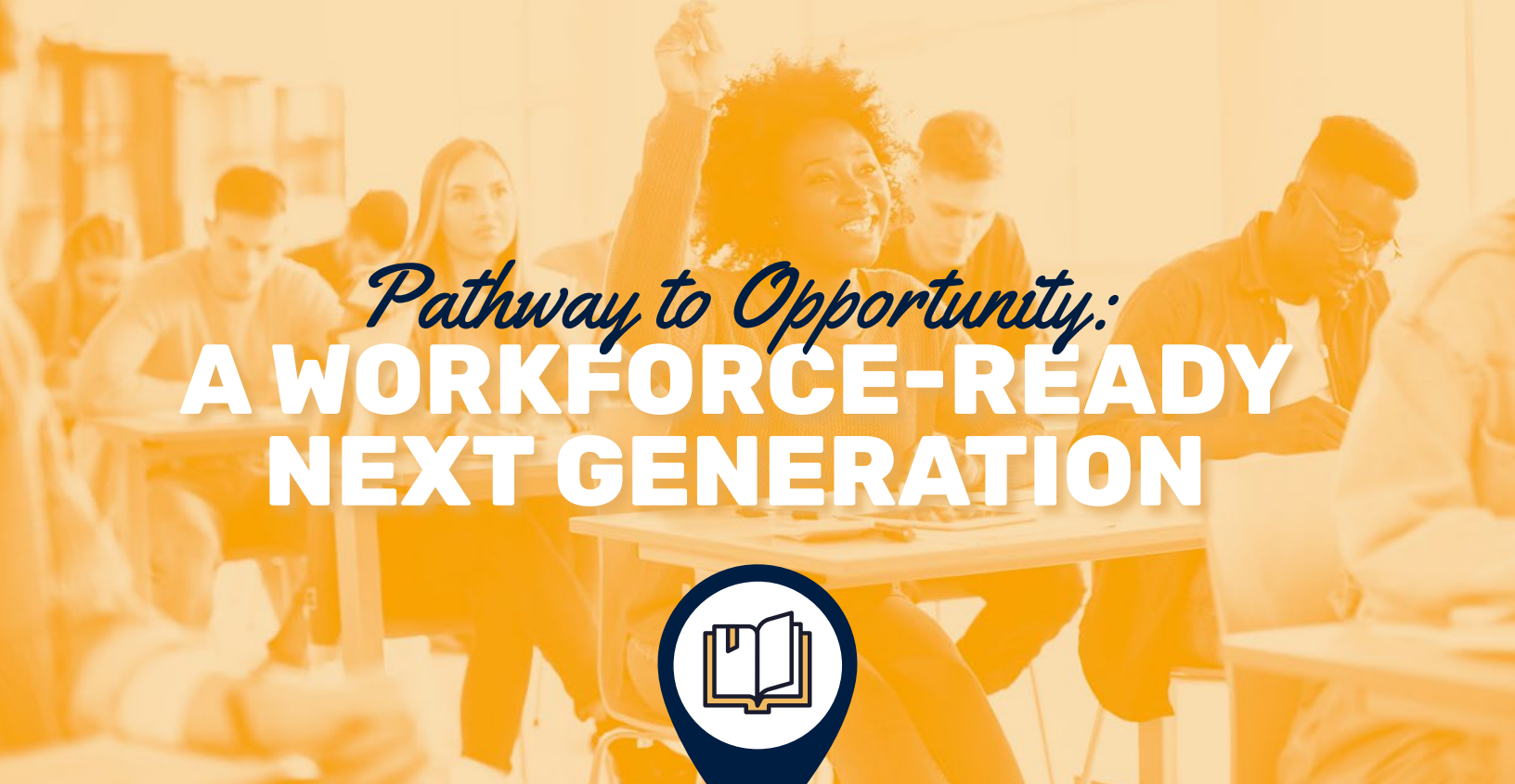


Homegrown Ideas for Real Change

- ◆ Phase out the state income tax as quickly as possible
- ◆ Create an income tax cut trigger, tied to state surpluses, to reduce taxes as revenues exceed expectations
- ◆ Eliminate the grocery tax that punishes consumers
- ◆ Repeal the franchise tax and sales tax registration taxes that hurt small businesses
- ◆ Reject costly, unfair sales tax exemptions
- ◆ Limit increases in local “advertising and promotion” or food and lodging sales taxes, require voter approval for any increases, and require voter approval to renew these taxes



Hard work should be rewarded and work should be accessible for all Arkansans.



Pathway to Opportunity: **A WORKFORCE-READY NEXT GENERATION**



📍 THE JOURNEY:

Arkansas became a national leader in education reform overnight

Three years ago, the notion that Arkansas would be the national leader in education freedom was a pipedream. Today, it is a reality.

While the LEARNS Act made unprecedented investments in teacher pay, literacy, and more, the most significant and transformational

component of the law was the creation of Education Freedom Accounts (EFAs).²³ The accounts allow parents to use their tax dollars for an education option of their choice, empowering families to take control of their childrens' future. Arkansas families can now decide which school best fits their childrens' unique needs, achieving a core goal of the *2023 Roadmap to Opportunity*—and the most significant conservative victory in state history.

This school year, more than 14,100 students are benefiting from this transformational program, a number that is only expected to grow as the program expands to universal eligibility in the 2025–2026 school year.²⁴ All early signs show it is on its way to being a tremendous success.²⁵





THE ROADBLOCKS AHEAD: Never-ending union attacks and a complex EFA program

Preserving and expanding education freedom should be of paramount importance to policymakers who believe in opportunity for the next generation. Unfortunately, education freedom is under constant attack.

In just the last 18 months, opponents of the commonsense law have launched multiple legal challenges and two ballot initiatives to derail it.²⁶ Fortunately, these efforts have all failed, but the Arkansas teacher's union and their allies are already gearing up for another fight.²⁷⁻²⁹ In fact, the exact same failed "Education Rights Amendment of 2024" has already been re-certified for signature gathering, giving the union and their allies two years to prepare for a potential November 2026 vote.³⁰

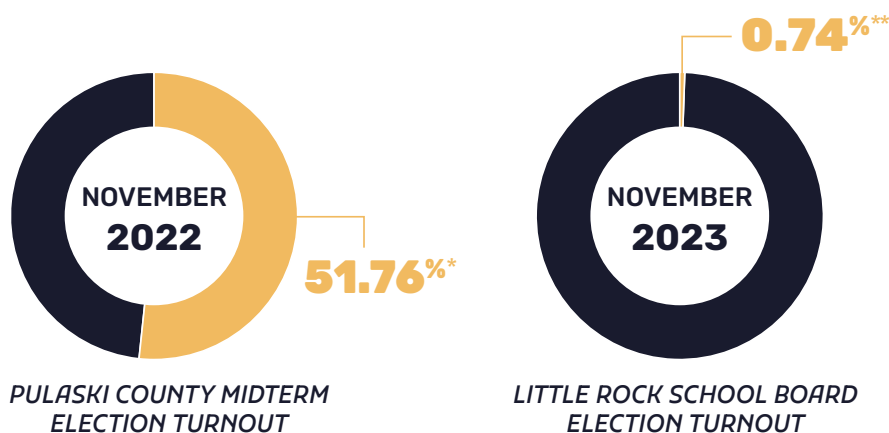
Additionally, while education freedom has been a lifeline for many Arkansas families,

the program has not been without some challenges. Families and participating schools face too much red tape, including onerous auditing requirements and inefficient transaction approval processes.³¹ Deficiencies in vendors who administer EFA accounts have also required the state to seek new providers, causing more uncertainty for families.³²

And of course Arkansas's public schools are in need of additional reform: Specifically, because local school board elections are not aligned with other state and federal elections, voter participation is often abysmally low in these races.³³

Term lengths also vary between school districts. This results in a lack of accountability for school board members who make critical decisions about public education in districts across Arkansas.

TURNOUT IS NEARLY NON-EXISTENT IN OFF-CYCLE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS



*Includes all of Pulaski County **Includes entire Little Rock School Board District
Sources: Arkansas Secretary of State; Pulaski County Board of Election Commissioners

🌱 OUR HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS:

Preserve education freedom for the next generation

To supercharge Arkansas’s education reform momentum, education freedom must be safeguarded against future attacks once and for all. Enshrining the right to education freedom in the Arkansas Constitution would ensure that these opportunities remain available for future generations and should be a top priority for Arkansas policymakers.

The program should also be refined to ensure that it is efficient and user-friendly for families. This means streamlining the auditing process for EFAs to remove unnecessary bottlenecks. It also means allowing multiple providers to participate in the EFA program, creating an actual market that will introduce competitive pressure and ensure families are put first.

Finally, increased accountability through more voter input is desperately needed at the local level.



GPS *Guiding Principle Statement:*

Parents deserve choices and kids deserve opportunity.

💡 *Homegrown Ideas for Real Change*

- ◆ **Protect education freedom and private school independence with a constitutional amendment**
- ◆ **Shift to risk-based auditing of a random sample of EFA transactions, with a target improper payment rate**
- ◆ **End audits of EFA-participating schools and instead focus on audits of transactions**
- ◆ **Increase parental choice by allowing families to choose their own EFA provider**
- ◆ **Align school board elections with other major elections throughout the year to boost voter turnout**
- ◆ **Implement universal term length and term limits for school board members to enhance accountability**
- ◆ **Make school board members subject to recall so voters can hold them accountable**



Pathway to Opportunity: GOVERNMENT REFORM



📍 THE JOURNEY:

Freezing new regulations and state hiring

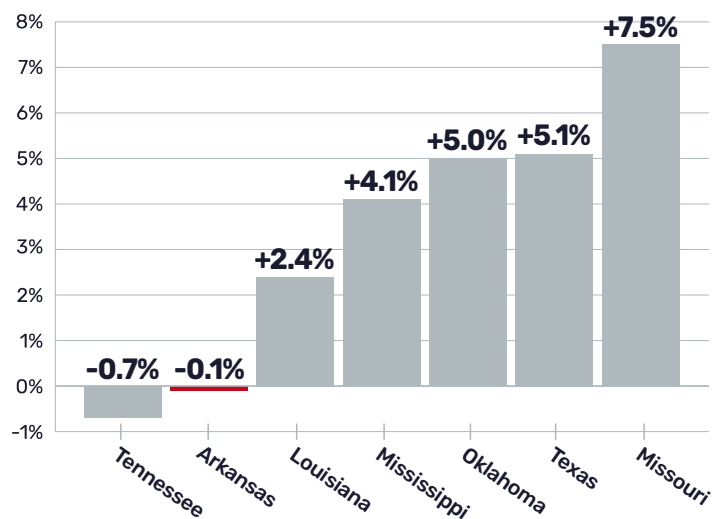
On her first day in office, newly-inaugurated Governor Sarah Sanders signed an executive order that instituted a regulatory freeze and a hiring freeze.³⁴ These two measures were designed to constrain the growth of state government and minimize government intervention in Arkansans' lives.³⁵

As a result, Arkansas is one of only two states in the region that has actually seen a *decline* in the number of state employees since January 2023, while nearly every other state has seen their state government employment rolls continue to grow.³⁶

These initial results are encouraging and suggest that the steps taken so far are having an impact. However, other challenges with the size, scope, and structure of state government lay ahead and stand as a real roadblock to opportunity for the next generation of Arkansans.

ARKANSAS'S STATE GOVERNMENT HIRING FREEZE HAS WORKED

Percent change in state employees since January 2023



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

THE ROADBLOCKS AHEAD: Unchecked spending growth

In the 2024 elections, voters spoke clearly and issued a federal mandate to reduce the size and scope of government. State policymakers should listen by prioritizing reforms that do just that.

Arkansas is one of just a few states in the region to not have a baked-in state spending cap.³⁷ In other states, these mechanisms help constrain the growth of state government to ensure it does not increase faster than taxpayers can afford, by tying state spending to growth in personal incomes, for example.

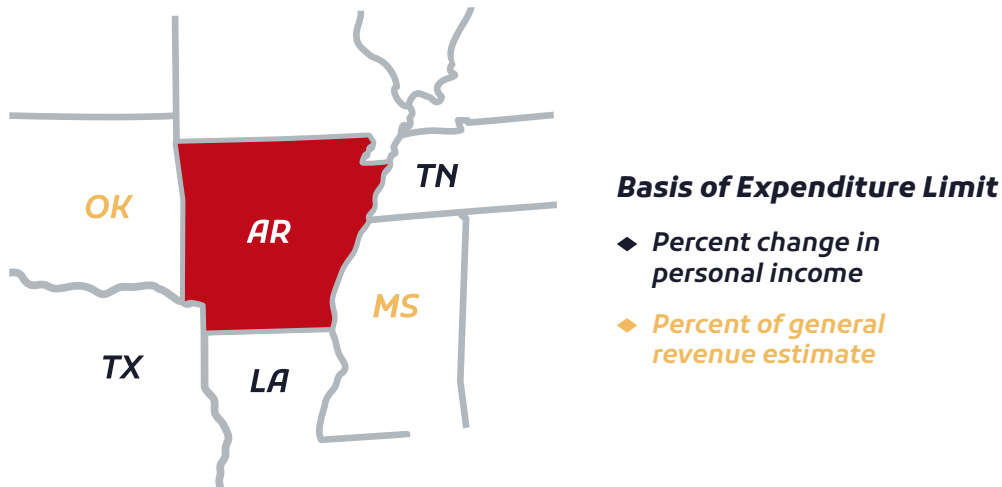
A lack of forced spending restraint is almost a guarantee that state government will continue to grow.

Arkansas has also not yet adopted a process to automatically reduce the number of existing regulations for new regulations added, which other states have enacted with great success.³⁸

And both Arkansas's legislative processes and ballot amendment processes are in dire need of reform as they shield important information from the public's view, often leading to un- or misinformed decisions that grow government.

While these long-standing problems are roadblocks to opportunity, there are clear solutions.

MOST OF ARKANSAS'S NEIGHBORS HAVE SPENDING LIMITS IN PLACE



OUR HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS: Put state government on a diet

To fully realize the vision of reducing the tax and regulatory burden on Arkansans, policymakers must consider limits on the growth of government. State government should not grow faster than Arkansans's ability to pay for it.

To help ensure government lives within its means, we need real spending restraints on state government. Coupled with reductions in unnecessary regulations and increased transparency, these reforms can rein in the bloated state bureaucracy.



💡 *Homegrown Ideas for Real Change*

- ◆ Limit state government spending increases to the population growth rate plus the inflation rate to constrain the growth of government to affordable levels
- ◆ Adopt a neutral regulation process so that any new regulations or rules proposed should be coupled with a reduction in regulations of equivalent economic burden
- ◆ Establish a regulatory working group to regularly review redundant, costly, or otherwise unnecessary regulations and recommend them for elimination
- ◆ Require every ballot initiative to have a fiscal note so that Arkansans have transparency about the cost of controversial provisions that activist groups are pushing
- ◆ Adopt a constitutional amendment that bans taxpayer-funded lobbying so Arkansans are not footing the bill for bureaucrats to lobby legislators
- ◆ Require Arkansas legislative committee votes to be clearly recorded and posted online for the public to access
- ◆ Enact a bill cap for Arkansas legislators to curb the excessively high number of bills filed each session, which reached more than 1,400 pieces of legislation in 2023



GPS *Guiding Principle Statement:*

Government should not grow faster than Arkansans' paychecks and Arkansans know best how to spend their money.







Pathway to Opportunity: **FAMILIES FIRST**



THE JOURNEY:

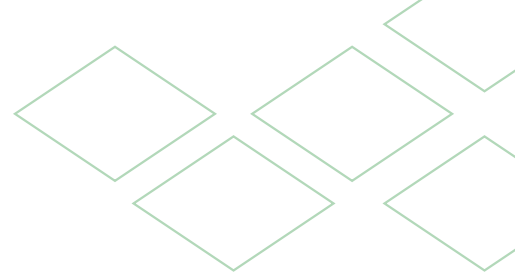
Streamlining foster parent training

Arkansas's child welfare system has been in a delicate state for some time. Too many foster kids and not enough foster parents have presented ongoing, sometimes heartbreaking challenges. But yet again, Arkansas has started taking significant steps in the right direction.

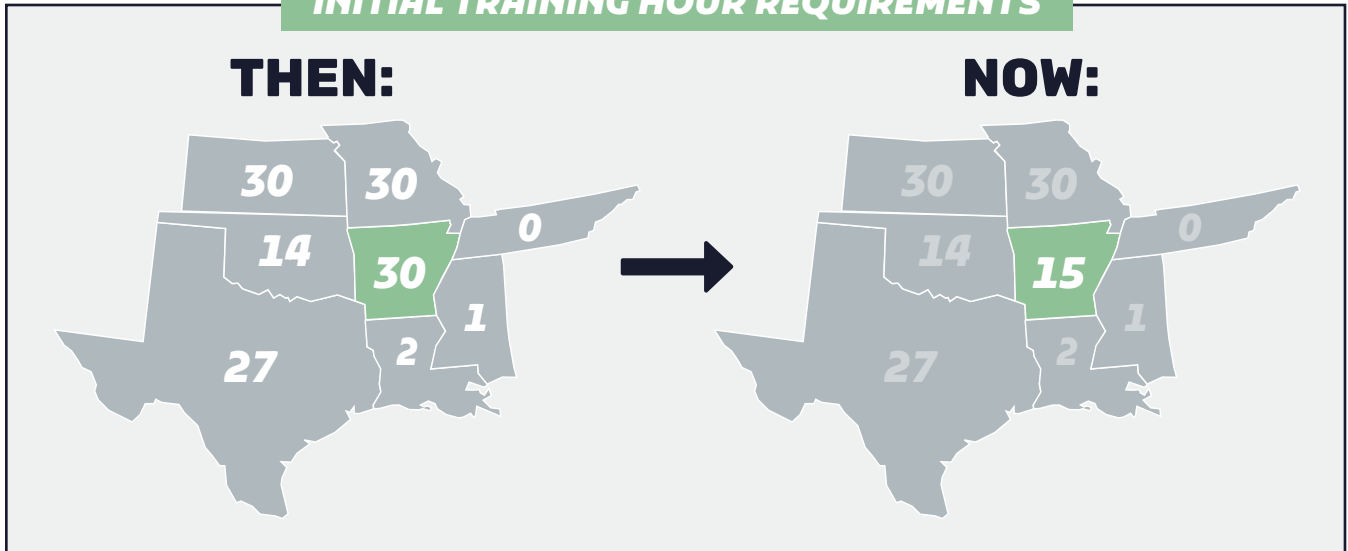
In March 2024, the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) modified Arkansas's training requirements for foster families.³⁹ At the time, Arkansas's training requirements were 30 hours for new foster families, and 15 hours for existing foster families just to maintain their certification. Both of these requirements were some of the most burdensome in the region and huge barriers for new foster parents.



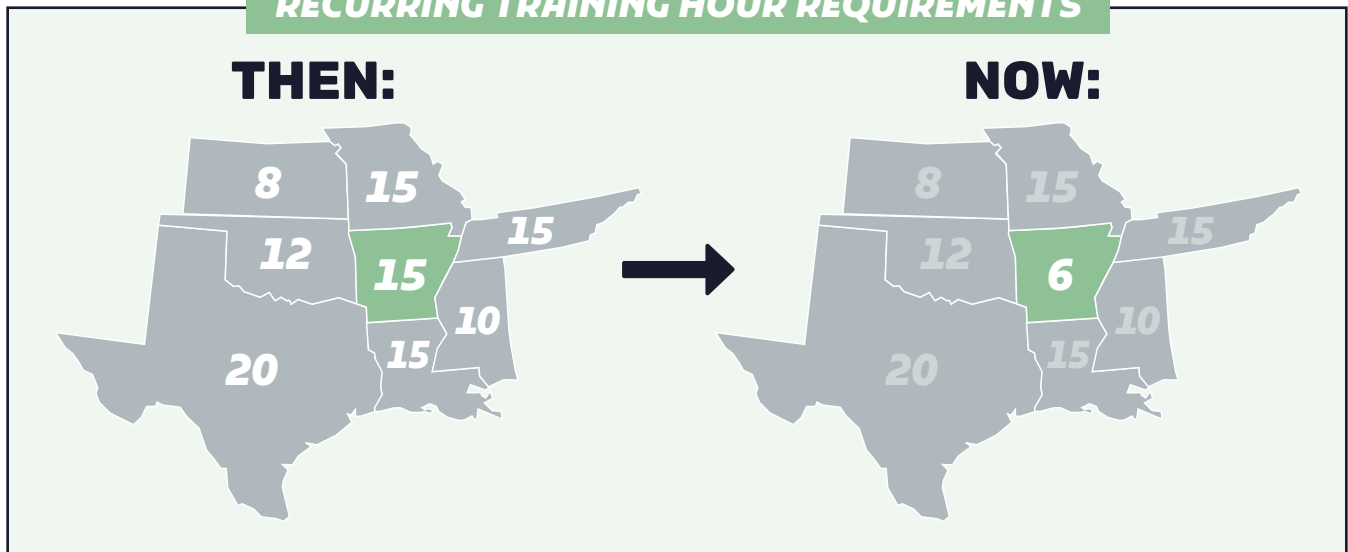
Family integrity should be prioritized and foster care should be a last resort.



INITIAL TRAINING HOUR REQUIREMENTS



RECURRING TRAINING HOUR REQUIREMENTS



However, the new policy streamlined training requirements to 15 hours for new families and just six hours for annual recurring training. This was massive movement. **As a result, Arkansas now has some of the lowest training barriers in the region.**

This means less burnout for foster parents and more time spent serving Arkansas kids instead of sitting in government classrooms. It also means a lower hurdle for Arkansans who want to become foster parents and help solve the foster parent shortage, which has been a longstanding problem in the state.

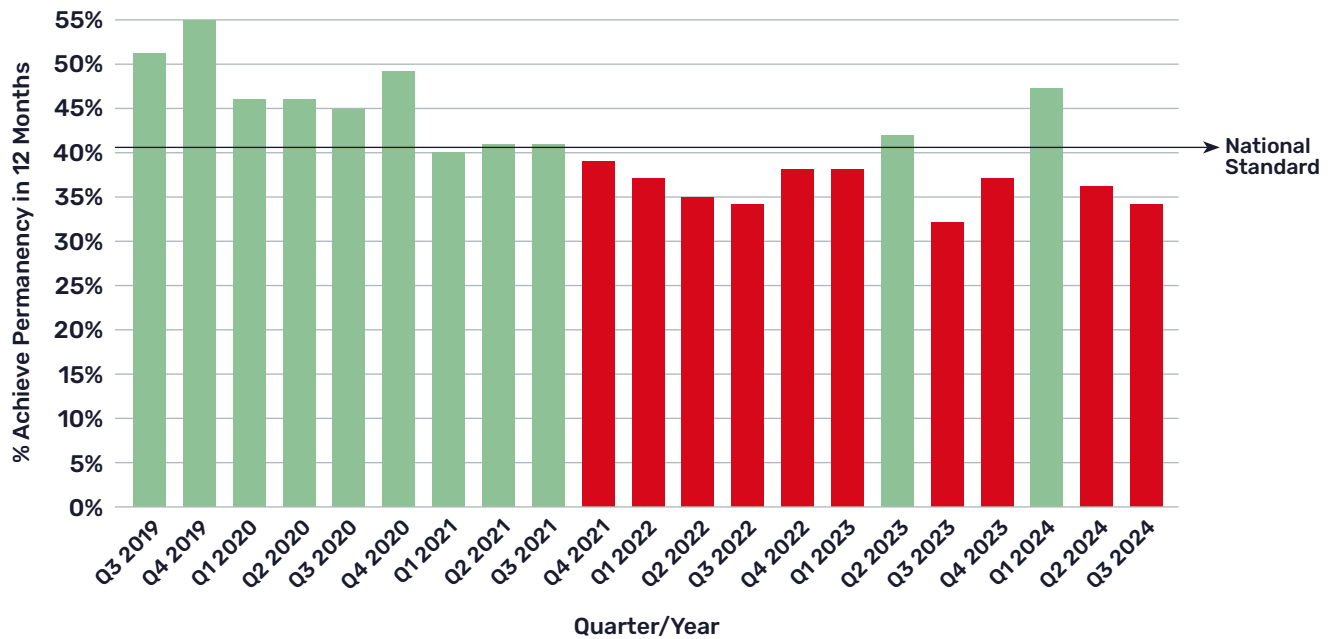
THE ROADBLOCKS AHEAD:

Broken homes and hundreds of kids still waiting for families

Unfortunately, despite this progress, systemic problems remain in the child welfare system. For example, while the overall number of children in foster care has declined, the percent of kids

who find permanent homes within 12 months is just 34 percent—below the national standard of 40.5 percent, and a drop from 51 percent just five years ago.⁴⁰⁻⁴¹

TIME DRAGS ON FOR FOSTER KIDS WAITING TO ACHIEVE PERMANENCY



Red indicates a quarter in which Arkansas was below the current national standard.
Source: Arkansas DHS

And the longer these kids remain in the system, the more likely they are to be moved from home to home: On average, a child will move 5.5 times for every 1,000 days in the foster care system in Arkansas, compared to the national average of 4.1 times.⁴²

While Arkansas’s recent training hour reforms will help increase the supply of foster families, in the meantime, there are still more kids stuck in the system than there are placements available.⁴³

**A CHILD WILL MOVE
5.5 TIMES
FOR EVERY 1,000 DAYS
IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM.**

OUR HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS:

Protect and preserve Arkansas families

Family integrity is crucial for the well-being of children, and when families remain together, it means a child doesn't become lost in the foster care system. Our guiding principles are oriented around the goals of promoting family integrity whenever possible, while ensuring that the child welfare system works to protect children and the rights of parents.

These goals can be accomplished by restoring family integrity as a guiding principle within our child welfare system. The decision to

separate a child from their family should not be made lightly. Judges should consider family integrity as a factor when making child welfare decisions and the decision to terminate a parent's rights should be based on the best interests of the child—not based on poverty or other arbitrary factors.

Finally, parents should be able to have their rights restored after demonstrating their ability to care for their child.

Homegrown Ideas for Real Change

- ◆ Allow parents to petition to restore their own parental rights instead of having to rely on DHS or an attorney ad litem to do so on their behalf
- ◆ Permit parental rights to be restored more quickly, mirroring Texas's two-year time period instead of Arkansas's existing three-year period
- ◆ Restrict emotional and mental disabilities from being used to terminate parental rights in order to keep families from being torn apart by non-severe illness or disabilities
- ◆ Broaden the definition of "best interest of the child" to account for the likelihood of future self-sufficiency, family integrity, and other long-term outcomes for judges to consider when making child welfare decisions
- ◆ Limit the initiation of FINS (Family in Need of Services) reports to parents, guardians, custodians, counselors, or school officials to streamline the reporting process



Family integrity should be prioritized and foster care should be a last resort.



Pathway to Opportunity: **LAW & ORDER**



THE JOURNEY:

Sweeping, historic parole reform

In the 2023 legislative session, Arkansas took monumental steps to crack down on repeat offenders and the “catch-and-release” policies that previously hampered efforts to address rising crime.

Thanks to the leadership of **Sen. Ben Gilmore** and **Rep. Jimmy Gazaway**, Arkansas adopted the Protect Arkansas Act, which restricts parole and raises minimum incarceration periods for the

most heinous crimes, exempts serious crimes from the Emergency Powers Act to ensure bureaucrats cannot release inmates en masse, and improves victim notification requirements.⁴⁴

This landmark legislation also reformed “earned time” provisions, replacing them with work-focused earned release credits, and provided essential documentation to inmates upon their release to ease their transition back into the workforce.⁴⁵





THE ROADBLOCKS AHEAD: Unaccountable bureaucracy

The monumental progress made by the Protect Arkansas Act, however, could still be entirely derailed if the Arkansas Board of Corrections has its way. Over just the last year, the Board has

gone above and beyond to delay and disrupt the implementation of the law, even filing a lawsuit against the people of Arkansas to stop it in its tracks.⁴⁶

THE BOARD HAS ALSO FOUND ITSELF KNEE-DEEP IN CONTROVERSY FOR:

- ◆ Refusing to open needed bed space to house inmates;⁴⁷
- ◆ Pushing a flawed “capacity” memo written by an auditor previously fired for falsifying records;⁴⁸
- ◆ Allegedly illegally hiring an attorney with questionable billing practices, costing Arkansas taxpayers thousands per day;⁴⁹
- ◆ Protecting a scandal-ridden member with apparent knowledge of rampant child abuse occurring at a facility under his watch;⁵⁰
- ◆ And more.⁵¹

Even worse, from 2011 to 2022, this same Board released nearly 30,000 inmates early (many of which were incarcerated for serious offenses) under a Clinton-era law, contributing to the state’s crime crisis.⁵²

What recourse do the people of Arkansas or their elected representatives have in response to this laundry list of embarrassments? Effectively nothing.

Members of the Board of Corrections enjoy seven-year terms, no term limits, no impeachment process (except by their own choice), and a stunning lack of transparency in their decision-making. This insulates the Board from any form of accountability from voters, taxpayers, or even elected state officials. For real reform to truly take root, this must change.



Problems also persist in other areas of the justice system: While Arkansans do have a say in the election of judges and district attorneys, candidates for these offices are prohibited from declaring a party affiliation, leaving voters in the dark about the philosophies of individuals seeking these critical roles.

🌱 OUR HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS:

Accountability for bureaucrats and justice for victims

In order for the full, positive impact of the Protect Arkansas Act to be realized, the Board of Corrections must face real accountability and transparency. Ultimately, the Board should be eliminated entirely. Its functions could more easily, effectively, and responsibly be handled within the Department of Corrections.

But in the meantime, commonsense reforms like shortening term lengths, imposing term limits, and requiring live streaming of Board meetings would be strong steps in the right direction.

Voters should have more transparency into the priorities of candidates for judicial and district attorney positions. Allowing candidates to declare a party affiliation allows voters to make more informed decisions and hold these officials accountable.

And while crime victims are the most impacted by these broken policies, too often they are forgotten. Arkansas should also adopt constitutional protections for the rights of crime victims to ensure they have a voice in the justice process.

💡 *Homegrown Ideas for Real Change*

- ◆ **Eliminate the Arkansas Board of Corrections and delegate its responsibilities to the Arkansas Department of Corrections and/or the Arkansas Post-Prison Transfer Board**
- ◆ **Require Post-Prison Transfer Board hearings to be streamed online and publish votes online to improve transparency (which should also be expanded to the Arkansas Corrections Board, if it is not eliminated)**
- ◆ **Introduce four-year terms with two-term limits for the Post-Prison Transfer Board to prevent career Board members (which should also be expanded to the Arkansas Board of Corrections, if it is not eliminated)**
- ◆ **Adopt a Crime Victims' Bill of Rights in the Arkansas Constitution to enact certain basic protections for crime victims, from improved notification rights to enhanced rights to confer with prosecutors and to be heard at judicial hearings**
- ◆ **Require candidates for judicial and district attorney races to declare a party affiliation**



Victims, their families, and our brave law enforcement officers should always be top priorities.

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