

public policy WATCH

ARKANSAS PUBLIC POLICY PANEL

Putting the PUBLIC back in public policy since 1963

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SUMMER 2021

THE 93RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY

RECAPPING THE 108-DAY CULTURE WAR



In-person advocacy was largely limited due to COVID-19 precautions, but there was one attack on voting rights that the Citizens First Congress could not sit out. On the last day of the session, the CFC organized a last-minute rally at the Capitol to defeat SB485, an egregious voter suppression bill that sought to eliminate the Monday before Election Day from early voting — historically the busiest early voting day. The bill failed on its fifth push

The Arkansas Legislature recessed its 2021 session on April 28. They wrapped 108 days in one of the most difficult sessions in memory.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson signed more than 1,100 bills into law over the extended session.

Bright spots were few and far between, overshadowed by the assault on human and civil rights. The legislature failed to tackle the state's most pressing challenges, from the pandemic to rural economic decline.

Instead, they advanced harmful

bills against the most vulnerable of our community. They attacked voting rights, black history, transgender youth and public education. They passed several unconstitutional laws that will keep the state tied up in expensive lawsuits for years to come. — *continue on pg. 2*

It's our turn to roll up our sleeves **4**

S. Ark leaders bring relief to communities **6**

Legislative redistricting ramps up this summer **8**

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The Attack on Voting Rights

GOP legislators sponsored a package of 19 anti-voter bills. Lawmakers removed your ability to vote with a sworn affidavit if you forget your ID at the polls. They passed a bill banning volunteers from passing out food and water to voters waiting in line at the polls. They shortened the deadline to return absentee ballots. They took local control away from full-time, non-partisan county election staff.

There used to be a time when voting rights were not partisan and both parties worked to increase voter turnout. Those days seem sadly gone.

They tried many times to cut early voting hours, reviving bills that had failed already. Advocates were in the halls of the legislature past midnight on the final day to make sure they didn't bring it back from the dead again.

Legislators also made it more difficult to mount citizen-led petition drives. They banned paying canvassers per-signature col-



When legislators called an unusual midnight meeting on the session's final day, we rallied at the Capitol to watchdog the action and — quite literally — put the session to bed.

lected. They also referred to the ballot another measure limiting citizen's rights to refer measures to the ballot. The legislative proposal will raise the threshold to pass future ballot measures from 50 percent to 60 percent.

Arkansas Fails Renters Again

Arkansas remains the only state in the country without minimum housing standards for health and safety. A bill to establish an implied warranty of habitability passed in committee but failed to pass the House. Another to repeal Arkansas's criminal evictions statute also failed. The Arkansas Realtors Association mounted a powerful lobby effort against the bills.

A small step forward did pass that outlines minimum habitability standards for landlords. But the bill doesn't have any provisions for enforcement. Under the bill, tenants can move out if

the landlord fails to make necessary repairs. The bill also eliminates the requirement that a tenant sued in unlawful detainer has to pay a deposit of alleged rent owed in order to obtain a hearing.

An Assault on Civil Rights

Several bills were introduced to ban teaching black history accurately. Advocates opposed and defeated several of these bills, but eventually a watered down version passed. Legislators passed two bills prohibiting transgender students from participating in school sports. They overrode Gov. Hutchinson's veto of a bill banning transgender youth from receiving gender-affirming care.

They passed a dangerous Stand Your Ground law against the testimony of experts and law enforcement. It allows people to shoot first and ask questions

BE ON THE LOOKOUT!
See how your legislators voted in our upcoming 2021 Vote Guide.

later if they simply perceive that they might be in danger. Similar legislation increased gun violence in other states, especially against black and brown people.

Arkansas legislators again rejected meaningful Hate Crimes legislation. A real hate crimes bill would increase penalties for crimes against a person on the basis of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Instead, Republican lawmakers pushed through their own “scaled back” version of the bill that is so vague it may actually protect white supremacists. Arkansas is one of three states without a hate crimes law, along with South Carolina and Wyoming.

Lawmakers also referred to the ballot a constitutional amendment to legalize discrimination. The proposed Arkansas Religious Freedom Amendment would allow nearly anyone to challenge and exempt themselves from nearly any state law.

One step forward, two steps back from public education

Lawmakers did increase foundation funding for public schools and increase teacher pay. But they also failed to address a crisis in teacher health care that could cost teachers dearly to stay insured. Lawmakers also passed a \$2 million Walton-backed school voucher bill that funnels money out of public schools to pay private school tuition. This same legislation failed in numerous other legislative sessions because it undermines quality public education. The new law doesn't require private schools

to comply with anti-discrimination laws.

But wait, there's more

Unfortunately, while they are in recess, they are not done. “Recess” instead of “adjournment” means they can call themselves back. They can take up legislation that has already been defeated again, or even to keep filing new legislation. Lawmakers will return in the fall to consider redistricting and any unfinished business. We must stay vigilant.

What's next?

Monitoring: We will continue monitoring legislative activity. Sign up for alerts at www.citizensfirst.org on any new action that further attacks the rights of everyday Arkansans.

Redistricting: We are turning attention to the redistricting process, ensuring that new legislative districts are drawn fairly. We have a great report to help you understand how redistricting happens in Arkansas — what fairness looks like and the dangers to watch out for at www.arpanel.org/redistricting

Elections: It's clear we need to educate voters on new voting restrictions. The next election is going to be needlessly confusing for many voters. We're also working with partners to expand candidate training and recruitment, voter education and registration, and voter turnout. If there is any lesson from this Arkansas legislature, it is that elections have consequences.

Ballot measures: We are also exploring opportunities with our partners to push important new reforms through the ballot process. Stay tuned!

And the ongoing work of organizing, building coalitions, and supporting leader development. Improving Arkansas takes working together to better our communities. We are in this together, and we need to keep getting stronger to win needed reforms.

The fight to defend the rights of all Arkansans and hold these legislators accountable for their actions continues in our communities, at the polls, and in our courts. **The good news is that there is a path forward if we all work together.** Let us know how we can help in your community!

Download our **2021 Directory of the Arkansas Legislature** at: www.arpanel.org/arleg



Or scan the code with your phone to download



COVID-19 VACCINE

IT'S OUR TURN TO ROLL UP OUR SLEEVES

It's hard to imagine a time when we didn't know COVID-19 existed. Now when people say "virus," we know what they mean. The impact of COVID-19 on our lives, our activities, and our freedom has affected us all. The responsibility is ours, as a community, to help stop this virus.

Every Arkansan over the age of 12 is eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective in preventing severe illness from COVID-19, and people who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 may start to do some things they had stopped doing because of the pandemic. People can start to resume normal lives again.

It takes everyone. We all need to step up to beat COVID-19. We ask you to join us in protecting yourself, your family and friends, and your community by getting vaccinated.

Getting vaccinated adds an important layer of protection for you, your family, and loved ones. Here are some things you should know about the COVID-19 vaccine:

- › All COVID-19 vaccines currently available in the U.S. are very effective at preventing the disease.
- › The most common side effects are pain in the arm where you got the shot, feeling tired, headache, body aches, chills, and fever.



- › Stopping a pandemic requires using all the tools we have available — wearing masks, staying at least 6 feet apart from people who don't live with you, avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, washing your hands frequently, and getting vaccinated.

We want our communities to be safe and get back to the moments we've missed with families, friends and neighbors. We all play a part in this effort, and you are key.

The COVID-19 vaccination is one of the strongest tools we can use to fight this pandemic together. If you're among the 50 percent of Arkansans who have not received the vaccine, we hope that you'll consider contacting your pharmacy or healthcare provider to schedule an appointment.

If you have questions about the COVID-19 vaccine, visit CDC's

FAQs website at: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html

or scan the code with your phone to visit the page directly



ICYMI We've hosted a series of COVID-19 webinars in communities across Arkansas! Watch them at: www.facebook.com/arpanel/videos

Or scan the code with your phone to visit the page directly



Get a COVID-19 vaccine



It's SAFE!

\$0.00

It's FREE!



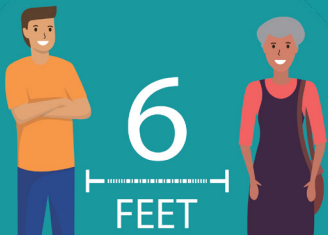
It will help PROTECT you and your family!



You might get side effects. But you should FEEL BETTER in a few days.



Get the FIRST vaccine you can!



Keep taking basic prevention steps until you are fully vaccinated.

Learn more:

www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html

COVID-19 UPDATE

S. ARK LEADERS BRING RELIEF TO COMMUNITIES



Leaders helped residents in Gould and Grady apply for COVID-19 relief at Gould First Baptist M.B. Church.

Since December, leaders in South Arkansas have been masking up to host a series of assistance drives focused on helping those behind on utility bills.

The **Gould Organizing Project**, a 501(c)(3) serving the Gould and Grady area, spearheaded events to support low-income residents within their communities and also those in Magnolia, Waldo, Marvell, Dumas, and Mitchellville.

Under the program, applicants were offered up to \$180 per household to cover the cost of past-due electric, gas, or water bills. The effort closed in May after providing assistance to **230 households**.

The program was funded with

federal CARES Act money through five separate grants. **William El-Amin**, GOP grant administrator, said helping communities with financial relief amid COVID-19 was an important task for the group.

GOP Chair **Curtis Mangrum** worked closely with El-Amin to ensure that everyone who needed help was served. “He was by my side through this whole process. He was really the boots-on-the-ground part of our operation and helped ensure that word got out and everything ran as smoothly as possible,” El-Amin said.

Leaders were aware that many families were having a difficult time paying bills due to job loss, illness, and other economic — *continue on pg. 7*

The Arkansas Attorney General’s office offered the following guidance for anyone still struggling to pay utility bills:

- › Take action immediately to seek assistance to avoid disconnection.
- › Verify what you owe directly with your utility company. Information, including what is owed, must be provided in writing to each customer with a past due balance.
- › Contact the utility company and discuss a payment plan if your bill is unaffordable.
 - › Utility companies are required to provide information regarding available payment options on their website and social media platforms.
 - › Utility companies are required to offer plans which provide a minimum of 18 months to repay any past due balances with no down payment required.
 - › Utility companies must also provide information regarding funds that may be available through assistance agencies or the [Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program](#).
- › Don’t fall for fake calls about utility bills. A legitimate utility company will not pressure you to pay through a wire transfer, gift card, or prepaid debit card.
- › Make all payments directly to the utility company.

— Continued from Page 6

hardships, El-Amin said. Some of those people lack the technology to apply online or have other barriers to connectivity, so hosting in-person drives was vital to reaching the greatest number of people in need.

Applicants were aided on a first come, first served basis and were asked to bring current utility bills, proof of income and ID. Utility providers were paid by the GOP directly.

The need for assistance within Arkansas's Delta communities was — and is — still great, El-Amin said. "The Delta isn't getting a lot of relief money and there are still a lot of households behind on their bills. We saw some utility bills that were thousands of dollars past due — some as high as \$4,000."

It is the goal of the GOP to continue to serve these communities by bringing as much

financial assistance as possible to their own backyards. They hope to re-open the program when and if more federal money becomes available.

El-Amin said he's already received several requests for help writing grants for other South Arkansas communities. "So we are going to keep asking our representatives for money," he said.


ARKANSAS RENT RELIEF PROGRAM

Are you struggling to pay rent or utilities because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Visit ar.gov/rentrelief to apply for rent relief today!

If you are a renter or landlord in Arkansas, you may be eligible for up to 15 months of rent and utilities dating back to April 1, 2020. Utilities include natural gas, propane, water, sewage, and electricity.

DHS • 855.RENTARK
855.738.8275



Arkansas Rent Relief Program applications are **STILL OPEN!** Funding can be applied to past rent, future rent, and certain utilities such as water, electricity, and gas. Up to 15 months of rent and utilities incurred between April 1, 2020 and Dec. 31, 2021 may be covered.

Visit: ar.gov/rentrelief for eligibility information and to apply.

The Folding Chair, Season 2 underway now

In February, we kicked off Season 2 of The Folding Chair, a Panel podcast that highlights the advocates supporting causes and policies that advance racial equity in Arkansas.

"The Folding Chair was developed to engage Arkansans in discussions about racial equity in an innovative way — to transform the negative thinking that discussing racial injustice is taboo and to take the next steps to close equity gaps in all communities," Host Osyrus Bolly, the Panel's Racial Equity Coordinator, said.

DID YOU KNOW?

The podcast's title is a nod to Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the U.S. Congress and the first woman to run for president, who said "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."



The season's first three guests include Mayor Julian Lott, the first African American mayor of Camden; Rachel Wallace and Hannah Feldman of the UC Berkeley School of Law Policy Advocacy Clinic, and Patrick M. Oliver, author and literary consultant.

The Folding Chair is available for streaming on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Google Play. Check it out!



LEGISLATIVE REDISTRICTING RAMPES UP THIS SUMMER

Protect your communities from gerrymandering.

The redistricting process is underway in Arkansas. It's critical for the public to get involved to stop gerrymandering. Arkansas' process is particularly vulnerable to political manipulation. Here's what you need to know:

What Is Redistricting?

Political boundaries are redrawn after each census to reflect changes in the population. The goal is to make each legislative district represent an equal number of residents.

The [Arkansas Board of Apportionment](#) redraws state legislative district boundaries. It's three members are Gov. Asa Hutchinson, Attorney General Leslie Rutledge, and Secretary of State John Thurston. The three Republicans will

set district lines for 100 House and 35 Senate districts.

The Arkansas Legislature will redraw lines for Arkansas's four U.S. Congressional districts who represent us in Washington D.C.

The 2020 Census data will show some big shifts in Arkansas' population. Northwest and Central Arkansas will likely get more legislative new districts. The Delta and other rural areas are likely to lose seats as districts are consolidated. The new census data is expected by Sept. 30, 2021.

Why Does It Matter?

A good redistricting process ensures accurate representation and keeps communities of interest together. The process should be



Your vote and your political power — your voice in our democracy — are on the line.

open and transparent. Arkansas's redistricting process is susceptible to political manipulation called **gerrymandering**. It is dominated by the party in power and does not have clear criteria.

Keeping communities of interest together is critical so they can elect leaders who understand their issues. Gerrymandering distorts representation against community interests in favor of partisan political outcomes. In the past

#FAIRMAPS

A good redistricting process ensures that **diverse communities** are fairly represented.

FAIR OUTCOME

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Black, Latinx, Asian American and communities in the minority party have been carved up to dilute their voting power. We need to attend public hearings on redistricting and propose our own plans to protect our communities.

How Can I Get Involved?

You can hold line-drawers accountable by paying attention and speaking up!

- Read our report on redistricting, attend a training or schedule a training with your group.
- Create your own maps and define your communities of interest.
- Attend public redistricting hearings and make sure they know how you define your community.
- Monitor public sessions and official websites to learn about proposed maps under consideration.
- Share information with your friends and family.

Redistricting & Gerrymandering in Arkansas
How Our Districts Got Their Shapes

Christopher Housenick, Ph.D., Political Science
Patrick D. Hagge, Ph.D., Geography

Read our report at:
www.arpanel.org/redistricting

ARKANSAS

STATE LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS

100
HOUSE SEATS



35
SENATE SEATS



WHO DRAWS THE DISTRICTS? POLITICIAN COMMISSION

- Three members: governor, secretary of state, attorney general

HOW ARE DISTRICTS DRAWN?

- | | |
|---|--|
| Process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politician commission draws the lines • Governor can't veto the plan • State Supreme Court will review or revise the plan if a citizen petitions |
| State-Level Criteria
Ranked: No | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contiguity for Senate • Follow county boundaries when practicable for Senate • No specific criteria for House districts |
| Public Hearings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No redistricting-specific requirements |
| Timing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By Feb. 1 following each census • Districts become effective 30 days from the filing date, unless proceedings for revision are initiated in the Supreme Court |

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS

4
SEATS



through 2020. Projected after reapportionment:
No change

WHO DRAWS THE DISTRICTS? STATE LEGISLATURE

HOW ARE DISTRICTS DRAWN?

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State legislature draws the lines • Governor can veto the plan |
| State-Level Criteria | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None |
| Timing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None |

BRENNAN CENTER
FOR JUSTICE

DID YOU KNOW?

A similar redistricting cycle occurs within our local governmental bodies — quorum courts, city councils, community college boards, and school boards — meaning you have an even greater opportunity to impact significant, equitable change at the local level!

These processes vary by entity and are handled by their corresponding elected bodies and local election commissions. Reach out to them to find out how you can get involved!

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**MONTHLY CHILD TAX CREDIT
PAYMENTS BEGIN JULY 15**

Eligible families will receive monthly payments
of up to \$300 for each child under 6 and
up to \$250 for each child 6 and above.



Roughly 39M households in the U.S. will automatically get monthly payments of the Child Tax Credit beginning July 15, 2021. Learn more from IRS at: <https://go.usa.gov/xHeUu>