

# public policy WATCH



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## 2019 SESSION SEES VICTORIES DESPITE ODDS

An unprecedented number of Arkansans engaged in the legislative process and made all the difference this legislative session. Advocacy by Citizens First Congress members helped make the few steps forward possible and ensured successful defense against several attacks.

“The legislative session was a war against women, children, the poor, the marginalized, public education and people of color,” said CFC Policy Director Kymara Seals. “Thankfully, our members and allies made their voices heard and we were able to make some important steps forward and stop some of the worst proposals.”

This year, the legislature considered 1,670 bills. About 1,100 bills became law. Over 500 CFC members came to the Capitol during the session to talk with their lawmakers and speak in committee hearings, and thousands more engaged by calling or emailing their lawmakers, participating in one of the four telephone and Facebook town halls we hosted, and responding to our alerts.

### EDUCATION

**P**rogress: In a show of bipartisanship, and one of the brightest spots of the session, the legislature passed the Dream Act, a CFC priority for 14 years. It requires that most students who graduate from Arkansas high schools be eligible for in-state tuition if they have lawful status or are a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient. The bill could benefit as many as 5,000 students.



**PROGRESS FOR DREAMERS:** Friends of Arkansas United gathered inside Gov. Hutchinson’s chambers April 10 as he signed into law Act 837, allowing for the licensing of DACA nurses; and Act 844, to provide in-state tuition equity for immigrant students who have lived in Arkansas for three years and graduated from an Arkansas high school or received a GED in the state.

The legislature also enacted a law allowing nursing licenses for people who have completed their vocational or professional course work and who have work permits under DACA. A similar attempt to allow DACA students to earn teaching licenses died in the House Education committee.

Other victories in education came by prohibiting the use of corporal punishment on students with disabilities, and the passing of Act 641, requiring more recess time.

**S**uccessful Defense: Once again public education was under attack with attempts to privatize our public schools. Several diverted public

funds to private schools but failed.

A bipartisan coalition of lawmakers who care about public education and who want to see the wise use of tax dollars defeated these proposals despite a well funded lobby operation to support them.

“We oppose privatizing public schools because it simply does not improve opportunities for students and it leads to segregated schools that make it harder for low income students and students of color to get a quality education,” said Alyce Love, chair of the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign and a retired teacher from Dumas. “We can improve learning for all students by

## SNAPSHOT: Q&A WITH CHRISTINA MULLINAX

**W**e interviewed Christina Mullinax, Arkansas organizer for Planned Parenthood and a Citizens First Congress steering committee member, to talk about the legislative session, debunk some common misconceptions and discuss why the public should rally around Planned Parenthood.

Mullinax is co-founder of the Arkansas Coalition for Reproductive Justice. She first came to the Little Rock center in 2001 for birth control when she was uninsured.

For the last seven years, she has worked as Arkansas' organizer, mobilizing supporters, patients, donors and volunteers across the state to change public opinion and policy to make Arkansas a better place for reproductive rights and reproductive health.

### Why have you aligned with the CFC?

**CM:** The CFC is the oldest progressive coalition in the state and has a history of fighting for social justice. This closely aligns with PP's mission. Our resolution on sex ed was approved by the CFC several years ago and we intend to keep building support and educating the member groups about that. It has been such a great way for our organization to network with other member groups across the state.

### What motivates you?

**CM:** Love motivates me. My parents were part of the Jesus Movement of the 1970's and raised me to stand up for justice as a part of living my faith. I was trained to seek the divine within each person and creature I encounter. I am continually moved these days by those standing up for love and justice across the globe, our nation and especially our state.

My close friends and family motivate me. I stay grounded by staying in relationship to those I love most. The older I get, the more I find hope, inspiration, and motivation through

their words and actions. I want to make the world a better place now for my nieces and nephew and my friends' kids.

The courage and determination of the Women's Emergency Committee motivates me. The thought of how these women came together over 40 years ago and organized to elect a better school board inspires me. This group eventually formed the Panel of American Women which became the Arkansas Public Policy Panel and CFC.

### What services does Planned Parenthood offer, and why should the public support it?

**CM:** Planned Parenthood offers a wide range of reproductive health care for women, men, trans and gender non-conforming folks. These services include abortion services, annual exams, birth control, breast exams, emergency contraception, family medicine, HIV testing, peri- and post-menopause diagnosis and symptom management, PrEP and PEP, STD testing and treatment, testicular cancer screenings, transgender services, UTI testing and treatment, and yeast infection diagnosis and treatment.

Those who support bodily autonomy and personal empowerment should support Planned Parenthood because we are the most trusted name in reproductive health care for the past 100 years.

Those who care about promoting safe and healthy relationships for young people should support us because we are the largest provider of sexual health education in the nation.

Planned Parenthood provides medically accurate information and education that supports people making decisions about when and if to start a family.

### What are your takeaways from this legislative session?

**CM:** My key takeaways after watching



“The Reproductive Justice movement, initiated by women of color across the globe, attempts to center those who are often most marginalized.”

— Christina Mullinax

nine abortion restrictions pass easily through the Arkansas legislature this past session are that we have a lot of work to do to remove the stigma around abortion in this state and train our supporters to be comfortable talking about abortion in public; and we need to elect legislators who will vote to protect abortion access and feel comfortable talking about keeping abortion safe, legal and accessible.

### How can people get involved with Planned Parenthood?

**CM:** Sign up to volunteer at [bit.ly/PPGPvolunteer](http://bit.ly/PPGPvolunteer). Text "STAND" to 22422 to join our Mobile Action Network. Donate online at [bit.ly/supportPPGP](http://bit.ly/supportPPGP). Follow us on Twitter @PPGreatPlainsAR. Use Planned Parenthood for your reproductive health needs.

## BE COUNTED: WHY THE 2020 CENSUS MATTERS



**ARKANSAS COUNTS:** Participants filled Red & Blue Arkansas in January for the inaugural meeting of Arkansas Counts, a newly-formed grassroots group dedicated to working towards a complete count for the 2020 census in Arkansas.

An accurate census count in 2020 is crucial to ensuring that Arkansas continues to receive resources to increase economic development, build roads, fund public schools and facilities, and repair infrastructure. For perspective on the stakes, Arkansas stands to lose about \$750 million in federal funding over the next decade if even 1 percent of our residents are not counted in the upcoming census.

The 2020 census is already at the center of a contentious legal battle stemming from the Trump administration's controversial decision to include a question on U.S. citizenship in the nationwide survey.

"We knew immediately that this was intended to have repercussions on our communities," said Mireya Reith, founding executive director of Arkansas United, a Springdale-based nonprofit that advocates for immigrants rights. "Our concerns really tie into a moment right now where immigrants in general all across the country have a distrust in government. That's in part because of this administration and how this administration really has lifted up enforcement and deportation as a primary priority."

A report released June 3 by the non-

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partisan group Urban Institute found that in one scenario analyzed, the proposed addition of a citizenship question, along with other factors like underfunding of the Census Bureau and fear in immigrant communities, could fuel a massive undercount in next year's census not seen since 1990.

Diana Elliott, one of the report's authors and a senior research associate at the institute, said the group's study shows that the projected undercount would disproportionately affect young blacks and Latinos. Non-Hispanic whites and people over the age of 50, on the other hand, are likely to be overcounted by the census, she added.

Census figures are used by the federal government for congressional apportionment and to distribute resources and funds to state and local jurisdictions across the country. The

data is also used by businesses to determine new ventures and advertising in different communities.

In addition to these challenges, the 2020 census will be completed online for first time ever. As a largely rural state, Arkansas has limited communication services. Currently, Arkansas ranks 48th in the U.S. for Internet coverage, and about 30 percent of our residents do not have Internet access.

Language barriers provide an additional obstacle to cultivating a complete count. Though census materials will be made available in Spanish and other languages, understanding how and why immigrants should participate can be challenging.

Arkansas Counts is organizing to overcome these challenges by assembling a team of Arkansans dedicated to identifying innovative, grassroots solutions. The coalition is already meeting to determine best practice in spreading the word in immigrant and African American communities and how to encourage participation.

For more information on Arkansas Counts and to learn about ways you can help in your community, visit [www.arkansasimpact.org/arkansas-counts](http://www.arkansasimpact.org/arkansas-counts) or follow their Facebook page at [facebook.com/ARcensus2020](https://facebook.com/ARcensus2020).



**SESSION** | continued from page 1 |

investing in proven solutions like quality teachers, after-school and summer programs, supporting kids in poverty and expanding early childhood education. We should invest in what works.”

Another bill we helped defeat allowed the Arkansas Department of Education to extend state control over a public school district from the current five years to nine total years. We need to rethink our approach to struggling schools as attempts by the Arkansas Department of Education to take over and improve school districts have failed every time. Giving the state more time to implement a failing strategy did not seem like an answer.

**S**etbacks: We supported but did not pass legislation that would offer early childhood educators a tax credit for attaining higher levels of certification. Shocking new research shows that large numbers of early childhood teachers are struggling to make ends meet and are sometimes even going hungry. This contributes to very high turnover in the profession, and not enough certified professional educators taking care of our most vulnerable and

“We can improve learning for all students by investing more in proven solutions like quality teachers, after-school and summer programs, supporting kids in poverty and expanding early childhood education. We should invest in what works.”

— Alyce Love

impressible kids.

Arkansas did raise minimum teacher pay slightly, but failed to keep pace with rising teacher salaries in neighboring states.

**ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

**P**rogress: Rights for Arkansas renters gained unprecedented momentum this session thanks to a report published by the CFC, public outcry,

powerful allies, and the introduction of a bill outlining basic habitability standards. Arkansas is currently the only state in the U.S. that does not have some version of a minimum housing standard, and previous attempts to pass similar legislation have failed, due largely to opposition from the Arkansas Realtors Association. The bill never made it out of committee despite multiple revisions at the behest of opponents, but more people than ever were engaged in the push for progress. Advocates are more organized than ever, working to build a campaign for the next session.

Another huge outcome was renewal of The Arkansas Works, Arkansas’ Medicaid expansion program. It offers nearly the only access to health care to some 235,000 low-income adult Arkansans. Lawmakers placed a work requirement on the program, but the courts threw it out this spring. People can now re-enroll in Arkansas Works if they have been kicked out of the program.

The court ruling is on appeal, but lawmakers passed the program by a single vote. The program is proven to save lives, save Arkansas millions of dollars, keep our rural health system viable and help families work their way out of poverty.

**S**uccessful defense: CFC members united against two significant sneak attacks on the state minimum wage. The bills froze the minimum wage at the current level of \$9.25, affecting more than 84 percent of businesses in the state and impacting tens of thousands of workers. Both bills failed.

**S**etbacks: Gov. Hutchinson successfully passed his tax package which was nothing short of a redistribution of wealth from low-income families to the wealthy. The bills significantly cut taxes on corporate and wealthy taxpayers, while raising sales taxes that impact middle and low income families the most. Even considering the modest middle- and low-income tax cuts passed in 2017, Arkansas’ tax system has become significantly less fair to working



**CFC ADVOCACY DAY:** About 100 participants turned out for the CFC's January Advocacy Day at the Arkansas Education Association and the Capitol to hear updates on the session and to lobby representatives.



**PRESS CONFERENCE:** CFC members gathered alongside allies inside the Capitol Rotunda in January to denounce Gov. Hutchinson's hefty tax cuts for Arkansas' wealthiest earners and corporations.

people.

Arkansas tax code is among the least fair in the country, taxing middle and low income families roughly twice the rate that we tax our wealthiest, fueled by our reliance on the state sales tax, which is the second highest in the nation. The governor's highway funding proposal on the 2020 ballot depends on voters raising our sales tax even higher.

Among other blows to low-income families were two significant pieces of legislation affecting the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one denying parents from receiving SNAP benefits during any month in which they are delinquent on child support, and another expanding work requirements for low-income Arkansans who receive SNAP.

### CIVIL RIGHTS ELECTION REFORM

**P**rogress: The juvenile justice system saw reform this session with the enactment of a bill mandating the use of validated risk assessment tools, creating a plan for diversion options to maximize the benefits for juvenile offenders and the development of a plan for the reinvestment of funds into community-based services.

Another significant win for juvenile justice came with the passing of a law that

limits the use of solitary confinement on juveniles under age 18.

**S**etbacks: Positive steps forward for our immigrant brothers and sisters stand in stark contrast to a new law prohibiting municipalities from adopting or enacting a sanctuary policy. The act penalizes any municipalities with a sanctuary policy by withholding discretionary funds or grants from the state while the policy is in place.

The legislature approved a measure that makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to access the ballot through the initiative process by increasing the minimum signature threshold in 45 counties, and leaves the ballot open only to those who can afford the expensive filing fees.

Another bill that passed will make it easier to invalidate a person's voter registration unless they can prove they are a citizen.

### ENVIRONMENT

**P**rogress: The CFC helped pass a law expanding access for renewable energy.

Additionally, CFC members were able to make significant progress on passing a container deposit law while also raising education and awareness, allowing this issue to gain traction with legislators.

"The CFC Environmental Caucus

has been effective in getting the word out," said Trina Walls, co-chair of the Environmental Caucus. "We have reached out to inform the public that the environment has no party affiliation — we all require clean air and water. It is the responsibility of us."

**S**uccessful defense: Members helped stop a major push to weaken regulations on swine farms and removed protections that would severely harmed the Buffalo National River and water quality in Arkansas.

**S**etbacks: The legislature approved new fees on the registration of electric and hybrid vehicles as a part of Gov. Hutchinson's highway funding plan and were unable to pass recommendations given by the Water Providers Legislative Task Force.

Our successes were realized through the hard work of CFC leaders, staff and interns, and legislative allies who helped move bills through tough committees and turned out in support of our priorities.

"I am optimistic about the strong alliances that were formed during this legislative session with groups that we share common interests and values," Seals said. "We are nurturing and growing those alliances stronger for future policy work."

If you are angry, disappointed, or discouraged by some of the actions of the Arkansas legislature, there is good news: primary elections are less than a year away. The time is now to get your campaign together, to encourage someone to run, or to get everyone you know registered to vote.

If you are happy or emboldened by some of the actions of the Arkansas legislature, your champions need your support.

The next legislative session takes place in January 2021.

For a detailed overview on how each legislator voted on CFC issues, visit [www.citizensfirst.org](http://www.citizensfirst.org).

# 2019 #ARLEG WRAP-UP

## CHEERS



- Stopping “stand your ground” legislation and attempts to eliminate gun-free zones.
- Stopping religious discrimination legislation targeting our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, but impacting us all.
- Stopping attacks on the Arkansas minimum wage.
- Defeating Buffalo River hog waste bill.
- Expanding renewable energy production.
- Stopping several terrible education bills attacking our teachers, funneling tax money into unaccountable private schools, and giving ineffective state bureaucrats more authority and time to suspend our local school boards and mismanage our schools.

## BIG STEPS FORWARD



- Passing the Dream Act after 14 years, to provide in-state tuition equity for immigrant students who have lived in Arkansas for 3 years and graduated from a state high school or received a GED in the state.
- Expanding recess and the parents and kids who organized to get it done.
- Banning spanking of kids with developmental disabilities.
- Renewal of expanded Medicaid, the only access to healthcare for more than 300K Arkansans.
- Major expansion of renewable energy production and green jobs in Arkansas.
- Some voucher transparency.

## BEST SIGNS OF HOPE



- How many people participated in the process.
- Powerful alliances.
- The five Democratic freshmen women who shook up the House — representation matters.

## JEERS



- The tax bills this session resulted in an astonishing transfer of wealth from low-income Arkansans who will see their taxes go up to the super wealthy and powerful who got major tax cuts.
- The racist, unnecessary and unconstitutional anti-immigration legislation rushed through on the last day.
- The Arkansas Realtors Association, who stopped fair housing protections for Arkansas renters representing one-third of the state.
- Our inability to focus education debates and spending on where the research shows we can make the biggest differences: early childhood, nutrition, teacher quality, after-school and summer programs.
- The assault on democracy — voter suppression, and attempts to roll-back the recent voter-approved state minimum wage.

## NEXT STEPS



- The time is NOW to get your campaign together, to encourage someone to run, or to get everyone you know registered to vote.
- Support solid candidates who will be challenged in primary elections less than a year away.
- A CFC meeting to plan next steps is set for Saturday, June 15 at 10 a.m. at the CFC office.

## LEGISLATIVE MVPS

- CFC staff, interns and volunteers
- Arkansas Education Association
- Arkansas Renters United
- DecARcerate
- Arkansas Moms Demand Action
- Arkansas United
- Audubon Arkansas
- Buffalo River Watershed Alliance
- Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

ARKANSAS  
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## CFC TAKES OVER THE CAPITOL



Hundreds of CFC members and allies gathered at the Capitol to learn about advocacy, support good policy and rally against the bad. CFC-organized events included CFC Advocacy and Youth Advocacy days, a rally to protect the minimum wage, and press conferences advocating for fair landlord-tenant laws and denouncing Gov. Hutchinson's tax cuts and highway bill.



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