

Aspire Arkansas supports data-informed approaches to community and economic development

By Greta Hacker

The Arkansas Community Foundation (ACF), a nonprofit focused on providing resources and support for charitable giving in the state of Arkansas, began a project in 2011 that would give Arkansans better access to information about the social, economic, and demographic circumstances affecting their state. This project, Aspire Arkansas, has continued to grow in the seven years since its inception. Arkansans have increasingly used the data report as a tool for informing and directing their initiatives. By taking advantage of Aspire data, stakeholders can more effectively engage in planning efforts to improve the quality of life around the state and contribute to economic prosperity.

Debuting as a print report, Aspire Arkansas was updated to an interactive online format in early 2018, making it even easier for Arkansans to access information about their communities. The report encompasses six areas: education, health, families, community, and demographics. Within each of these categories, Aspire Arkansas details specific indicators such as poverty rates, high school graduation and remediation rates, life expectancy, unemployment, voter participation, and population changes. The data provides remarkable specificity, as it breaks down estimates by region, county, or school district. Along with presenting these numbers in a user-friendly format, Aspire Arkansas also reports general state trends and puts Arkansas's progress in a national context by showing its rank among the 50 states.

Both the ease of accessibility and the streamlined data presentation have helped the tool accomplish its ultimate goal: helping Arkansans make smart decisions in bettering their state.

Sarah Kinser, chief program officer for the ACF, commented on the organization's intent in creating the datasets. Kinser noted that Aspire Arkansas helps Arkansans "think strategically about where to focus their attention and resources to help move their communities forward. Arkansans are known for their generosity and willingness to pitch in when needed, so we wanted to provide a tool that would help focus that goodwill on the most critical issues facing our state."

Kinser also elaborated on one of these issues: grade-level reading.

"One of the datasets Arkansas Community Foundation is looking at most closely is third grade reading scores," she said. "As of 2017, only 37 percent of Arkansas third graders were reading on grade level, which means that almost two-thirds of our kids don't have the early literacy skills they need to be successful throughout the rest of their educational careers and beyond."

Kinser emphasized that this information has led to interventions specifically targeting grade-level reading.

"In each of the communities we serve, we're talking to teachers and parents, learning about new nonprofit programs, and looking for ways to use our financial resources to help," she said.

Because of this data, the ACF has chosen to become more involved in the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a conglomeration of over 30 organizations working to increase third grade reading proficiency through creating partnerships with communities, school districts, educators, and parents.

Beyond providing useful data on a statewide level, Aspire Arkansas also has the potential to impact local communities. The Faulkner County Community Foundation, a local affiliate of the ACF, administers a Giving Tree grant program in which nonprofits, government bodies, school districts, and other entities can apply for grant funding from the ACF to advance their charitable missions. Shelley Mehl, executive director of the Faulkner County Community Foundation (FCCF) and a Conway City Council member, explained that Aspire Arkansas data is instrumental in helping the FCCF decide how to allocate grant funding.

"The Aspire data report allows us to identify and prioritize the needs in our local community," Mehl said. "Our Giving Tree unrestricted grants receive so many requests that having this information allows us to target and monitor our impact on Faulkner County."

The Faulkner County Community Foundation awarded Giving Tree grants to 18 local organizations this year. These organizations included: the Bethlehem House (which received a grant to provide funding for a community breakfast program), the Conway Symphony Orchestra (which received a grant to support their Community Music Program), and the Mt. Vernon

Baptist Church Food Pantry (which received a grant to purchase food for local distribution from the Arkansas Food Bank).

In addition to facilitating organizational efforts, the Aspire Arkansas report also gives civic-minded individuals information they need to serve their communities effectively.

Kinser believes that the tool has the power to fuel individual passion for service.

"Our challenge to Arkansans is to take a look at the data, find an issue that resonates for you, and get involved," Kinser said. "There are many ways to be supportive: Ask questions or do research to find out more about the issue, give money to a charitable organization

working on the issue, raise awareness of the numbers among your friends and neighbors, talk to an elected official—everyone can find a way to help Arkansas move our numbers in the right direction."

View and learn more about the Aspire Arkansas report at www.aspirearkansas.org.



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