

# Community Connections: building civic engagement in Arkansas

*The third in a series exploring  
issues from ARCF's  
Aspire Arkansas report.*

**engage**  
*Learn more. Give smart.*





*Volunteers support Helena's biggest event of the year, the King Biscuit Blues Festival.*

# Delta Dawn

## It's a New Day in Helena, Thanks to Community Volunteers

by Kimberly Dishongh

**R**emembering what her hometown of Helena looked like in its heyday is what drives Susan Carter to do more to serve it now. She looks around the 2012 King Biscuit Blues Festival, a largely volunteer-run annual event, and knows she's not alone.

"A lot of them, it's because they're natives and they remember what Helena was," says Carter, whose paid job is writing grants at Phillips Community College and whose volunteer task was overseeing the information tents at the festival. "Everybody has realized it's never going to be like that again so we've got to do something to

make it as good as we can again."

Once a thriving river town, Helena's decline started in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Businesses closed, homes and buildings were abandoned. Public spaces fell into a state of disrepair and the town, overall, had a feeling of neglect.

Things started to really pick up again for Helena around 2005, when the Delta Bridge Project, a community-driven strategic plan to revitalize struggling Delta towns, found its legs.



## Delta Bridge Project Engages Citizens

Led by Southern Bancorp in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation, Delta Bridge was piloted in Phillips County in 2003, with 300 residents working together in teams with goals for healthcare, education, tourism, leadership, housing and economic development. The project has now moved into Coahoma County, Mississippi, and is just getting started in Arkansas's Mississippi County as well.

The project gave volunteers in the community direction and leadership to help them get things done. "There really has always been a group of people who cared, but a handful of people can only do so much," said Suzanne Dawson, senior vice president and senior retail officer at Southern Bancorp in Helena and co-chair of the Blues Fest treasury operation.

Carter says the project inspired more people to get involved in the community and rallied existing volunteers to do even more. "That plan was really put together by the community," she explained. "They came to the meetings, they serve on the committees, it wasn't just some plan that the Waltons handed us. I think that's what's given a lot of people in this group big buy-in."

## Call to Action Motivates Locals to "Do Just One Thing" for Helena

Since 2004, more than 300 dilapidated buildings have been torn down or refurbished, new businesses have been recruited and partnerships have been formed to improve tourism, bringing money into the once-dying community.

In that time, the Boys and Girls Club in Helena completed a \$1.1 million renovation on a long-abandoned former hardware store. It now serves as a model for other Boys and Girls Clubs in the region, according to Doug Friedlander, executive director of the Phillips County Chamber of Commerce.

"It's not just the facility but the leadership in there and also the board," said Friedlander, who has issued a call to action by asking that everyone in Helena do "just one thing" to better the community. "Our board raised \$3 million in two years, and this is one of the poorest counties in America — and that's all volunteers."

Another all-volunteer board raised \$1.7 million to renovate an abandoned grocery store into a home for the Phillips County Library. Yet another board came together at Phillips Community College to create the Great River Promise, ensuring that every child who graduates from a high school in Phillips County is guaranteed tuition-free enrollment at the community college.

"The Census showed from 2000 to 2010 a 20 percent decline over that decade, but from 2009 to 2010, the estimate shows our population actually went up," said Friedlander. "Most people think most of the population was lost in the first half of the decade, so I always reckon the turnabout to be around 2005. That's where you can start pointing to physical accomplishments that you can see, one after the other after the other, starting to take off."

The Blues Festival, however, was in operation long before Delta Bridge got its start. This year there were about 200 volunteers to run tents for disseminating information and selling Blues Bucks, wristbands and festival merchandise. Blues



**"Our board raised \$3 million in two years... and that's all volunteers."  
— Doug Friedlander**







Bucks tents are adopted on each of the three festival days by individuals, families or organizations, and adoptees are responsible for finding volunteers to staff their tents.

Gloria Higginbotham, co-owner of Helena's Delta Gypsy gift shop, was in charge of merchandise tents at this year's festival and found 60 volunteers to run them. "I'm not going to say that it was not difficult," she said, "but I have to say that Helena has a great volunteer base."

## Volunteers Connect through Phillips County Volunteer Corps

Higginbotham, also president of the Humane Society of the Delta's executive board and an advisory board member for the Delta Cultural Art Center, enjoys the social aspect of volunteering, even if she often gets to greet her friends only in passing on the way to and from meetings.

She also likes that she can see the results of her labor. "This is the 12th poorest county in the nation, and it's so rewarding when you get a group of volunteers and you can take something from nothing and make the difference," she said. "You can see the difference and change our community for the better."

She says there are plenty of opportunities to volunteer, and there is always room for more volunteers. Last year, Friedlander spearheaded the Phillips County Volunteer Corps to match up volunteers and opportunities to serve. That rather simple but effective tool started out with a volunteer maintaining a database of volunteer opportunities and sending out notices to volunteers who signed up for the corps. Now, though, there is money available in the budget to hire someone to do the job part-time. "We have several hundred people signed up for it," said Friedlander.

## Volunteers Look to the Future

In Helena, the Blues Festival may be over for 2012, but the work to improve the community continues. There are projects aiming to recreate Civil War-era landmarks, promote arts and culture of the Delta and beautify the city, and the list goes on. Volunteers like Higginbotham don't intend to stop. "It's never finished," said Higginbotham. "You just see something else to do and keep going."



To learn more about volunteerism in Arkansas and ways to get involved, visit [www.arcf.org](http://www.arcf.org).



25.2% of Arkansans participated in some kind of civic organization (school group, sports/recreational association, service or civic association, church or religious group, etc.) during 2008-2010.

Source: Corporation for National & Community Service, [civic.serve.gov](http://civic.serve.gov)



# Future Funds Give Young Philanthropists a Chance to Make Their Mark

**E**veryone has a philanthropic bone in their body,” said Fayetteville Future Fund charter member Katie Tennant. “More than people ever realize, they want to give back to their community. But many young professionals don’t know how or don’t think they have the means to help. Future Funds pool membership money together to make a bigger impact. You as an individual become a part of the group that IS making a difference.”

Now executive director of Fayetteville Area Community Foundation, Tennant became involved in the Future Fund as a volunteer co-chair of the Fayetteville Future Fund Steering Committee late in 2011. The committee sought the advice of another Arkansas Community Foundation local office, Hot Springs Area Community Foundation, about how they successfully tailored the giving circle model to young professionals.

Hot Springs Future Fund Chair Jared Zeiser said the concept of a Future Fund came from a group in Greenville, South Carolina, that successfully used a giving circle to boost participation by younger professionals in community philanthropy. Under this model, Future Fund members pool their dues to build an endowment and make grants for charities in their community.

“Our steering committee held small group meetings in houses to jump-start the initial membership drive and get feedback on the concept,” said Zeiser. “We held the first Spring Mixer in May 2011 — our existing members were asked to bring friends, and those who joined were able to vote on grants for our community.”

The Hot Springs mixer worked well and led to another event this May. Hot Springs Future Fund membership dues go 50 percent to an endowment and 50 percent to current-year grants. Six grants went out after the Spring Mixer in 2012 to nonprofits serving children, the homeless and those needing healthcare.

“We seek to educate and motivate younger folks in the community to see the impact philanthropy can make and to be a part of that change,” Zeiser explained. “We think it is positive that they get to vote right away on how to

*continued on page 5*

Arkansas ranks 8th in terms of the average percent of household income contributed to charitable causes – 6.3%.

Source: *The Chronicle of Philanthropy's*  
How America Gives survey



*Hot Springs Future Fund members Karen Dooley, Melanie Masino, Amy Johnson, Jared Zeiser, back row: Lance Porter, Brian Hill, Gary Troutman*



*Fayetteville Future Fund members Matt Powell, Robert Curtner, Brad Audrain, Brenda Jones, Darrin Beckham and Andrew Duck*



# How engaged is your community?

Collaboration is the starting point for creating positive change in our communities. As the success stories from Helena (page 1) and Harrison (page 7) attest, moving our state in the right direction takes broad-based civic engagement and strong community connections. How engaged are the citizens in your community?

In Arkansas Community Foundation's *Aspire Arkansas* report, released last May, we identified seven goals for Arkansas's communities and looked for data that shows how each of our communities is faring with regard to each goal. Below are maps from the report addressing civic engagement issues — voter participation and charitable giving.

Our goal is to help Arkansans in identifying local challenges and making more informed decisions about key issues. Use these maps to help compare your county to others across your region and the whole state so you can start the conversation in your community about how to move the numbers in the right direction. The maps below represent data collected by the Arkansas Secretary of State's Office and Internal Revenue Service.

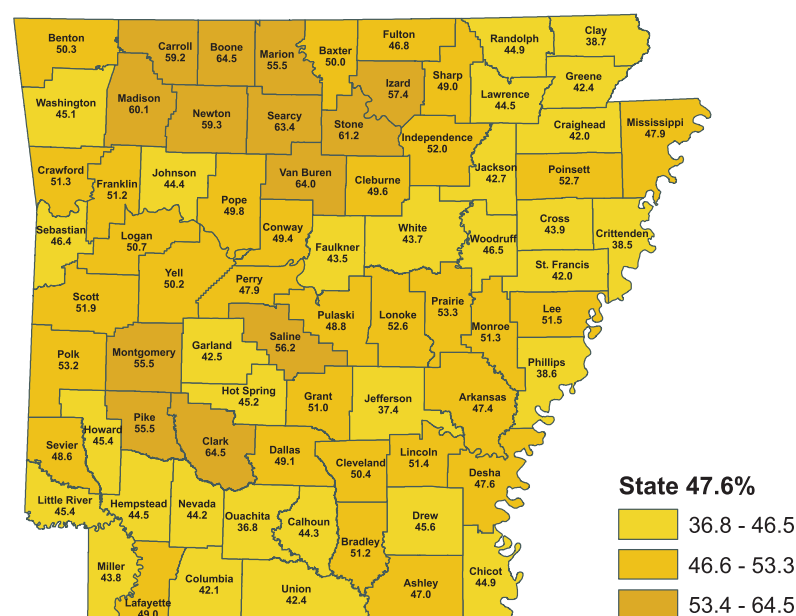
For additional data on civic participation and historical trends for your county, visit [www.arcf.org/AspireArkansas](http://www.arcf.org/AspireArkansas).



## voter PARTICIPATION

by County: 2010

(general election and non-partisan judicial runoff election)

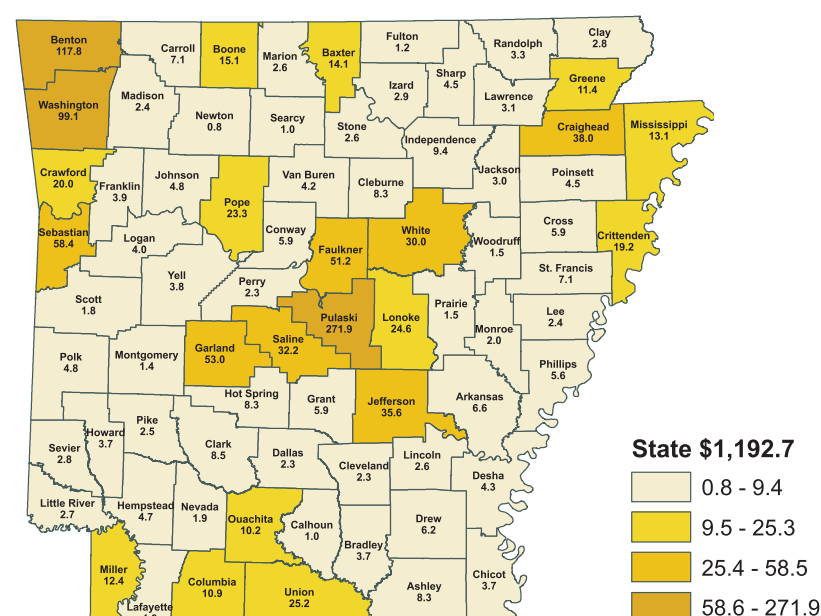


Source: Arkansas Secretary of State's Office, Vote Naturally

## charitable GIVING

by County: 2006

(itemized contributions reported - \$Millions)



Source: Internal Revenue Service, Charitable Giving by Households that Itemize Deductions

## Future Funds, continued from page 4

give out a part of the money. They also are a part of the vision to build a fund for the future that will continue to make a difference for our community."

Tennant's Fayetteville group used the lessons learned in Hot Springs to form a Steering Committee back in October 2011 that continues to meet every four to six weeks. Their membership drive kicked off last January. "We raised almost \$13,000 in 32 days. This allowed us to qualify for a \$5,000 match from Arkansas Community Foundation for our endowment, and we also had money for initial community grants," Tennant said. One of Fayetteville Future Fund's first went to Safety Net, a program of the Fayetteville School system that helps kids who are homeless or have little family support with money for haircuts before job interviews and caps and gowns for graduation.



Arkansas Community Foundation has start-up Future Fund groups in nine counties across the state. Visit [www.arcf.org](http://www.arcf.org) to find out how to get involved.



# ARCF Can Help You Invest In Your Community

In Hot Springs, four golfing buddies played a friendly scramble game every Christmas Eve until their wives gave them an ultimatum: no more golf on Christmas Eve. The golfers bargained to maintain their tradition and appease their wives by playing the match for charity. Soon, the Christmas Scramble Golf Tournament became a tradition, and the golfers established an endowment at ARCF's Hot Springs Area local office to manage their charitable funds.

In Sharp County, after tornadoes ripped through Highland and Ash Flat on February 4, 2008, citizens partnered with ARCF's Sharp County local office to establish a disaster relief fund that could channel charitable dollars to organizations leading the rebuilding effort.

In Sebastian County, the Rotary Club of Fort Smith Fred Baker Memorial Endowment supports the club's charitable work and honors the memory of a beloved club member.

Throughout the state, when Arkansans pull together to invest in their communities, Arkansas Community Foundation is there to help make the process of charitable giving simple, flexible and effective. In fact, we were established specifically to support and grow grassroots philanthropy in our state!

Here's how we can help:

- Because we're here for the long term, Arkansas Community Foundation can protect your charitable gift and ensure that funds are directed to the local causes you care about now and in the future.
- Giving should be fun! We handle the back-office paperwork and financial processes, and you get to enjoy putting your charitable dollars to work in your community. As an added bonus, when you establish a fund at ARCF, you qualify for maximum tax benefits for charitable giving.
- ARCF can be your philanthropic resource. Our work enables us to partner with thousands of donors and hundreds of nonprofit organizations throughout Arkansas. We can connect you to organizations working to address the issues that are important to you and to fellow donors who share your passions.

Time and time again, we've seen that philanthropy strengthens communities and brings individuals together. Join our family of philanthropists and start investing in Arkansas. Contact Kim Evans, vice president for development and client services, to learn more. [kevans@arcf.org](mailto:kevans@arcf.org) or 501-372-1116.



Arkansas ranks 48th in terms of the percent of residents who participated in volunteer work between 2008 and 2010 - 21.4%.

Source: *The Corporation for National & Community Service*,  
[www.volunteeringinamerica.gov](http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov)







*Harrison C.O.R.E. members (front, left to right) Jeanette Fitton, Karen Hill, (back) Robert McCorkindale, Jeff Crockett, Layne Ragsdale, John Paul Hammerschmidt, Terry Cook, Patty Methvin, Dave Fitton at Downtown Coffeehouse & Espresso Bar.*

## Community Engagement is at the C.O.R.E. of Downtown Revitalization

**S**omething is happening in Harrison. Over the past few years, the city has attracted 32 net businesses to the downtown area, including five new restaurants. A streetscaping project has slowed highway traffic through the downtown and increased on-street parking to make the courthouse square more walkable and inviting to customers. Colorful banners tout the downtown's amenities, and the marquee at the old Lyric Theater flashes coming attractions.

The driving force behind the revitalization of Harrison's downtown is a strategic plan developed by the citizens themselves, under the guidance of a new advocacy organization called Harrison C.O.R.E. (Central Organization for Revitalization and Enhancement).

C.O.R.E. got its start back in 2009. "Our historic downtown was really showing its age," explained C.O.R.E. Facilitator Layne Ragsdale. A group of local business owners, led by former U.S. Representative John Paul Hammerschmidt, began work on a plan to reenergize the downtown and, about the same time, learned that the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service was looking for a pilot city for its Breakthrough Solutions community-building program. "We begged to be picked as the pilot program," Ragsdale said.

The Breakthrough Solutions process adopted by Harrison C.O.R.E. puts community engagement at the forefront. "If you look at the most successful communities and regions in the country, they always involve citizens in their planning processes," explained Mark Peterson, professor of community and economic development for



the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. “They engage the public in multiple ways over a period of time, so the process and projects are owned by the local people. Because citizens shape the plan, they invest their time, energy and resources in making it successful. It’s not easy!”

To find out what local citizens wanted from their downtown, Harrison C.O.R.E. posted surveys in the newspaper and online, called public meetings, made personal phone calls and conducted interviews. They even invited teens in the Boone County Youth Leadership program to weigh-in.

After months of gathering input, C.O.R.E. compiled the results into a 10-part plan, ranging from events and marketing to historic preservation and downtown infrastructure. Some action steps have been easy to put into place — establishing a walking tour of the historic downtown, hosting clean-up events, placing landscaping elements throughout the downtown — but others will require the support and participation of multiple organizations and government agencies. “Our volunteer civic group can’t do all of the work necessary to improve our downtown infrastructure,” said Layne Ragsdale. “But we’re here to act as advocates for the strategic plan.”

“The organization is run by volunteers, and from the outset we let everyone know that we’re not here to compete with existing organizations,” explained Hammerschmidt. C.O.R.E.’s commitment to openness and inclusivity has helped to create an environment that fosters partnership and brings local leaders and elected officials to the table.

C.O.R.E. members admit that, despite the many signs of progress in their downtown, the process has, in some ways, been slow going. What they initially thought would be a three- to six-month planning process is now well into its third year with no signs of slowing down.

“It doesn’t happen overnight,” said Mark Peterson. “It’s about focusing on assets and opportunities. If you talk about what’s going well, people start to get excited and it changes the conversation in the community. It’s building a momentum that ultimately affects the whole community.”

And though the process of building civic engagement is slow and sometimes messy, C.O.R.E. members agree it’s absolutely necessary. “You really have to have community buy-in,” said Ragsdale. “We all know that people will disagree over some details, but there is power in saying that the vast majority of our community agrees.”

**“The organization is run by volunteers, and from the outset we let everyone know that we’re not here to compete with existing organizations.”**

**— John Paul Hammerschmidt**



**\$16.48** – the average estimated value of a volunteer hour in Arkansas, according to *Independent Sector*.



*Chantilly’s, a Victorian tea room, is one of the newest restaurants in Harrison’s downtown.*



*Harrison’s historic courthouse square is packed with local businesses and retail outlets.*



To see video of Harrison C.O.R.E. volunteers and learn more about the Breakthrough Solutions program, visit [www.arcf.org](http://www.arcf.org).



# How can we increase civic participation in Arkansas communities?



By Bernadette Devone  
*Arkansas Public Policy Panel*

**M**any people in Arkansas don't expect much from their government, and they don't participate in how their communities are run. That's a tragedy because Arkansas is unique in how much impact grassroots citizens can have.

I work with residents who want to come together to develop a shared vision of problems and opportunities in their communities, identify solutions and take collective action. It's exciting to see them increase their participation as they learn to collaborate, build consensus, share power and develop win-win solutions that benefit the whole, not just the few.

I've seen people realize the power they have to affect change and learn to use it together to improve their communities. Often that means making sure laws and institutions are working well, because while the opportunity to make a difference is there, Arkansas also has a history of suppressing civic participation.

Every day, I see people proudly taking the opportunity to participate in the political process, hold elected officials accountable and influence public policy decisions, but I also see officials obstructing access to public information and openly discouraging residents' involvement. One city council even tried to ban a community group from existing!

Our democracy rests on the assumption that people will participate and that government should involve them. For our communities to thrive, we all have to take responsibility for spreading civic engagement. We must overcome the barriers that keep us from working together towards shared prosperity. Our future depends on it!



By Mireya Reith  
*Arkansas United Community Coalition*

**B**road-based civic participation is the cornerstone of any democracy. However, work remains in order for Arkansas to be able to boast inclusive civic processes that fully integrate the diverse communities in this state, especially our immigrants. Eighty percent of immigrants who could be eligible to vote in Arkansas do not currently participate in our elections. Meanwhile, to date, no first- or second-generation immigrant has ever been elected to the Arkansas state legislature.

There is a misconception that immigrants do not participate because they do not want to, but more frequently, immigrants do not know how, and they perceive that their voices do not matter.

In the short-term, there is need for:

- **Civic education** targeted towards immigrants and disbursed in their native languages
- **Targeted voter registration and get-out-the-vote activities** with immigrants that emphasize direct voter contact
- **Voter protection efforts** that ensure that voters' rights are upheld for all Arkansans
- **Enhanced citizenship services** to support Arkansas's 40,000 legal permanent residents, many of whom are eligible to start their process but do not know where to begin
- **Candidate training** that would have the potential of building a pipeline of civic leadership for immigrants from the local level and up
- **National immigration reform debate** that reflects Arkansas stories and voices

Meanwhile, in the long-term, there is a need to cultivate immigrants' civic identity as Arkansans, which can only be achieved by giving individuals tangible opportunities to seek solutions to issues that they themselves have identified as priorities. For more information about such strategies, please visit [www.arkansascoalition.org](http://www.arkansascoalition.org) and learn more about our Change Agents program.



# Books and Beyond

## The future of civic engagement at Arkansas's public libraries

**L**ooking for civic engagement? Look no further than the public library. Access is free, information is unlimited and everyone's invited.

Although collections of books and public records remain libraries' bread and butter, many libraries across the state are embracing the challenge of educating and informing the public in a changing world through new programs and services for all ages.

We talked to Hadi Dudley of the Bentonville Public Library and Don Ernst of the Central Arkansas Library System to learn more about the role libraries can play in building civic engagement.

**INFORMED CITIZENSHIP.** "Intellectual freedom is the basis for our democratic system," said Dudley. The Bentonville Public Library supports participation in the democratic process through voter registration drives and a mock-election program that enables children to experience voting. In 2010, the library also hosted a United States Naturalization Ceremony, in which 30 participants from 14 countries took the Oath of Allegiance.

**YOUTH DEVELOPMENT.** In early 2013, the Central Arkansas Library System (CALS) will open its new Children's Library on 10th Street in Little Rock. The new library will feature a garden, greenhouse, "nutrition lab" (test kitchen for kids), crafting tool shed, performance space and more. Strategically located in the Central Little Rock Promise Neighborhood, a traditionally underserved area of the city with a high poverty rate, the library will bring much-needed literacy and enrichment activities to at-risk children. "The library will help us encourage the learning lives of children who need it most and bridge the gaps between people," said Ernst.

**WORKFORCE TRAINING.** "Often, when economic conditions are challenging for patrons, library usage increases," said Dudley. Displaced workers and unemployed patrons use the library's computers to seek jobs and prepare resumes. The Bentonville Public Library supports these job seekers through resume workshops, interview tips and assistance with online job searches. The library also has recently expanded its literacy-tutorial holdings and offered new English as a Second Language classes to help patrons increase their literacy skills and career readiness. For patrons who lack computer and Internet access at home, the public library is a lifeline to the information and technology they need to be successful in the workforce.

**PUBLIC SPACES.** Because they bridge socioeconomic boundaries and appeal to people of all ages and interests, public libraries are uniquely positioned to bring people together. For example, the Central Arkansas Library System's meeting spaces, along with a new 350-seat multipurpose theater currently in the planning stages, give citizens a place to share ideas and organize public initiatives. And public events like the Arkansas Literary Festival and Arkansas Sounds Music Festival bring citizens together for shared cultural experiences. "The library is in some ways one of our last and most precious public spaces," Ernst remarked.



*Francisco & Ingrid Maldonado became U.S. citizens in a ceremony at the Bentonville Public Library through the American Dream Starts @ Your Local Library initiative.*

For more information about innovative library programs and ways you can support libraries in Arkansas, visit [www.arcf.org](http://www.arcf.org).







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## People Will Be Engaged in Their Communities

I know how hard it is for all of us to make time for civic and volunteer activities. But for our community to thrive, we each need to take time to attend meetings supporting the causes we care about and become familiar with the issues that are affecting all of us.

Arkansas Community Foundation's *Aspire Arkansas* report released in 2011 provides county-by-county data on seven aspira-

tions for our state, one of which is, **"People will be engaged in their community."** In this issue of *ENGAGE* magazine, we examine programs that are working in Arkansas to help citizens become more active and involved in their communities.

In this issue, you'll read about volunteers in Helena who are helping to revitalize their hometown (**page 1**) and a committee in Harrison that engaged their entire community in developing a plan to rebuild their downtown area (**page 7**). On **page 4**, learn about Arkansas Community Foundation's new Future Fund program, a way for young professionals to work together to support charitable needs in their communities. And on **page 10**, discover new ways our state's libraries are helping to create a space for public discourse.

Many of the ways we show we care about our communities — stopping by to check on an elderly neighbor, volunteering at a local food pantry, attending a school board meeting or calling a city council member to check on a new ordinance — are not being tracked systematically by demographers or government agencies. But voter participation and charitable giving statistics are included in the *Aspire Arkansas* report. See those stats on **page 5**.

I'm always proud when I see that Arkansas consistently performs well in *The Catalog for Philanthropy's Generosity Index*. In fact, we are among the top three most generous states based on a comparison of adjusted gross income and itemized charitable donations reported on IRS forms.

By encouraging charitable giving, volunteerism and civic participation, we can all support our communities and work together for the common good.

  
ARCF President and CEO

