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Smart Giving to Improve Communities



# The Value of Community Connection and Civic Participation

Part of a series exploring issues from  
The Community Foundation's  
*Aspire Arkansas* report.

June 2020

# ENGAGE

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## Dr. Vasu Was the Epitome of a Community Connector



I have the opportunity to work with ordinary people who do amazing things. And often I have the opportunity to work with extraordinary people who do transformational work. And then, there is Dr. Vasu. The late Parthasarathy Vasudevan, M.D., of Helena, known to all as Dr. Vasu, trained as a urologist in Boston during the mid-1970s. Dr. Vasu moved to Helena, where he remained an active citizen in the Arkansas Delta and an advocate for its people for the rest of his life.

An immigrant to the U.S. who adopted and loved Phillips County, the Delta and Arkansas, Dr. Vasu was the epitome of a community connector. There was no challenge that could not be overcome (or at least worked around). There was no “no” from him. There was only “yes.” There was only “try.” There was only “we must do better.”

Books could be written on Dr. Vasu’s work and how he used community connections to champion so many good things in Phillips County. He was instrumental in the development of the Delta Area Health Education Center, and in his honor the Dr. Vasudevan Wellness Center was established where patients receive low-cost health services and health education. These are just a few of the hundreds of projects and differences he created for the good of his community.

The world has changed since Dr. Vasu passed away in January. In this time of COVID-19 uncertainty and social distancing, I continue to be inspired by his legacy, and I see scores of individuals like him stepping up to make a difference by working together for the good of their neighborhoods and towns.

I was but a blip in Dr. Vasu’s life. He was a mountain in mine. I hope you will join me in following his example and making those community connections that are changing Arkansas.

Best regards,

Heather Larkin  
President and CEO

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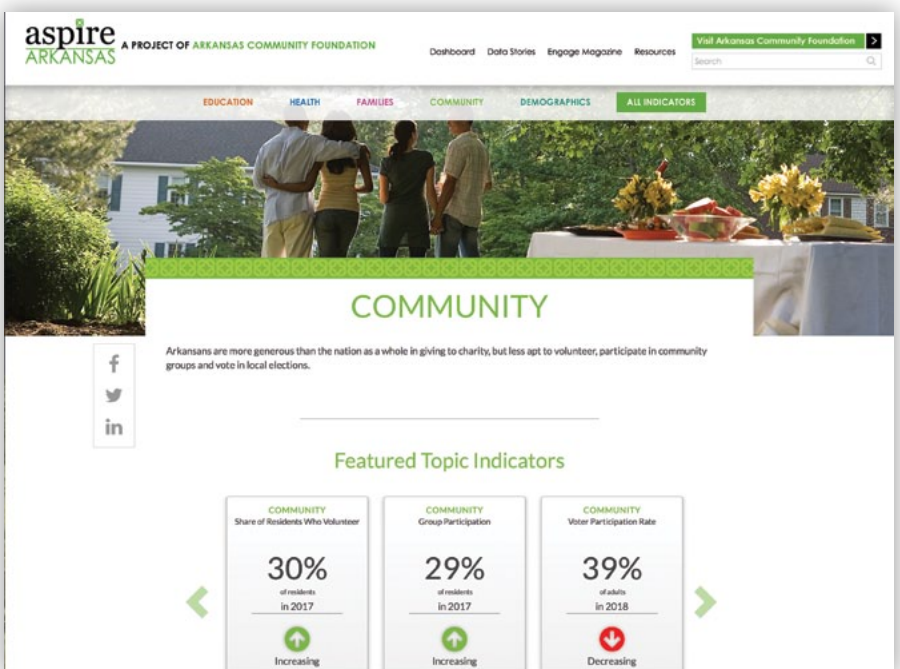
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Find out more about community connection trends in the community page of [aspirearkansas.org](http://aspirearkansas.org).



# Community Connections Contribute to Civic Participation, Education and Health

By Kim Dishongh



*When schools closed, Parent Mentor Program members at Eudora Elementary were a bridge between families and the information and resources they needed to stay healthy and be involved with their community.*

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

— Margaret Mead

A small group of parents, community and school staff gathered in tiny Eudora three years ago, their initial goal being to raise reading levels of elementary students. Their efforts blossomed beyond strengthening their school to bridging gaps in the community.

The connections they have formed are even more important now, positioning them to help residents who have been isolated socially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Parent Mentor Program at Eudora Elementary in Chicot County's Lakeside School District was created to work hand-in-hand with Eudora Reads, another program that is still in place. A team of five parent mentors were vetted, hired and trained, each one awarded a \$500 per semester stipend. Parent mentors are required to work in schools for two hours a day, four days a week — though most spend considerably more time in the school — supporting teachers in classrooms.

“Now, the community wants the committee involved in everything,” said Tanya Broadnax, southeast regional director with the Rural Community Alliance, the nonprofit that brought the program, modeled after one started in Chicago's Logan Square Neighborhood Association, to Eudora Elementary.

Through their new jobs, parent mentors learned about not only education techniques and curriculum maps but also about the external forces that affect what happens inside schools and throughout their community. That led to opportunities to form connections with community leaders and education policymakers. Their roles expanded to include voter registration, census counting, political engagement and more.

Though school buildings sat empty for the last two to three months of this school year, Parent Mentor Program members kept working.

Cathy Nash, director of Eudora Elementary's Parent Mentor Program, fielded questions about the Alternative Method of Education students used to complete the school year as well as about how to prevent Covid-19 and how to get tested for the virus.

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"I've heard from parents, and I've even heard from some of the kids. I explain about social distancing, and I tell them how to make masks. They pass that information on to their parents, as well," said Nash. "Mostly, they want to know what's going on. They just want more information."

Broadnax said residents who may be skeptical of "outsiders" or even government officials often have more confidence in people who have roots in their community. She learned that firsthand, noticing when she first moved back to Arkansas from California to work for Rural Community Alliance that people who attended her meetings often gave her fake contact information.

"A lot of people were standoffish, and I would have a little meeting and afterward everybody would give me the wrong information. The wrong phone numbers, the wrong addresses, sometimes the wrong names," said Broadnax. She started explaining in her meetings that she was from the area, that she had moved away to California and back to Dermott to be close to her family.

"That opened the door," she said.

Parent mentors, who live and work in the community, are thus trusted sources of information. They encourage residents — and each other — to get involved, to get registered and to exercise their rights to vote.

"The Parent Mentor Program and our staff are working with the parents to help engage them with their children as well

as the community. We spill over into the community," said Nash.

Ahead of the recent mayoral race in Eudora, for example, the Parent Mentor Program gave residents a chance to meet the candidates.

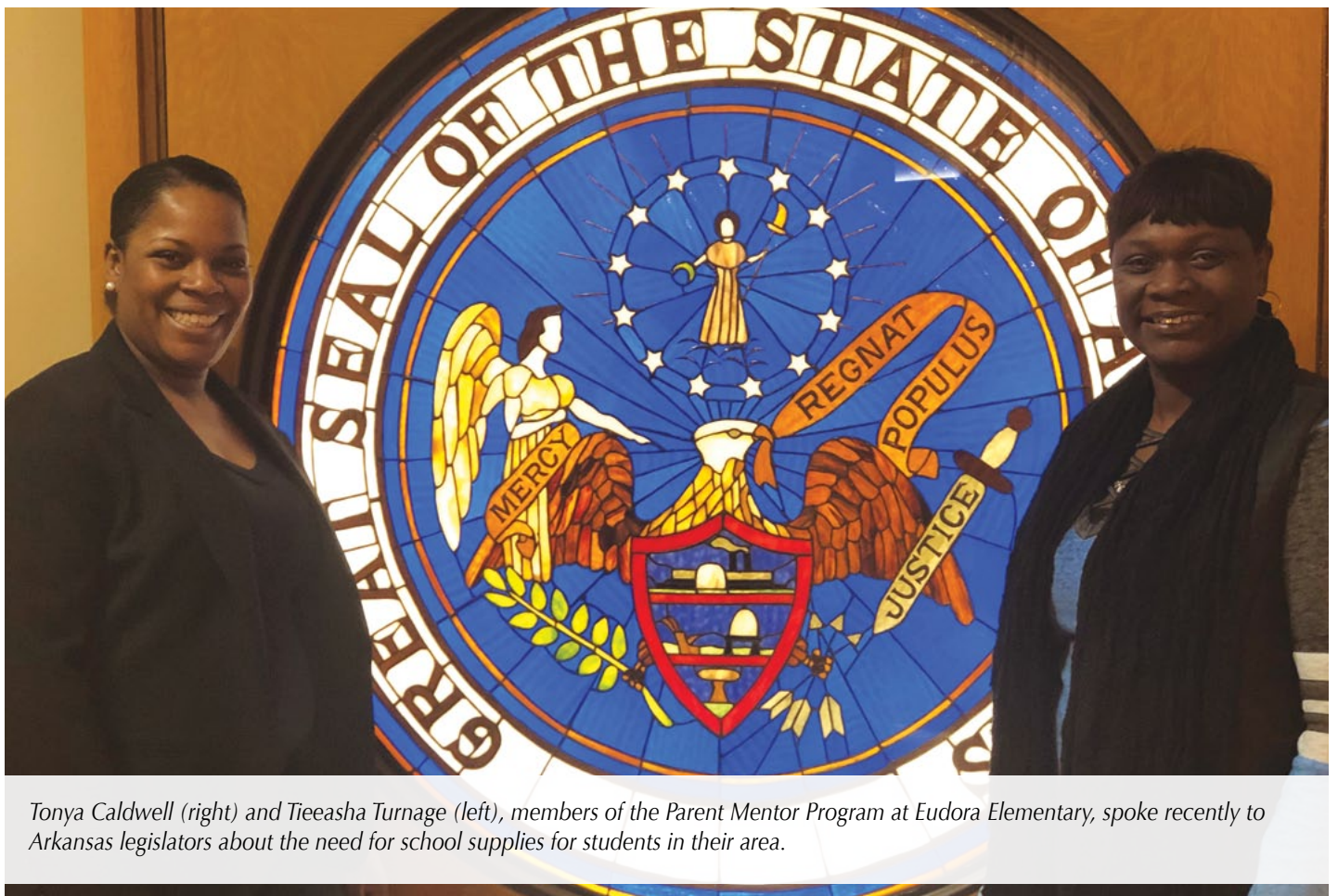
"We didn't necessarily endorse one candidate or the other," said parent mentor Tieeasha Turnage. "We involved our community and our parents, and we hosted a question answered by our third graders here at the schools."

The third graders had some astute inquiries, including what types of jobs or programs the candidates would bring to the community's youth and what they might do with buildings in town.

Since schools closed in mid-March, Parent Mentor Program members have hand-delivered Alternative Method of Instruction packets to families, some of whom have neither internet access nor transportation. The district provides food for students while schools are closed, and the women in the Parent Mentor Program work to see that families — even those who don't have children at Eudora Elementary — have food when they need it as well.

For Turnage, the Parent Mentor Program experience has been transformative.

"Within a year's time I went from being a stay-at-home mom to working at the schools. I became a sub at the school, now I'm working toward my degree. I got involved



*Tonya Caldwell (right) and Tieeasha Turnage (left), members of the Parent Mentor Program at Eudora Elementary, spoke recently to Arkansas legislators about the need for school supplies for students in their area.*





*Springdale city leaders have made concerted efforts to connect with Marshallese and Hispanic residents for whom English is often not the first language. Fire fighters and police in Springdale visit elementary schools so students can learn how to stay safe and secure and so they know they can call on emergency personnel when needed.*

in politics, and I was going to city council meetings and school board meetings. I had done none of these things beforehand," said Turnage. "I was traveling all over the state. I was speaking to different politicians, some of our representatives, I was speaking at the Capitol on behalf of our school system, just trying to bring awareness to some of the things that we needed and so it really kind of catapulted me into a lot of things."

The group has also continued spreading the word about the importance of completing the 2020 Census. A handful of families have brought their census forms to Nash for review, just to make sure they had filled them in correctly, and she mailed the forms in for them afterward.

"They want to know why they need to fill out the census and do they need to include everybody, and they want to know how that's going to affect their children and their benefits. So we discuss that there won't be any effect on their children's benefits but that there will be some effects on their children's lives if they don't get counted," Nash said.

Some populations are recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau as being hard-to-count. Groups in that category include cultural and linguistic minorities, low-income families, people without high school diplomas and more.

In Springdale, Marshallese and Hispanic populations make the census a challenge.

"Springdale is a very diverse city," said Mayor Doug Sprouse, currently serving during his second census. "Sometimes that has to do with trust and sometimes it simply has to do with education and letting people know what the census is and why we do it, so we're trying to address all those fronts. We believe we had a significant undercount and in our Marshallese population back in 2010, and we're working very hard to address that."

The census isn't Springdale's sole focus, however. Springdale received the All-America City Award from the National Civic League in 2017 and 2018, honoring city officials' work in helping residents and newcomers work together to strengthen their community, and the city's continued work in that area could result in a higher census response.

The city partnered with the Springdale Chamber of Commerce and Springdale schools to develop a Youth Council, allowing students to learn the roles of local officials, hold mock meetings and collaborate on semester-long projects. Application information for the council is provided in English, Spanish and Marshallese.

"They learn what the city does. You know, so many of us



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just don't think about it. You turn the spigot on and water comes out, so to speak," Sprouse said.

In 2018, with a one-year Tyson Foods Common Ground Grant the city hired a welcoming coordinator, whose responsibilities included spearheading events with minority communities, making sure city information is available in Spanish and Marshallese and serving as a liaison between city officials and residents.

"We went to a lot of meetings, we went to churches, we went to about anywhere people wanted to meet with us to talk about issues and to help people understand and to hear from them about issues that were important to them," Sprouse said. "I can remember when I was a kid and we had the Welcome Wagon. It's kind of that idea. It was just a way to help our new residents, no matter where they come from, figure out what helped them feel more welcome, help them know where to get services, how to interact with city government and let them know that the police department is not your enemy."

Sprouse said the city did not fill the position after the grant ended, but that conversations are underway about creating a position for a regional welcoming coordinator that would

serve multiple cities, with each city contributing financially to that effort.

When Covid-19 arrived in Arkansas, Sprouse and others doubled down on efforts to educate all residents, including Hispanic and Marshallese populations, on how to protect themselves from the virus.

"Our state Complete Count Committee has helped us with a lot of resources and, of course, we've worked with the Marshallese consulate," Sprouse said. "We've done videos, we've done a lot of printed material, we've worked with the Marshallese and Hispanic radio stations to try and get the message out about social distancing and about all the things that we're being urged to do right now."

The pandemic is slowing down progress on census gathering and other city initiatives, Sprouse said, but he is hopeful that the city's efforts to connect with all of its residents will pay off.

"If we continue going in the right direction," he said, "then then I think our efforts were very successful in those non-English speaking communities, especially where we were most concerned."



*The Parent Mentor Program at Eudora Elementary helped organize a recent event to distribute masks, hand sanitizer, clothing and food to community members in need. Parent Mentors' involvement in schools has led to their activism throughout the community.*





# Power in Numbers



*“Be counted, or be counted out.” — Rev. Cecil L. Murray*

There are a few important things our government asks us to do: vote; serve on a jury; pay taxes; and complete the census.

Voting rolls around every few years, sometimes a little more. Jury duty is randomly chosen and includes some financial reimbursement. Paying taxes is required every year. But completing the census only comes around every 10 years. It's a simple concept, really. The census is literally the federal government counting the number of people who live within the republic.

Now, with pandemic relief and increased government spending nationwide to support the unemployed and social support programs, being counted is more important than ever. In 2010, the last time the census was taken, 66.5% of the nation responded. Only 59.5% of Arkansas reported. In mid-May of this year the state was behind again with only 54.3% of residents reporting. Arkansas is lagging in reporting rates and the pandemic has made things more difficult. According to Shelby Johnson, the director of the state's Geographic Information Office and co-chair of Arkansas's Complete Count Committee, prior to the pandemic, census takers planned to use face-to-face meetings and events to increase participation.

“A lot of that outreach activity was planned for community gatherings. For example, festivals, parades, other sorts of events like that, where we could provide additional information to Arkansans, and of course, all of those activities are on hold now,” said Johnson.

The U.S. Census Bureau has requested several operational changes from Congress, such as an additional extension on the self-response period deadline.

“An undercount of even 1% could cost Arkansas \$990 million over the next decade,” said Gov. Asa Hutchinson. That's almost a billion dollars per percentage point. In a historically poor state like Arkansas, if the other 45.7% of Arkansans completed the census, we could potentially bring 40-plus billions of extra dollars to the state. That is not insignificant for a state that consistently ranks in the bottom ten for education, healthcare, crime and poverty.

Census figures are used to make decisions at every level of government. At state and local levels, the census affects political representation. Counts are used to determine the number of elected representatives and the shape of the districts they represent. Census figures help determine where new Arkansas roads, schools and public facilities are built. Policy decisions are made by the state's legislature, and

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funding for public services like education, healthcare and economic development all derive from census data. Nationally, the census impacts Arkansas budgets for important programs like Medicaid, SNAP, highways and transportation, childcare programs and affordable housing programs.

In August of 2019 Gov. Hutchinson issued an executive order to establish the Arkansas Complete Count Committee to promote statewide participation. Resulting from that order is Arkansas Counts — a statewide coalition committed to ensuring a complete and accurate census in Arkansas. The coalition is led by four organizations: Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families; Arkansas Impact Philanthropy; Arkansas Public Policy Panel; and Arkansas United.

In addition to achieving a higher response rate in general, the coalition is working with other organizations to help encourage all Arkansans to participate in the census with a focus on people of color, parents of children under five, low- and moderate-income individuals, non-English speakers and rural residents.

The elderly are another target audience that the coalition hopes to have represented more accurately. Elderly residents often need more social support services like Medicare, senior and veteran assistance, hospitals and transportation. census data helps determine how the resources for these services get distributed.

Children are especially important to the count. Aside from the fact that many children weren't born when the last census was conducted, their representation matters a great deal for funding.

"A key to ensuring that Arkansas children get the resources they need to thrive and succeed is to ensure they are counted in the 2020 Census," said Rich Huddleston, executive director at Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "Young children are especially at risk of being 'undercounted,' particularly children of color, children in low-income families, children in immigrant families and those living in rural areas. At risk are billions of dollars in federal aid — including funding for highways and

infrastructure, education, school lunches, Head Start, Medicaid, nutrition assistance and health care."

Completing the census has been made easier this year. The census form takes about six minutes to complete and can be done online for the first time. Since some may struggle with new technology, the paper and phone versions are still made possible for everyone.

The online census survey is available in 12 languages and the paper version is available in English and Spanish. It's also important to note that participation will not threaten any Arkansan's privacy. It is illegal for the U.S. Census Bureau to share any person's data with federal agencies, immigration or law enforcement or to determine allocation of individual government benefits.

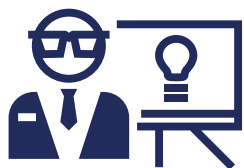
If you've already completed your census, your work is done, right? Not quite. If you live in Arkansas there is more you can do to help spread the word and get the state fully counted. After you've completed the census for your own household, the Arkansas Counts Coalition is encouraging individuals, community groups, churches, schools and whoever else can reach target communities to set up support sites to encourage more participation. The coalition's website, [arcounts.org](http://arcounts.org) has easy step-by-step instructions for how to set up a site along with dozens of tools for promoting census participation in your network or community.

It's really not much to ask of Arkansans. The framers of the Constitution ultimately gave the power to the people. Between voting, jury duty, paying taxes and the census, the latter is certainly the easiest. And with scaled participation, the census can have great and lasting impact on the well-being and prosperity of the state. Being counted equals being represented. And being represented means more for every Arkansan.

*Arkansas Community Foundation is proud to be one of the Arkansas Impact Philanthropy partners. Arkansas Counts is supported by Delta Dental of Arkansas Foundation, Tyson Foods, Walmart Foundation and other Arkansas Impact Philanthropy partners to ensure a complete and accurate census in Arkansas.*

## What is at stake?

Census data used for:



Schools



Roads



Hospitals



Jobs



Political representation of your community





## How to be Counted

- **PARTICIPATE** in the census in 2020 — visit [bit.ly/comit2countar](http://bit.ly/comit2countar) and #CommitToCountAR.
- **SHARE** how your community will #CommitToCountAR on social media.
- **TELL** 20 family members, friends and fellow residents to complete the census survey.
- **SETUP** a census support site in your community or organize an event. To get started, use “How to Set Up a Census Support Site” found at [arcounts.org](http://arcounts.org).



*“The census matters literally to everyone. It doesn’t matter your background, race, ethnicity. It really is all about our state and making sure we get all the resources our state needs to be successful.”*

— Regina Taylor  
Chief Community Initiatives Officer  
Arkansas Foodbank



*"Voting is the way to make your opinion known in your community." — Kathy Webb*

## The Act of Voting Drives Community Improvement

"Governments will do it to you or with you," said Vic Snyder, former U.S. Representative for the Second District of Arkansas. "Voting is the first step to having government do things WITH you. When you don't vote, you have no voice in what the government does. To be self-governing, you have to do the 'self' part."

"The promise of the United States and one of our founding principles is that 'the people rule.' It is the contract our founders handed down to Americans that our rulers would not be kings and queens, but that we would choose those who would lead us from among ourselves," said Bill Gossage, a former Arkansas State Representative and Deputy Chief of Staff, External Affairs, for the Governor's Office.

"It is important to vote because when we don't, we contribute to the weakening of our national foundation. Although it's hard to imagine that we could lose the freedoms that our founders won for us, a nation that gets lazy about fulfilling its civic duty by voting risks losing the freedom to determine its own destiny," Gossage said.

"Voting is crucial to every effort to improve our communities, said Andrea Allen, Executive Director of the Delta Center for Economic Development at Arkansas State

University in Jonesboro. "It's so much more than just electing a candidate — it's choosing the right policies and people to guide our communities forward and be good stewards of our tax dollars. It's having a voice that aligns with our own values and helps set the direction for our communities."

Prissy Hickerson of Texarkana, a former Arkansas State Representative, encourages everyone to vote in local, state and national elections. "But if you don't keep up with the issues and the candidates, you won't know how to vote. There is no excuse today with so many pathways to receive information," she said.

"Voting is the way you make your opinion known in your community," said Kathy Webb, former Arkansas State Representative who serves Ward 3 on the Little Rock City Board of Directors. "It is up to you to support candidates who will build your community in the most important way to you based on your take on safety, infrastructure and economic development."

"Voting is my personal investment in democracy, and it's not to be taken lightly," Snyder said. He relays a story of his days in the early '80s as a physician serving in Thailand. There was a move for a portion of the military to take over the government in a coup. Snyder will never forget watching a man crying for the loss of his homeland's democracy.





Vic Snyder



Bill Gossage



Andrea Allen



Kathy Webb



Prissy Hickerson

“We are privileged and blessed to live in a nation where our votes are counted,” Allen said. “It is the peaceful transfer of government that reflects our nation’s desires. We must protect this right by registering to vote, researching the candidates and issues, and voting in every election.”

Every vote does matter, according to all five. In 2018, 50 congressional races (five Senate and 45 House) were decided by less than a 5 percent margin. In 2016, there were 22 such elections. And close elections happen even more frequently in local elections.

“You don’t have to look any farther than District 34 right here in Arkansas. Just this year, the two candidates who were running to replace Representative John Walker in that district were tied,” said Gossage. “Elections officials examined the ballots for ten days. On the tenth day, they found an uncounted absentee ballot. That single vote decided the winner, and the winner of that election went on to win that seat in the Arkansas House of Representatives.”

Last year a 1% sales tax was defeated in Jonesboro by 211 votes. The revenue from this tax would have been spent on first responders and new quality-of-life projects in the city.

Proponents believed the tax would better position Jonesboro as a great place to live and attract a solid workforce. Opponents argued that the city should fund necessities like roads and sidewalks first.

“Your vote really does matter. It is your opportunity to make a difference in how your community moves forward,” said Webb. “Fundamentally, your vote can help determine the direction of your city or town.”

The ballot box is an equalizer that gives every voter a voice in the governance of our cities, counties, states, and the nation, according to Gossage. “When everyone votes, our communities are stronger. When only half of the citizens vote, a handful of voters is deciding what’s best for everyone. Some might even argue that low participation weakens the winner,” he said.

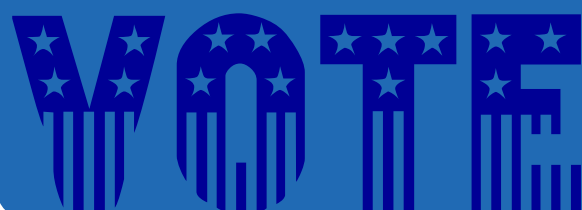
“It’s our responsibility, our civic duty, to vote,” Hickerson said. “Further, we have better elected representatives if they know folks are paying attention and voting based on what they see.”

“Study after study shows that the more educated we are on the issues, and the more we exercise our right to vote, the more we will be active in our communities,” Allen said. “Regardless of your political values — conservative or liberal — being active and exercising your right to vote will improve your community.”

## How To Get More People to Vote

The United States has one of the lowest voter turnout rates of all developed countries in the world, according to Pew Research Center. Here are some ways you can encourage others in your community to vote:

- Ask local candidates to attend your neighborhood association or other club meetings to give their viewpoints on issues important to you.
- Join organized efforts to help people register to vote.
- Encourage friends to go with you to attend candidate or issue forums at community centers or libraries.
- Offer to take a neighbor to the polling place if they have transportation issues.
- If you are a business owner, allow employees flexibility to vote.
- Share with friends that you voted. According to an article in *Psychology Today*, “when Facebook users were shown the ‘I voted’ button alongside a social message that showed which of their friends had voted, they were much more likely to vote than if they were shown an informational message.”



# ENGAGE

## Why is it important to get to know your neighbors and interact with others in your local community?



**Deborah Bell** Executive Director of Programs, Better Community Development, Inc., Little Rock

I was raised in a family and in a neighborhood where “everybody knew everyone.” You were considered a neighbor regardless of where you lived, be it next door or down the street. Neighbors had authentic relationships. There was little judgement; it didn’t matter if it was a single parent family, a blended family, a family with no children or a family of ten. We tended to ignore differences based on education, employment or church membership.

Neighbors took care of each other. Neighbors felt comfortable borrowing a cup of sugar or watching out for everyone’s children, families and property. They trusted each other and felt safe and secure in their neighborhoods.

Now, more than ever, knowing one’s neighbors and the needs of your community are important. We are seeing a growing need to help each other, and we are seeing our neighbors rise to the occasion. A good neighbor is always willing to help others when needed and one you can count on in difficult times.

Knowing and trusting your neighbors and community helps us all. They say, “A rising tide lifts all boats.” With the pandemic, the more we know and help each other, the safer our neighborhoods and communities will be.



**Baxter Sharp** Attorney and Past Community Foundation Board Chair, Brinkley

I believe that humans are essentially social beings. The new practice of “social distancing” has put a strain on our ability to simply be together. In fact, the pandemic has put strains to varying degrees on many, but perhaps one silver lining is that we are getting to know each other better. Unfortunately, some Arkansans are faced with being on the receiving end of charity for the first time in their lives. They are getting to know the local charities and the people who make getting help possible. Others are seeking to help locally and learning about needs in their backyard.

The phrase “think globally, act locally” comes to mind. Those of us who tend to have altruistic personalities get extra energy in connecting with others and solving problems. By knowing each other and our communities better, we have a better chance of trying to find solutions.

Speaking from my own experience, Arkansas, especially in her small towns, is blessed with people who truly know each other. When someone is in need, be it death or natural disaster or now a global pandemic, our neighbors are there for each other with food, fundraisers, mowing lawns and harvesting crops. Through the Community Foundation, donors can give to what they “know” or volunteers can serve on boards and committees. The Foundation makes helping, connecting, giving and receiving possible in ways that make the microcosm of our little world a better place.

# ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS





# Improve the Civic Health of Your Community



Retired Hendrix College professor Dr. Jay Barth now serves as Chief Education Officer for the City of Little Rock. Barth was M.E. and Ima Graves Peace Professor of Politics and Director of the Arkansas Policy Program at Hendrix College. He is a contributor to *Talk Business & Politics* through the organization's polling partnership with Hendrix. Barth received the Diane Blair Award for Outstanding Achievement in Politics and Government, Southern Political Science Association in 2014 and the Butler Center Fellowship in 2008. He is the co-author of "Arkansas Politics and Government: Do the People Rule?" with Diane Blair.

Dr. Jay Barth defines civic health as the way citizens interact in their community to bring about necessary change. He believes there are several criteria for civic health:

- **Volunteerism and the way nonprofits serve as change agents.**
- **Engagement in the democratic process including voting, serving on juries, participating in community meetings.**
- **Talking with neighbors about issues in the community and the world.**

When it comes to volunteerism, Barth suggests communities should look at more than the number of volunteers. Leaders should determine if it is always the same people who volunteer for everything or if they have a broad variety of volunteers coming from all parts of the community. Making sure citizens are aware of how they can help meet the needs of their local nonprofits can boost civic health.

"By its nature, volunteering almost always involves groups of individuals coming together to work on projects," said Barth. "That has created particular challenges with the COVID-19 crisis because of the necessity for social distancing."

There have been some creative responses to the need for social distancing, including the meal programs targeted at children and other vulnerable communities in Little Rock based out of the Clinton Presidential Library. "It feels as though groups have become more adept at using technology for the planning meetings that are so crucial in responding to crucial needs because of COVID-19," Barth said. "Inside and outside government, technology has taken on a heightened role and individuals are learning how to communicate more effectively and efficiently and to build social bonds through technology."

Historically, the poor and individuals of color have not always been viewed as credible participants in local, state and national government. "I do think it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy when barriers are set up to prevent their participation," Barth said. "It is hard to engage people's time and talents if their voice doesn't have an effect. Barriers to participation lead to heightened cynicism when only a handful of folks have a say in what the community looks like."

He said the COVID-19 crisis highlights the need for government at all levels that responds to the needs of its people and government officials who are open,

*continued on page 13*





transparent and accurate in the information that they provide their constituents.

Getting people to talk about tough issues is even more challenging in today's polarized society. "Libraries are beautiful spaces for good conversations about the issues of the day," Barth said. "The Clinton School for Public Service is an amazing resource to activate knowledge and communication." He believes communities would be improved by structured ways to begin conversations in libraries, community centers and universities throughout our state.

Arkansas voting rates are low compared to national norms, and U.S. voting rates are low compared to other developed countries. If local voting rates are dropping, community leaders need to take actions to boost those rates.

"Low turnouts can raise doubts about the decisions made by a government, endangering its stability and credibility," Barth said. Decisions made by City Councils and County Quorum Courts don't have as much authority if the community as a whole doesn't participate.

He cites an example of the power of civic engagement is the way individuals and environmental groups fought state government after a large-scale hog farm was permitted near the Buffalo River National Park. Participating in public meetings, calls to legislators to pressure on the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality to step back from its

***"Low turnouts can raise doubts about the decisions made by a government, endangering its stability and credibility."***

position and local and statewide public outcry reshaped the conversation and shined light on the importance of the Buffalo River, resulting in a change of state policy.

The transformation of the Pettaway neighborhood in downtown Little Rock between Scott Street on the west, Interstate 30 on the east, 15th Street on the north and Roosevelt Road on the south is another example of civic engagement's power to create change. Now a diverse neighborhood where traditional brick homes and ultra-modern houses sit side-by-side with Victorian cottages, tiny homes and houses created from multiple shipping containers, it was once devastated by gang violence and heavily damaged by tornadoes. Just a few years ago there were hundreds of vacant lots, flood-prone areas and absentee ownership. Individuals and community groups worked hard to keep out low-quality housing and promote healthy redevelopment rather than gentrification.





What action can you take to enhance civic health? Barth suggests the following:

- 1** Hold public meetings in different parts of the county to allow the government to come to the people, rather than making people always travel to the county seat. Make participating easier by bringing down barriers to engagement at civic meetings.
- 2** Make voting easier by extending the early voting days and hours. If you are an employer, offer time off to your employees to vote.
- 3** Promote travel by school groups to the State Capitol to see the legislative process at work.
- 4** Change civic education in schools to empower kids. Engage them in the process rather than asking them to study an operation that is detached and complicated. Use the existing state law that allows high school students to serve as poll workers to connect them to democratic process.
- 5** Hold non-partisan seminars on how to run for office.
- 6** Provide an environment of connection and engagement to all citizens that allows them to see the positive results of participation.

*“Inside and outside government, technology has taken on a heightened role and individuals are learning how to communicate more effectively and efficiently and to build social bonds through technology.”*

— Jay Barth





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## Bloom Where You Are Planted

Mary Harsh of Magnolia inspires generations to give back.

Born in 1922 and a lifelong native of Magnolia, Mary Harsh taught her daughters and all those around her to give and give generously, inspiring multiple generations to find a way to serve their communities wherever they are and with whatever they have.

When asked how the pandemic has changed her philanthropic focus she said, “What would the pandemic change if you’re already giving anyway?”

Mary Harsh is a founding member of the Foundation’s Columbia County affiliate and currently has two funds that support the courthouse preservation and Magnolia area charities. Her daughter, Molly Harsh Burns, has two philanthropy-minded daughters of her own, Elizabeth Burns Anderson of Lonoke and Rebecca Burns Gosnell of Magnolia. All three women carry the baton alongside their spirited matriarch. All are committed to their own philanthropic passions, volunteering on boards of multiple charities and setting their own example for their community and families.

According to granddaughter Elizabeth, who recently started a fund to help serve the needs in Lonoke, “My grandmother lives every day to the fullest. The pandemic is not slowing

her down.” An avid reader, traveler, bridge player and rose gardener — she is widely known for sharing her roses with everyone — there is always something for Mary Harsh to do and somewhere to help. Her generosity in the community is legendary, and through her daughters and granddaughters, lasting.



From left, Mary Warnock Harsh, Elizabeth Burns Anderson, Molly Harsh Burns and Rebecca Burns Gosnell.

