

STATE OF ARKANSAS
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

PROCLAMATION

EO 23-18

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS COME - GREETINGS:

**EXECUTIVE ORDER TO PROTECT CHILDREN, SUPPORT FAMILIES, AND
IMPROVE THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN ARKANSAS**

WHEREAS: Children are a special gift from God and every child deserves a loving and nurturing family;

WHEREAS: Substance abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, absent parents, and broken homes put children at risk;

WHEREAS: When parents are temporarily or permanently unable to care for a child, the State of Arkansas has the responsibility to ensure safe, nurturing care for that child in a supportive environment;

WHEREAS: According to the Arkansas Department of Human Services, as of January 2023, approximately 4,100 children in Arkansas were in foster care;

WHEREAS: Arkansas lacks a sufficient number of foster families to adequately serve children in foster care;

WHEREAS: According to the Arkansas Department of Human Services, between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2022, approximately 196 Arkansas children reached the age of majority while in foster care, which is described by the term "aging out" within the foster care system;

WHEREAS: Those that age out of the foster care system in Arkansas are at a significantly higher risk for homelessness, human trafficking, and incarceration; and

WHEREAS: It is the policy of this administration to protect vulnerable children, support foster families, and work with stakeholders to improve the foster care system in Arkansas.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS, acting under the authority vested in me as the Governor of the State of Arkansas, do hereby order the following:

(1) That there shall be established the Arkansas Strategic Plan for Foster Care Placement (the "Plan").

- a) The Plan shall have a working group composed of:
 - i. The Secretary of the Department of Human Services;
 - ii. The Secretary of the Department of Public Safety;
 - iii. The Secretary of the Department of Education; and
 - iv. Every Child Arkansas, which is comprised of non-profit, faith-based organizations, private placement agencies, and other organizations.

- b) The Plan's working group shall develop preventative action strategies that:
 - i. Reduce the number of children entering the foster care system;
 - ii. Increase the number of available foster families to provide ideal placements for children taken into care; and
 - iii. Increase the percentage of children reunited with their biological families after placement in foster care.

- c) The Plan's working group shall formulate reforms that:
 - i. Streamline the delivery of services to foster families and children in foster care;
 - ii. Connect eligible children and families to prevention services;
 - iii. Coordinate child safety and risk monitoring;
 - iv. Support in-home parenting and practices;
 - v. Deliver mental health and substance abuse treatment and services to foster families and foster children in need;
 - vi. Educate child-welfare workers, public safety officials, law enforcement officers, and educators on available prevention services;
 - vii. Develop tools and related metrics to recruit, train, and license foster families to provide ideal placements for children in care;
 - viii. Improve foster family retention rates across the state;
 - ix. Support foster family recruitment efforts, which target families that embrace reunification goals; and
 - x. Incorporate "trauma-informed training" into existing training systems for child welfare workers, public safety officials, law enforcement officers, and educators.

- d) Upon developing the Plan, the working group shall provide recommendations to the Governor on any specific actions needed to facilitate this Order's directive, including additional Executive or Legislative action no later than June 30, 2023.

(2) The Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, or her designee, shall:

- a) Streamline the placement of children in foster care with relatives, as directed in Ark. Code Ann. § 9-28-1003(19) by:
 - i. Reducing processing time to open and license a child's relatives to 45 days or less;
 - ii. Accelerating the process for permanent adoption to relatives; and

- iii. Reviewing statutory language and department regulation to reduce the mandatory waiting time for children in care where the adoption is to a relative. If statutory change is needed, the Secretary is directed to recommend language to the Office of the Governor to better serve children in foster care.
 - b) Streamline the process for adoption from foster care within sixty (60) days of the enactment of this Executive Order. These actions shall include:
 - i. Reducing processing time to open and license a family for foster care;
 - ii. Decreasing the time between the completion of the mandatory six-month placement period and the finalization of the adoption; and
 - iii. Providing adoptive families with additional transparency as to the adoption process and timeline.
 - c) Implement or enhance efforts to support children aging out of foster care, which include:
 - i. Conducting a study to evaluate current strategies in Arkansas, which assist children aging out of foster care with housing, education, and other assistance given to those aged 18-21 years old. This study shall compare the outcomes in Arkansas to national and regional outcomes;
 - ii. Submitting a report on strategies to interrupt generational cycles of abuse and neglect that impact children aging out of foster care; and
 - iii. Presenting recommendations on measures to avoid homelessness, human trafficking, and incarceration for children aging out of foster care no later than June 30, 2023.
- (3) The Director of the Division of Children and Family Services (“DCFS”) at the Arkansas Department of Human Services shall meet quarterly with organizations, coalitions, officials, relevant stakeholders in the adoption and foster care advocacy community, and representatives from the Office of the Governor, to collaborate on efforts to better serve children and families receiving services through DCFS, including foster families and adoptive families.
 - a) These meetings shall continue through at least the end of the calendar year 2025, which the Governor may extend upon request; and
 - b) An annual report shall be submitted to the Governor detailing the findings, progress, and recommendations that result from these meetings.
- (4) Within one year of the effective date of this Order, DCFS shall create a single-source website location for data related to foster care in Arkansas, which shall include:
 - a) County-level foster care data;
 - b) Annual report card and operational report for DCFS;
 - c) Any other material determined by the Director of DCFS as valuable to enhance knowledge and transparency of the State foster care system; and

- d) The name and contact information of at least one foster and adoption advocate in each county, who is not employed by the State of Arkansas, to provide guidance, support, and information to Arkansas residents interested in becoming foster parents.

This Executive Order shall become effective upon its signing and shall remain in full force and effect until amended or rescinded by further executive orders.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and cause the Great Seal of the State of Arkansas to be affixed this 28th day of February, in the year of our Lord 2023.



Sarah Huckabee Sanders

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Governor

Attest:

John Thurston

John Thurston, Secretary of State