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Arkansas General Assembly Allocates \$500K to Housing Trust Fund While Advocates Build Permanent Source Campaign

by Michael Anderson // 2013, Spring



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Housing Arkansas celebrated an important step forward in its campaign to secure dedicated revenue with the passage of SB 728 in 2013 Arkansas General Assembly. SB 728 allocates \$500,000 to the Arkansas Housing Trust Fund to create pilot housing options in each of the four congressional districts, the first investment of state funds since the Housing Trust Fund was established by Act 661 in 2009.

Governor Mike Beebe signed SB 728 in early April after moving through the House and Senate in the weeks prior. The legislation was introduced by Senator Joyce Elliot, a long time housing champion who led the effort in the Arkansas General Assembly to create the state housing trust fund.

With funding, the Arkansas Housing Trust Fund will provide assistance to households earning no more than 80% of the area median income. The Arkansas Development Finance Authority (ADFA) will disburse funds as grants or loans for new construction, rehabilitation, rental assistance, land acquisition, predevelopment costs, infrastructure, transitional housing, down payment assistance, housing and

foreclosure counseling, and technical assistance. Providing oversight and guidance to ADFA is the Arkansas Housing Trust Fund Advisory Committee, an appointed body established in Act 661. In 2009, Housing Arkansas and Senator Elliot successfully moved legislation to enact Act 611, creating the Arkansas Housing Trust Fund. Unfortunately, Act 661 did not include any funding.

“We are enthusiastic about Housing Trust Fund’s flexibility to respond to Arkansas specific needs and opportunities,” said Lou Tobian, Chair of the Housing Trust Fund Advisory Committee. *“We look forward for the opportunity to work with the Arkansas Development Finance Authority to determine the best way to use these pilot funds to demonstrate the potential impact of the Housing Trust Fund. By investing in the Housing Trust Fund, not only are we going to provide safe and healthy homes, we are going to create construction jobs and we are going to attract Federal funds and private investment that would not have otherwise come to Arkansas.”*

Housing Arkansas is building a campaign to pass legislation with a dedicated revenue source in the 2015 General Assembly (the Arkansas General Assembly convenes every other year). Housing Arkansas estimates that in order to make significant advances towards providing needed housing, the state should be investing at least \$15 million into the Housing Trust Fund annually.



In addition to its strategy in the 2013 General Assembly, Housing Arkansas is engaging in several other activities to build the support for dedicated funding. With a steering committee that has doubled in the past year, Housing Arkansas has formed four working committees to advance the campaign: Legislative, Grassroots Development, Communications, and Fundraising. With the 2013 General Assembly adjourned, the Legislative Committee will shift its focus to identifying a revenue source. The Grassroots Development committee is planning a listening tour that will travel to 5-6 locations around the state to gather information about local housing needs, to educate on the potential positive impact of dedicating state revenue to the Arkansas Housing Trust Fund, and to recruit and train supporters to be effective advocates.

In August 2012, Housing Arkansas partnered with pediatric researchers at Arkansas Children’s Hospital and **Children’s HealthWatch** on the release of the policy action brief *A Safe, Stable Place to Call Home Supports Young Children’s Health in Arkansas*. In late 2012, Housing Arkansas launched a new website www.housingar.org. Housing Arkansas is also utilizing public opinion research it commissioned to test public attitudes towards affordable housing and state investment in the housing trust fund.



In 2010 and 2011, Housing Arkansas contracted with **Opinion Research Associates** to conduct a focus group and a statewide poll. The public opinion research identified messages that elicit strong support for increasing the availability of affordable housing. Particularly resonant to Arkansans polled were messages that emphasized the importance of home and that reflect the values of opportunity, reward for work, and a responsibility to take care of the most vulnerable. The poll also revealed that Arkansans care deeply that veterans, children, seniors, people with serious disabilities and people earning low wages have a place to call home.

From this research, Housing Arkansas adopted four lead message frames for the revenue campaign:

Every child deserves a safe place to call home

A place to call home offers seniors (or people with disabilities) an opportunity to live and grow with independence and dignity

Our veterans should have access to safe, affordable housing

Hardworking Arkansans should be able to afford a home and still have enough money for groceries and child care

With momentum from the passage of SB 728, active working committees, tested messages and an outreach plan intended to build support around the state, Housing Arkansas is poised to significantly elevate the support for dedicating state revenue to the Trust Fund. *“To pass revenue legislation in 2015 is going to require serious work,”* said Rick Pierce, chair of Housing Arkansas’ Legislative Committee. *“Our success this session shows that members of the General Assembly are willing to invest in housing opportunity. Our job now is activating supportive Arkansans across the state to reach out to their legislators to say ‘Home is priority for Arkansas: We need a dedicated revenue source for the Housing Trust Fund.’”*

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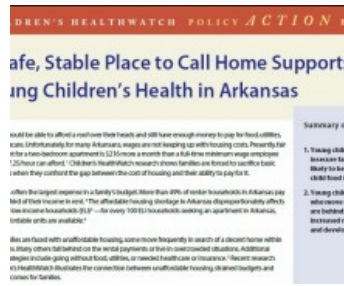
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