



Arkansas  
**BlueCross BlueShield**  
An Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association



# Tipping the Scales toward **Wellness**

Arkansas Blue Cross targets pressing threats  
to our state's health

Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield is aggressively addressing several daunting challenges that are detrimental to the welfare of our state and its people with targeted investments in our communities.

For instance:

- Arkansas leads the nation in **pregnancy-related deaths**.
- The **mental health crisis** in our state is far from over.
- The proven strategy of **whole-person healthcare** is still not widely practiced here. Whole-person health considers a person's physical, mental and emotional health, along with **social determinants of health** – factors like their education level, job, income, relationships, culture, neighborhood, etc.

In the past **two years** alone, Arkansas Blue Cross and its Blue & You Foundation for a Healthier Arkansas have committed more than **\$19 million** to targeted grassroots initiatives (in all 75 counties) that seek to make Arkansas a healthier place with a brighter future.



## Maternal health investments

According to a 2023 legislative report<sup>1</sup>:

- The Arkansas **maternal mortality rate** is the highest in the United States.
- A staggering **92%** of pregnancy-related deaths in Arkansas (2018-2020) likely were **preventable**.
- The **infant mortality rate** in Arkansas is the nation's **third-highest**, behind only Louisiana and Mississippi.

To address this crisis, in 2023 our Blue & You Foundation awarded a total of **more than \$1 million** to almost a dozen projects that seek to produce healthier outcomes for moms and babies.

These grants funded initiatives like:

- Providing services for **pregnant and parenting teens in crisis** (case management, parenting education, housing, etc.) in Springdale – \$12,577.
- Improving the **pregnancy experience of black women** by replicating the Birthing Project Sister Friend support model across rural counties – \$73,800.
- Expanding a program in the Jonesboro area to **help Latina women overcome care barriers** (social, cultural and language issues, etc.) that may limit their access to adequate healthcare and mental health assistance before, during and after pregnancy – \$90,032.

In addition, in April 2024, the Blue & You Foundation opened a **grant cycle specifically for maternal and pediatric health** in which organizations submitted proposals ranging from **\$5,000 to \$200,000**. Award notices are scheduled to be sent in mid-August 2024.



## Mental health investments

A recent **federal survey**<sup>2</sup> from May 2024 found that rates of reported indicators of **anxiety** and **depression** in Arkansas are **among the highest** in the nation. Vermont, by contrast, has some of the lowest rates on those indicators.

	U.S.	Arkansas	Rank (of 51)	Vermont	Rank (of 51)
<b>Anxiety</b>	17.6%	20.4%	49 <sup>th</sup>	12.5%	1 <sup>st</sup>
<b>Depression</b>	13.7%	16.2%	46 <sup>th</sup>	8.2%	1 <sup>st</sup>
<b>Anxiety &amp; Depression</b>	21.3%	23.2%	42 <sup>nd</sup>	20.7%	2 <sup>nd</sup>

In 2023 alone, Arkansas Blue Cross and the Blue & You Foundation awarded more than **\$7.5 million** in special grants for behavioral health-related programs in Arkansas.

Funded mental/behavioral health initiatives include projects such as:

- Establishing specially designed **“calming rooms” in 75 local schools** throughout Arkansas – \$187,500.
- Creating an **Office of Counseling Services** at a college in Little Rock to provide on-campus behavioral health services for students, faculty and staff and promote good mental health – \$150,000.
- Increasing access to **quality mental health services for youth** in Benton County after-school/summer programs – \$150,000.
- Expanding **addiction treatment services** in Northeast Arkansas to serve up to 1,500 more residents – \$114,000.
- Providing **peer support, outreach, education and treatment** coordination for people recovering from addiction in the El Dorado area – \$22,000.
- Providing **mental health resources** to certain at-risk youth (in foster care, adopted, homeless, runaways, trafficking victims, etc.) in Faulkner, Lonoke, Pulaski and Saline counties – \$1,418,252.

In addition, on July 1, 2024, the Blue & You Foundation opened a **grant cycle specifically for mental/behavioral health** in which organizations may submit proposals ranging from **\$5,000 to \$200,000**. Award notices are scheduled to be sent in early November 2024.



## Whole-person health investments

For several years, Arkansas Blue Cross – in cooperation with the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) – has participated in several initiatives that incentivize primary care providers to address a variety of physical, mental, emotional and environmental factors that can affect their patients' well-being, including social determinants of health.

For meeting performance goals related to these programs, Arkansas Blue Cross awarded hundreds of providers in thousands of clinics throughout Arkansas a combined total of **\$7.4 million** in 2022 and 2023.

Additionally, in 2023 and 2024, the Blue & You Foundation awarded more than **\$3.4 million** in grants to address **social determinants of health**.

Even a cursory look at **County Health Rankings & Roadmaps**<sup>3</sup> reveals the powerful impact social determinants of health can have on well-being. Not surprisingly, the best results are found in affluent Benton County in Northwest Arkansas, and the worst overall health outcomes are found in economically challenged Phillips County in Eastern Arkansas. Here are some key stats:

	Benton County	Phillips County
<b>Premature death</b> (Years lost before age 75, per 100,000 people)	<b>6,700</b>	<b>19,900</b>
<b>Poor or fair health</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Low birthweight</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Teen births</b> (Per 1,000 females ages 15-19)	<b>21</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Access to exercise opportunities</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Children in poverty</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>53%</b>
<b>Injury deaths</b> (Per 100,000 population)	<b>61</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>Food environment index</b> (0 = worst, 10 = best)	<b>7.9</b>	<b>4.4</b>



Funded social determinants of health initiatives include projects such as:

- Providing **food assistance** (specifically protein) to underserved communities in Jefferson County – \$25,000.
- Expanding a Hot Springs-area child advocacy center’s age-appropriate, active-learning presentations that **teach children to recognize signs of danger** and empower them to tell trusted adults who can help – \$50,000.
- Completing seven **safe, energy-efficient and affordable homes** for low-to-moderate-income families in Central Arkansas – \$188,000.
- Providing 100 at-risk youth with **employment-focused life skill classes**, relational support, quarterly job fairs and intensive internships to increase job-readiness and overall economic stability – \$140,815.
- **Rehousing** at least seven Heber Springs-area families who are **victims of domestic violence** into safe and affordable housing by providing three months of rental and utility assistance – \$27,505.
- Adding **four shelter units** and expanding **health and social services support** for **homeless persons** needing post-acute medical care in the Fayetteville area – \$145,000.
- Deploying a state-of-the-art mobile vision clinic to provide **free, comprehensive eye examinations and glasses** to children, targeting socioeconomically disadvantaged schools statewide – \$174,124.

For more information on how to apply for Blue & You Foundation grants, visit [blueandyoufoundation.org](https://blueandyoufoundation.org)

These investments in the well-being of Arkansans are just a few of the ways we carry out our core mission and display our commitment to our state.

If you have questions about our efforts to improve the health of Arkansas in these key areas, please feel free to give me a call or drop me a line.

Sincerely,

**David Manns**

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<sup>1</sup> 2023 Arkansas Maternal Mortality Review Committee Legislative Report – issued in December 2023

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)/U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey – April 30-May 27, 2024

<sup>3</sup> County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute) – 2024 estimates