



Newsletter From Rep. Matthew J. Shepherd District 97

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Strengthening Arkansas Workforce

Members of the Arkansas Legislative Council's Hospital, Medicaid, and Developmental Disabilities Study Subcommittee recently reviewed a report examining how Arkansas can better connect workforce development programs with social services that support families on their path to employment. The findings highlight a clear opportunity. Arkansas employers continue searching for workers while many Arkansans are looking for stable employment or the training needed to move into better jobs.

Low labor force participation has had significant impacts on both workers and employers across the state. An estimated 202,000 prime-working-age Arkansans are not engaged in the workforce at all. The state's 58.5% labor force participation rate ranks in the bottom ten nationally, even as employers report approximately 68,000 unfilled positions. These numbers suggest the challenge is not a lack of jobs, but difficulty connecting people with the education, training, and support services needed to enter the workforce.

The report also points to a concerning trend among young people. Arkansas has one of the nation's highest disconnected youth rates, referring to residents ages 16–24 who are neither in school nor working. At 15.2%, Arkansas ranks 47th among states and the District of Columbia. With 22.7% of Arkansans under age 18, the state cannot afford to lose young workers and students to long-term disconnection.

The report suggests that better coordination between workforce programs and assistance programs, such as job training, childcare support, and health coverage through Arkansas Medicaid, could help more Arkansans successfully move from education and assistance programs into long-term employment. One idea discussed is a more integrated “one door to work” approach that allows individuals to access workforce training, health services, and family support programs through a more coordinated system. The subcommittee is reviewing the recommendations to determine what legislation could be introduced next session to help strengthen and expand Arkansas's workforce. You can read the full report at arkansashouse.org.

