

ARKANSAS AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN STEERING COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES

Zoom Meeting

Wednesday, September 22, 2021 – 3:30pm

**IN ATTENDANCE**

**STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Larry Walther, Secretary, Department of Finance and Administration  
Johnny Key, Secretary, Department of Education  
Cindy Gillespie, Secretary, Department of Human Services  
Mike Preston, Secretary, Department of Commerce  
Wes Ward, Secretary, Department of Agriculture  
A.J. Gary, Director of the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management  
Stacy Hurst, Secretary, Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism  
Daryl Bassett, Secretary, Department of Labor & Licensing  
Dr. Jose Romero, Secretary, Department of Health  
Senator Bill Sample  
Senator Keith Ingram  
Senator Ronald Caldwell  
Representative Kenneth Ferguson  
Representative Jeff Wardlaw  
Representative Frances Cavanaugh

**ADDITIONAL ATTENDEES**

Alan McVey, Chief of Staff, Department of Finance and Administration  
Paul Louthian, Deputy Director, Department of Finance and Administration  
Elaina Damante, CEO and Senior Director, Boys & Girls Clubs of Diamond Hills  
Chris Richey, CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of Saline County  
Chris Shimer, CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of Western Benton County

**AGENDA**

- 1) Welcome and Opening Remarks – Secretary Walther
- 2) Approval of Minutes – Secretary Larry Walther
- 3) Request
  - Boys & Girls Club: Relief Essential for Arkansas' Disadvantaged Youth Club (Club Ready)
    - Presented by: Elaina Damante, Chris Richey, and Chris Shimer
    - Participating Sites:

Arkansas River Valley	Ashley County	Benton County
Bryant	Central Arkansas	Crittenden County
Diamond Hills	Donald W. Reynolds	Drew County
El Dorado	Faulkner County	Fort Smith
Jacksonville	Jefferson County	Magnolia

Malvern/Hot Springs  
Saline County  
South Logan County

McGehee  
Scott County  
Van Buren

Phillips  
Siloam Springs

- 4) Next Meeting October 27<sup>th</sup> at 3:30pm
- 5) Adjournment

### **WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS**

Secretary Larry Walther welcomed the committee to the meeting and called the meeting to order.

### **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Secretary Larry Walther presented the minutes from the September 9, 2021 meeting. *Senator Bill Sample motioned to approve; Secretary Stacy Hurst provided a second; Secretary Walther called for a vote; the minutes were approved.*

### **REQUEST - BOYS & GIRLS CLUB: RELIEF ESSENTIAL FOR ARKANSAS' DISADVANTAGED YOUTH CLUB (CLUB READY)**

Secretary Walther introduced guest speakers from the Boys & Girls Clubs of Arkansas, Elaina Damante, Chris Shimer, and Chris Richey to present their proposal for funding. Ms. Damante, CEO of The Boys & Girls Clubs of Diamond Hills, began the presentation explaining she is starting her ninth year as CEO of Diamond Hills, which consists of three clubs: Mountainburg, Paris, and Alma. She then shared the Boys & Girls Clubs Mission Statement, which is to enable all young people to reach their full potential of as productive, caring, responsible citizens. They take children from all areas and socioeconomic backgrounds and find out what they need and make sure they succeed from where they are.

Ms. Damante explained how COVID has affected the clubs and changed not only children's lives, but also parents, grandparents, and their staff as well. She explained that the Boys & Girls Clubs donations are down approximately 90% due to COVID, and that they are writing more grants but also very grateful for the grants out there that have kept their doors open. Since many businesses have closed and families are struggling to support themselves, they cannot support the clubs in the manner they used to.

Ms. Damante noted how their children are also struggling with depression, apathy, and even hopelessness. Some are struggling because of hunger, and some lack supervision since they are home more and do not have the love and support that they need. That's where the Boys & Girls Clubs come in by making sure children get the best start and the best finish they can. Ms. Damante stated how the need for this funding to ensure their children grow in a positive direction and have the best chance at success that the clubs and the state can give them. She then explained how two of her clubs have 100% free and reduced lunches in a depressed lower socioeconomic area already going on eight years now and the other club is at 53% free and reduced. The clubs work with the schools by filling the gaps the school cannot fill.

Academic outcomes will be measured by evidence-based programming, which is the largest area they are requesting funding for as they feel it is their biggest need. She explained how they will probably use different programming in each club to accommodate what each school specifically needs. The club in Mountainburg has only 33% of children reading at grade level or above and

the children are lagging. The Boys & Girls Clubs will work with the school's superintendent to see what reading programs they currently utilize and then will work with the teachers to find a program that will complement that school. Their goal will be for the children to read at grade level or above. These programs will run through the summer, so instead of losing knowledge during the summer, the children will gain knowledge. So, when fall comes, they will have evidence-based programming to prove what they're doing is successful.

She then stated how they work with the children individually to cater towards their specific needs. As an example, she described how one of their programs teaches children life skills and etiquette. With their youth of the year program, they work with many of the state's representatives and senators to bring the children to Little Rock to meet the Governor which is a huge deal for the kids.

Ms. Damante then noted that many of the clubs have outdated filtration systems. When COVID hit, three quarters of the Boys & Girls Clubs stayed open to take care of essential workers' children, which also meant the staff were putting themselves at risk. Part of the funding will be to upgrade the filtration systems so that the clubs can be the safest they can be to protect the children and staff. She noted the funds that are being requested will affect over 30,000 children and their families. She finished by explaining the need for mental health counselors by telling a story about one of her kids who was struggling because his home life was not good, and he was being bullied.

Senator Caldwell asked, if the funding is used for mental health, isn't that adding another layer of the same services out there for the Boys & Girls Club that they already have. Ms. Damante answered by explaining how schools are overwhelmed and understaffed, so the Clubs would be able to help with mental health as well.

Secretary Gillespie asked which part of DHS she reached out to so she can follow up so that they are connecting the Boys & Girls Clubs into the right part of DHS since there are grants out there to provide these services already. Ms. Damante replied that this is an area that they feel is not necessary, so they are not duplicating services. Stripping this area away is not the issue. Secretary Gillespie, like Senator Caldwell, noted she did not see that in the description of the grant, in which Ms. Damante explained it's in the social emotional learning section of the proposal. She also stated they can modify the proposal to work in the areas the Committee feels is most necessary. Senator Caldwell reiterated they don't want to pay for the same services more than once that are already available through another department. Ms. Damante answered that this is a multi-faceted grant that does not have to go towards mental health if not needed. Mr. Richey then described a few programs already out there that are not necessarily mental health programs, so it's not just mental health as stated in their proposal.

Mr. Shimer added to the discussion by mentioning another need in the category is training for the staff, which they refer to as Mental Health First Aid. He stated the organizations would like to have the ability to be able to recognize the children that may need those types of services. He stated that his organization also works with a couple of other agencies in Siloam Springs. Ozark Guidance is one of those agencies with whom they have partnerships with that are already out there. Mr. Shimer also mentioned that under the academic portion of the proposal under education that some of the programs listed there and what they have done for their staff. He says COVID affected them drastically in that we had to change our programming and required us to have fewer numbers of staff because of the COVID restrictions that they were under due to the

building size and how they operated. He says they had to bring in more staff to meet those numbers which made things difficult.

One of the education programs they worked with in the Siloam Springs School District this summer they wanted to partner with was to get kids caught back up and eliminate the learning loss that many of the children have suffered over the last year. Mr. Shimer stated he partnered with the school district there and they helped with some different programs such as fall, freckle, and bottle were three programs to help children get caught up. He stated when he looks at these programs these types of funding are a huge game changer and transformational for clubs because they will have the ability to bring in additional staff and get them the training they need to impact more children in Arkansas. He stated that they are looking at 30,000 to 35,000 members not to mention the other youth they serve across this state in 44 locations. He stressed that the academic programs are a huge game changer and the teen programs with career launch and transfer virtual reality programs that allows them to work with the older children. Mr. Shimer stated how beneficial these programs are for teens preparing to enter the workforce and to be able to utilize this technology where they can get out on the floor of a company and see how it works on a day-to-day basis. Mr. Shimer mentioned he would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Secretary Johnny Key spoke to Senator Caldwell in response to his question and stated the demand for mental health support right now is far outstripping the availability of resources. He continued by saying our schools are doing what they can and ramping up the partnerships around the rural mental health efforts. Secretary Key stated we still do not have the number of people trained in the Mental Health First Aid Program that we need around the state. It is the first layer to help you understand where the kids need to be referred to next or possibility of what resources they need to be made available. He then mentioned that before COVID they were getting ready to launch a significant mental health initiative. We are launching that now, and we will make sure that the Boys and Girls Clubs are included in that work to make sure it is all coordinated so there is no overlap in services. Secretary Key ended by saying he doesn't think there are many gaps in services and does not believe an overlap is a concern.

Secretary Walther asked for any other questions from the committee and then continued by asking Paul Louthian to give the committee a summary of the evaluation the DFA and CTEH have made on this proposal. Mr. Louthian responded by stating they set this up with CTEH, and they are putting programs into place that will help the children's education and keep them in line with their peers throughout the state. Secretary Hurst asked if the new programs are a result of the pandemic and if they had received any guidelines from the U.S. Treasury. Mr. Louthian responded by stating that the program directly lines up with the guidelines put out by the Treasury and each program will follow those guidelines.

*Secretary Walther entertained a motion to approve; Representative Kenneth Ferguson motioned to approve; Secretary Johnny Key provided a second; Secretary Walther called for a vote; the motion passed.*

### **SCHEDULING OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will be held Wednesday, October 27, 2021 at 3:30pm.

**The meeting was adjourned.**