

# ARKANSAS ◆ ADVOCATE

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS HEALTH CARE ENVIRONMENT EDUCATION INVESTIGATIONS

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

HEALTH CARE

MATERNAL HEALTH

## Committee halts public comment, approves bill to require reports from Arkansas disability nonprofit

Legislators also send “Healthy Moms, Healthy Babies Act” forward

BY: MARY HENNIGAN - FEBRUARY 11, 2025 6:10 PM



📹 Rep. Jack Ladyman, R-Jonesboro, presents a bill to the House Committee on Public Health, Welfare and Labor on Feb. 11, 2025. The bill would require Disability Rights Arkansas, a federally funded nonprofit, to provide reports to the Legislature. (Mary Hennigan/Arkansas Advocate)

Legislation to require a disability advocacy group to supply reports to the Legislature earned initial approval from Arkansas lawmakers Tuesday.

Separately, the House Committee on Public Health, Welfare and Labor also sent the governor's Healthy Moms, Healthy Babies Act on to the full House for consideration.

Under Rep. Jack Ladyman's [House Bill 1382](#), Disability Rights Arkansas (DRA) would be mandated to provide reports to subcommittees of the Arkansas Legislative Council for review, even though the independent nonprofit doesn't receive state funding.

"They have no oversight by the state of Arkansas, while they provide services to our most vulnerable citizens," Ladyman, a Jonesboro Republican, told the House committee on public health. "They do good work in a lot of areas, but some people they serve think they exhibit government overreach in some of the areas that they work in."

[DRA](#) is an independent, federally funded nonprofit. It was established in 1980 as a result of then-Gov. David Pryor's previous compliance with Congress' Public Law 94-103. The organization provides free services such as advocacy and litigation, referrals and investigations into institutional abuse and neglect cases.



📷 Katrina Robertson (second from left) listens in the audience of the House Public Health, Welfare and Labor Committee on Feb. 11, 2025. Robertson testified in favor of a bill to require reporting from Disability Rights Arkansas, a nonprofit organization. (Mary Hennigan/Arkansas Advocate)

Katrina Robertson testified in support of Ladyman’s bill and said that as the parent and guardian of her disabled son, Noah, she is the decision-maker for the 21-year-old, who has the cognitive ability of a 4-year-old.

Adopted by Robertson at age nine, she said Noah “exhibited complex behaviors – challenging behaviors – mainly due to the abuse and neglect that he had suffered.” She said finding a system that worked for her family was difficult and included crisis intervention by the police, stays in the hospital, a homeless shelter and multiple allegations of abuse.

Robertson said she didn’t hear from DRA, even during the allegations, until she posted on social media “in desperation.” But DRA then seemed most interested in assessing whether Noah’s treatment was grounds for a lawsuit, and an attorney suggested residential care would strip Robertson’s son of his dignity, she testified.

About three years ago, Robertson said she transported Noah from jail to the Booneville Human Development Center, where he

remains surrounded by his peers and works a 14(c) wage program job, which provides paid employment for workers with disabilities in Arkansas. Robertson said her son enjoys the congregate living environment and he even has a girlfriend – or maybe three, each of whom don't know about the other, Robertson said.

“It is impossible to claim that care within a facility is worse than care in the community unless both are subject to the same levels of scrutiny,” Robertson said.

The Arkansas Department of Human Services [operates five human development centers](#) where children and adults can receive services and long- or- short-term placements. According to a DHS description of the Booneville location, residents can join in a rug weaving program, paper recycling or custodial and food service training opportunities.



Tom Masseau, executive director of Disability Rights Arkansas, testifies against House Bill 1382 on Feb. 11, 2025. (Mary Hennigan/Arkansas Advocate)

DRA Executive Director Tom Masseau testified against HB 1382 and told the committee that the Legislature already has access to the reports it produces.

Masseau said he was willing to attend any legislative committee meeting to answer questions or discuss DRA, but legislating the nonprofit's reporting requirements would lead to broad implications for other nonprofits in Arkansas.

“There’s no other private, nonprofit organization in this state that has their organization named specifically in statute to come before a special committee to present information that’s already readily available with no required action from the committee,” said Masseau, who has led the nonprofit since 2013. “...What slippery slope are we going to go down if there’s a few individuals who are unhappy with the work that we’re doing on advocacy?”

Masseau said it is “demoralizing” to see the effort put into current reports and watch the [Board of Developmental Disability Services](#) take little or no action.

Republican Reps. Aaron Pilkington of Knoxville and Ryan Rose of Van Buren pushed back on Masseau’s testimony and questioned how providing the same reports to a different entity would result in more work.

**YOU MAKE OUR WORK POSSIBLE.**

**SUPPORT**

Rose suggested the reports would lead to increased transparency and ultimately lead to recommendations of how to better life for Arkansans with disabilities.

Rep. Mary Bentley, R-Perryville, said she was concerned that Masseau wasn’t happy with the bill.

“This will give us an opportunity to be targeted, to make effective policy decisions, for us to get together and hear what’s going on, to discuss the report [and] bring different policymakers into the room,” she said. “I would say that you should be delighted with this bill. I think this will help disabled Arkansans greatly.”

While Masseau agreed with lawmakers that it’s important for the message of the nonprofit to be heard, he disagreed with the

reporting mandate and maintained that the bill was an overstep, as he said it would affect other organizations.

Shortly before Pilkington fast-tracked the committee to vote on the bill without hearing any remaining speakers who signed up to testify, Rep. Wayne Long, R-Bradford, asked if Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders could abolish the DRA.



📷 Rep. Denise Ennett, D-Little Rock, questions bills during a House committee on public health, welfare and labor on Feb. 11, 2025. (Mary Hennigan/Arkansas Advocate)

Long didn't receive a certain answer before the vote, in which Rep. Denise Ennett, D-Little Rock, was one of few who voted against the bill.

“I, too, have a son with multiple disabilities, and DRA does great work throughout the state of Arkansas,” Ennett said. “...I feel like this is a one-sided argument mandating a nonprofit to make reports when they have repeatedly said that the reports are made available. I feel like it's government overreach.”

The bill will head to the full House next.

### **'Healthy Moms, Healthy Babies Act' goes forward**

Members of the House committee on public health also voted Tuesday to advance the “Healthy Moms, Healthy Babies Act” after some concerns about a section regarding alleged medical injuries during childbirth.



Rep. Aaron Pilkington, R-Knoxville, details House Bill 1427, which would establish the “Healthy Moms, Healthy Babies Act” and invest \$45 million annually in improving maternal health outcomes in Arkansas. Sen. Missy Irvin, R-Mountain View, (right) sponsored identical legislation in the Senate. Photographed Feb. 11, 2025. (Mary Hennigan/Arkansas Advocate)

[House Bill 1427](#) from Pilkington is identical to [Senate Bill 213](#) sponsored by Sen. Missy Irvin, R-Mountain View. The proposed legislation acts on Sanders’ promise to [prioritize improved maternal health outcomes](#) for the lowest-class Arkansans.

Under a \$45 million annual price tag, the legislation would establish presumptive Medicaid eligibility for pregnant Arkansans, offer reimbursements for doulas and community health workers and establish pregnancy-related Medicaid coverage for specific treatments. It does not expand Medicaid coverage for postpartum mothers from 60 days to 12 months after birth, a federal option that all other states have taken action on.

Though Ladyman was the only legislator heard Tuesday to vote against the bill in committee, several asked questions about limiting allegations for medical injuries during childbirth until the minor’s fifth birthday.

Paul Byrd, a Little Rock-based attorney, spoke against the bill because of his concerns about the same section.

“A neuropsychological exam is very hard to perform on a child until they’re five years old,” Byrd said. “...Even if you get one, then you gotta have a couple years to track and have another one to see the progression.”

Byrd recommended the bill be amended to change the age limitation to include a two-year window after the child turns five, but the sponsors of the bill refused to pull down the bill.

A number of people spoke in favor of the HB 1427, including a representative from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and the Arkansas Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics.

The bill will head to the full House next.

## State lawmakers aim to tackle Arkansas’ maternal health crisis with new legislation



Gov.  
Sarah

Huckabee Sanders on Thursday announced new legislation aimed at improving maternal health for the lowest-income Arkansans. Much of the legislation, contained in identical versions of House and Senate bills

**YOU MAKE OUR WORK POSSIBLE.**

**SUPPORT**

*Last updated 6:10 p.m., Feb. 11, 2025*



**REPUBLISH**

*Our stories may be republished online or in print under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our website. AP and Getty images may not be republished. Please see our [republishing guidelines](#) for use of any other photos and graphics.*





## MARY HENNIGAN

Mary is a tenacious, award-winning journalist whose coverage spans city government to housing policy. She reported for the Arkansas Advocate until February 2025. She holds a bachelor's and master's degree in journalism from the University of Arkansas.

### MORE FROM AUTHOR

## MORE FROM OUR NEWSROOM



### Arkansas governor signs first-in-the-nation ban on drug middlemen owning pharmacies

BY TESS VRBIN

April 17, 2025



### Bill regulating transgender Arkansans' bathroom use heads to House despite public pushback

BY TESS VRBIN

April 16, 2025

## SEEKING TRUTH. REPORTING RESPONSIBLY.

**Democracy Toolkit** // Register to vote | Find your polling place | Find your elected state officials | Find your U.S. senators and congressmen | Become an election worker



### ABOUT US

The Arkansas Advocate is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization dedicated to tough, fair daily reporting and investigative journalism that holds public officials accountable and focuses on the relationship between the lives of Arkansans and public policy. This service is free to readers and other news outlets.

We're part of [States Newsroom](#), the nation's largest state-focused nonprofit news organization.



Our stories may be republished online or in print under [Creative Commons license](#) CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our website. (See full [republishing guidelines](#).)

[DEIJ Policy](#) | [Ethics Policy](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



© Arkansas Advocate, 2025

v1.79.1

STATES NEWSROOM

FAIR. FEARLESS. FREE.