



## Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families Announces Keesa Smith as New Executive Director!

Keesa will begin at AACF on February 20, and she will help us create and execute a vision for our organization that embodies our legacy of groundbreaking change and improving the lives and well-being of Arkansas's children and families, and reducing racial disparities across the state.

"We are grateful that, after a long and careful search, we have a new executive director," said Ryan Davis, AACF Board of Directors President. "Keesa has a strong commitment to the children and families of Arkansas, and she is prepared to lead AACF to new heights."



Keesa will be only the fifth Executive Director in AACF's 45-year history. The previous directors were Jo Luck, 1978-1979; Don Crary, 1979-1988; Amy Rossi, 1988-2003; and Rich Huddleston, 2004-2022.

"I am excited and look forward to continuing AACF's long history of advocating on behalf of our state's most vulnerable population, our children," said Keesa. "For more than 45 years, AACF has played a key role in keeping children's issues at the forefront of people's minds. I can't wait to begin this new role and continue the work of improving the lives of Arkansas's children and families."

Keesa worked for the Arkansas Department of Human Services from 2013 until 2023 as the Deputy Director of Youth and Families. In that role, she oversaw the divisions responsible for the state's child welfare, juvenile justice and early education programs during a time of significant transformation.

During her time with DHS, Keesa also served as the agency's appointee on several boards and commissions, and as the Secretary's designee on the Supreme Court Commission on Children, Youth and Families, and in her own capacity for the Racial Justice Taskforce and the Arkansas Court Improvement Program Advisory Council. Keesa also served as Deputy Legal Counsel for former Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe, as a staff attorney at the Center for Arkansas Legal Services, and as a university instructor in Business and Constitutional Law.

Before serving at DHS, Keesa led the Department of Workforce Services' Board of Review, overhauling processes that eliminated a backlog of more than 4,000

unemployment appeals and decreasing the wait time for clients for an agency response from 14 months to 23 days.

Keesa earned a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her Juris Doctorate from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Bowen School of Law. She is a member of the Pulaski County Bar Association; the Harold Flowers Law Society; the Beta Pi Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc; the inaugural class of the Arkansas Bar Association Leadership Academy Program; Class XXVI of the Greater Little Rock Leadership program; and she is a 2021 Aspen Institute Ascend Fellow.

Jennifer Ferguson and Laura Kellams, who have been acting as interim co-executive directors, will return as Deputy Director and Northwest Arkansas Director, respectively, though Kellams will continue to provide legislative advocacy leadership during the 2023 legislative session.

We hope you will join us in welcoming Keesa to our team!