

Arkansas Children's Establishes \$70 Million Groundbreaking Center Focused on Opioids' Impact on Children

Attorney General Awards \$50 Million in Effort to Improve Health of Children

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LITTLE ROCK, AR. (Nov. 9, 2023) – Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin is awarding \$50 million of opioid settlement funds to Arkansas Children's to pioneer one of the nation's most ambitious research **efforts dedicated to opioids' impact on children.**

The National Center for Opioid Research & Clinical Effectiveness (NCOR) **will position Arkansas as a national leader in understanding the impacts of the opioid crisis on the fetus, newborn and developing children.** It will also accelerate development of effective evidence-based treatments that radically improve child health and inform state and national policy efforts. **Research published in the journal *Pediatrics* this year shows opioids are the leading cause of poisoning deaths in children under age 5 across the nation.**

The Office of the Attorney General is responsible for administering the state's share of the national opioid settlements to fund opioid remediation in compliance with the terms of the settlement agreements.

"Today we are making history in the fight against opioid abuse in America. I am granting \$50 million of the state's opioid settlement funds to help establish the National Center for Opioid Research & Clinical Effectiveness (NCOR) at Arkansas Children's. NCOR will be a game changer for our children," Griffin said. **"This research center will be the first of its kind not just in Arkansas, but in the entire country. It will put our state on the front line of saving future**

generations from the scourge of opioid addiction and on the map as the center for pediatric opioid research in the United States.”

Arkansas Children’s will develop a revolutionary facility with cutting-edge infrastructure, equipment, and technology to support the clinical, social work and outreach teams who are tackling the crisis directly.

The state’s nationally ranked pediatric health system will build **the center around brain imaging technology, better equipping experts in fetal and neonatal neuroimaging to study how opioids impact children’s developing brains.** The enhanced imaging capability will help scientists better understand what parts of the brain are at play so they can design innovative prevention methods and therapies.

The center will host collaborative space to lead multicenter clinical trials, offer trailblazing telehealth capabilities and build an advanced analytics and informatics infrastructure focused on statistical analysis and machine learning. Arkansas Children’s will also leverage toxicology capabilities to refine techniques to quickly detect opioids, including newer synthetic opioids, which now escape detection of many testing platforms. **“The opioid crisis has devastated Arkansas families, and we see the impact in our NICU, clinics and ER every day,”** said Marcy Doderer, FACHE, Arkansas Children’s president and chief executive officer. “By creating this center, we are accelerating a healthier future for the children of Arkansas. The brilliant capacity of the team already on the ground and those we will recruit will create a better today and healthier tomorrow for the unbelievable number of children who suffer in the opioid crisis’ wake.”

Opioids pose threats to child health across the United States and were recently discovered to be the leading cause of fatal poisoning in children 5 years old and younger. The study published earlier this year in the journal *Pediatrics* also noted that over the past decade children have been accidentally exposed to many new opioid sources beyond families’ stored prescriptions, including heroin and fentanyl.

In 2019, research published by the *Journal of Pediatrics* found that $\frac{3}{4}$ of cases of children being exposed to opioids were accidental and nearly all involved swallowing the drugs after unintentional contact.

Meanwhile, intentional opioid use continues to rise among Arkansas youth. **Pregnant women and their newborns are deeply impacted. Babies exposed to opioids before birth are more likely to experience abnormal neurodevelopment, have learning impairments and face behavioral health challenges. These children are also much more likely to struggle with substance abuse as they grow up.**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention studies show Arkansas has the second highest dispensing rate for opioids in the nation.

Another threat children face is neonatal abstinence syndrome, a series of withdrawal symptoms babies struggle with after **their mothers use drugs during pregnancy. Babies with these symptoms are more likely to have birth defects and experience a host of complications.** Nationally, these withdrawal symptom rates continue to climb, and **Arkansas Department of Health research found a 433 percent increase in the condition over a 10-year-period.**

Arkansas Children's estimates the project will require \$70 million in funding and the health system will provide the funds beyond the opioid settlement proceeds. Plans call for construction to begin in 2024 on the 45,000-square-foot facility, which will be in the research corridor of the health system's Little Rock campus. Scientists will work closely with the Arkansas Children's Research Institute and Arkansas Children's Nutrition Center, one of six National Human Nutrition Centers funded through the USDA-ARS.

The health system will also draw on an existing network of partnerships and collaborations to move what is learned at the center directly into the community to decrease opioid use and abuse. This will include an electronic game-based adolescent prescription drug prevention program delivered through schools, community outreach programs and other venues.

Arkansas Children's is already recognized as a national leader in developing and implementing the Eat Sleep Console (ESC) Care Approach to treat neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (NOWS) and the Following Baby Back Home (FBBH) Initiative to improve long-term childhood outcomes. The center will build on the strong partnerships already in place through Arkansas Children's statewide nursery alliance, which brings birthing hospitals across the state together to learn evidence-based practices from each other and share methods that improve babies' outcomes.

“Arkansas Children's is a nationally renowned leader in pediatric health care, and as such is an ideal partner in the effort to reduce and eliminate the devastation that opioid abuse has caused in our state and across our country,” Griffin said. “The establishment of this center represents a significant investment in prevention, care and research that will benefit all Arkansans regardless of their address.”

ABOUT ATTORNEY GENERAL TIM GRIFFIN

Tim Griffin was sworn in as the 57th Attorney General of Arkansas on January 10, 2023, having previously served as the state's 20th Lieutenant Governor from 2015-2023. From 2011-2015, Griffin served as the 24th representative of Arkansas's Second Congressional District, where he served on the House Committee on Ways and Means, House Armed Services Committee, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, House Committee on Ethics and House Committee on the

Judiciary while also serving as a Deputy Whip for the Majority. Griffin has served as an officer in the U.S. Army Reserve Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps for more than 27 years and currently holds the rank of colonel. In 2005, Griffin was mobilized to active duty as an Army prosecutor at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and served with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in Mosul, Iraq. He is currently serving as the Commander of the 2d Legal Operations Detachment in New Orleans, Louisiana. His previous assignments include serving as the Commander of the 134th Legal Operations Detachment at Fort Liberty (née Bragg), North Carolina, and as a Senior Legislative Advisor to the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness at the Pentagon. Griffin earned a master's degree in strategic studies as a Distinguished Honor Graduate from the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Griffin also served as U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, and Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of Political Affairs for President George W. Bush; Special Assistant to Assistant Attorney General Michael Chertoff, Criminal Division, U.S. Department of Justice; Special Assistant U.S. Attorney, U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Arkansas; Senior Investigative Counsel, Government Reform and Oversight Committee, U.S. House of Representatives; and Associate Independent Counsel, Office of Independent Counsel David M. Barrett, In re: HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros. Griffin is a graduate of Magnolia High School, Hendrix College in Conway, and Tulane Law School in New Orleans. He attended graduate school at Oxford University. He is admitted to practice law in Arkansas (active) and Louisiana (inactive). Griffin attends Immanuel Baptist Church and lives in Little Rock with his wife, Elizabeth, a Camden native, and their three children.

ABOUT ARKANSAS CHILDREN'S

Arkansas Children's is the only healthcare system in the state solely dedicated to caring for Arkansas' more than 700,000 children. The private, non-profit organization includes two pediatric hospitals, a pediatric research institute and USDA nutrition center, a philanthropic foundation, a nursery alliance, statewide clinics, and many education and outreach programs — all focused on fulfilling a promise to define and deliver unprecedented child health. Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH) is a 336-bed, Magnet-recognized facility in Little Rock operating the state's only Level I pediatric trauma center; the state's only burn center; the state's only Level IV neonatal intensive care unit; the state's only pediatric intensive care unit; the state's only pediatric surgery program with Level 1 verification from the American College of Surgeons (ACS); and the state's only nationally recognized pediatric transport program. Arkansas Children's is nationally ranked by U.S. News & World Report in seven pediatric subspecialties (2023—2024): Cancer, Cardiology & Heart Surgery, Diabetes & Endocrinology, Nephrology, Orthopedics, Pulmonology and Urology. Arkansas Children's Northwest (ACNW), the first and only pediatric hospital in the Northwest Arkansas region, is a level IV pediatric trauma center. ACNW operates a 24-bed inpatient unit; a surgical unit with five operating rooms; outpatient clinics offering over 20 subspecialties; diagnostic services; imaging capabilities; occupational therapy services; and Northwest Arkansas' only pediatric emergency department, equipped with 30 exam rooms. Generous philanthropic and volunteer engagement has sustained Arkansas Children's since it began as an orphanage in 1912, and today ensures the system can deliver on its promise of unprecedented child health. To learn more, visit archildrens.org.