





# Actively

## INTERVENING

### ARKANSAS' NEW ATTORNEY GENERAL SEES FULL SPECTRUM OF NEEDS

By Robin Mero



**CYCLES OF POVERTY AND PETTY CRIME SHOULD NOT BE ACCEPTED AS PERMANENT CONDITIONS, SAYS ARKANSAS ATTORNEY GENERAL TIM GRIFFIN.**

Current reform of the state's criminal justice system does focus on protecting Arkansans from violent crime, but Griffin also supports using the court system to identify demoralized, low-level offenders for whom poverty and lack of education have been self-perpetuating.

By targeting those who are receptive to intervention, many Arkansans can be trained and educated to find and hold good jobs, live cleanly, and be kind and responsible parents and neighbors. It's less expensive, principled and common sense, he says.

As the state's chief legal officer, Griffin is determined to curtail violence to ensure that Arkansans

have the conditions they need to feel safe. He is working with state legislators and the governor to restructure criminal justice policy, expand prison capacity and eliminate parole.

Yet he knows there are thousands of Arkansans who can't seem to escape unhealthy cycles of misdemeanor crime.

"It's not either/or, it's about *all* the above. We need to intervene with people as early as possible to get them off of the wrong track and onto the right track," he insists.

"I believe as conservatives we should own the rehabilitative space. We should be the leaders. There are people who, whether they're young or due to life circumstances or decisions they have made, need intervention to keep them out of a system that might exacerbate their problems. We

◀ **PHOTO:** Attorney General Tim Griffin.



**“REALITY HAS TO WRAP AROUND THESE PROGRAMS ... METRICS AND OUTCOME-BASED ANALYSIS. IF A PROGRAM’S NOT WORKING, DON’T SINK A BUNCH OF MONEY IN IT.”**

**- TIM GRIFFIN  
ARKANSAS  
ATTORNEY GENERAL**

want to get them the help they may need to live a productive life, before an escalation. There are good diversion programs around the country ... and it works.”

Figuring out who is more likely to be helped is key, Griffin says. And if it’s not working, stop. “Government is horrible at this,” he says. “Reality has to wrap around these programs ... metrics and outcome-based analysis. If a program’s not working, don’t sink a bunch of money in it.”

Griffin understands the complexities of creating change on an individual level.

“It’s difficult to address because there’s usually a myriad of problems. Illiteracy. Drug addiction, often accompanied by spousal abuse. Anger issues. Broken homes. Kids who get on the wrong path because one of their parents has these issues.”

In 2018, while he was Lieutenant Governor, Griffin attended a City Center Conversation event benefiting Pathway to Freedom, a faith-based prison ministry that facilitates reentry into society.

Griffin met executive director Scott McLean; they planned a coffee and a tour of the Wrightsville Prison program. Griffin walked the barracks and shook hands with and encouraged inmates. Within weeks he joined the ministry board and soon was known as tireless, not afraid to take risks, resourceful and direct.

The program demonstrates the lowest recidivism rate in the Arkansas Department of Corrections. Within three years, only 22.7 percent of participants returned to prison as compared to 47.5 percent in the general population – a figure which Griffin is pleased to share.

“Some things work, some things don’t. The problem arises when government continues doing things that don’t work,” he says. “If you’re talking about bang for your buck in terms of money, you get the most for your dollar by investing in diversion before people get too far down the road. We see opportunities for some people who are in District Court for misdemeanors – to get them the

**▲ PHOTO:** Attorney General Tim Griffin with his wife Elizabeth and their three children, Mary Katherine, John and Charlotte Anne. *Photo courtesy of Griffin.*

# PATHWAY TO FREEDOM

A FAITH-BASED PRISON MINISTRY THAT FACILITATES REENTRY INTO SOCIETY. THE PROGRAM DEMONSTRATES **THE LOWEST RECIDIVISM RATE** IN THE ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS.

WITHIN THREE YEARS

**22.7%** OF PARTICIPANTS RETURNED TO PRISON **vs** **47.5%** IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

addiction help they need, the work skills, the life skills, so they can live productive lives. That saves taxpayer dollars and gives us more employees, because a lot of these people will gain critical work skills. It teaches a respect for the community and the rules we have to live under in a civil society.

“I think a lot of the principles that I’ve enumerated here are what you’re trying to do with your district court community diversion program,” he says. “Identifying people who are in district

court for misdemeanors, to intervene ... wrap your arms around those people with reality, and equip them with training and counseling and education and the burden of responsibility. Give them the chance. Some of them will fail, but the ones who don’t ... you have changed their long-term trajectory. They can go into society and be neighbors who ask to borrow tools instead of stealing them, and who cost taxpayers less because they not only quit taking, they start paying. It’s beautiful.”

## THE WHYS OF ATTORNEY GENERAL TIM GRIFFIN

As part of the triad of conservative state leaders recently elected, Griffin believes conservatives should own the rehabilitative space. These are his underlying principles:

- ▶ **We are all equal before God**, and there but for the grace of God go I. We have an obligation to help those where we can. Not everybody is welcoming of help, but we’ve got to pay attention to who is more likely to be helped. This is a country that believes in second chances and redemption as a cultural matter.
- ▶ **Common sense**. These prisoners are going to get out, and they’re coming to a neighborhood near you. Would you rather them knock on the door and say, ‘May I borrow your tools so that I can fix my fence?’ versus you coming home and they decided to take without asking by breaking into your garage? We want them to thrive, not just survive.
- ▶ **It’s cheaper**. If we can get people on the right path, educationally, in terms of their addiction, whatever they’re dealing with ... anger management, conflict resolution ... getting them a diesel driving certificate, a plumbing certificate, an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, law degree, whatever they want to pursue – in prison or out – it’s going to be cheaper for us if they are rolling in the direction of the rest of society, paying taxes versus taking taxes.
- ▶ **Ultimately this will create a more productive society**, a safer, healthier society and a place we want to live. And all this is related to the broader issue of economic development and jobs. We already can’t fill the jobs we have. We’re in a competition and part of it is quality of life. We’ve got to address this, not only for the sake of humanity and bottom line, but it’s part of a broader problem. If you want companies to move here, to continue to grow jobs here, you have got to deal with quality of life issues. ◀