



## Episode 11: Our Funds, Our Future: The American Rescue Plan Act in Ohio

### *Audio Transcript*

Sarah K. 00:00:21 Hi everyone. And welcome back to Just a Bite. We are kicking off our first interview of the year by chatting with one of our most trusted partners and coalitions, Advocates for Ohio's Future. Kelsey Berfeld and Sarah Hudacek, the two women behind Advocates for Ohio's Future, have been leading the charge for advocating for a transparent process of allocating the American Rescue Plan dollars that Ohio has been receiving from the federal government to recover from the pandemic and build more resilient communities.

Sarah K. 00:01:10 Hi, Kelsey. Hi Sarah. Thank you both for being on the podcast today. Um, why don't we start out by you both introducing yourselves and giving the listeners some context around what Advocates for Ohio's Future does and who you are.

Sarah H. 00:01:28 Great. Thanks so much, Sarah, for having us. We're really excited to be here. My name's Sarah Hudacek. I am the policy assistant for Advocates for Ohio's Future, and I'll let Kelsey introduce herself. She'll tell you a little bit about AOF.

Kelsey B. 00:01:44 Excellent. Sarah, thank you so much. Uh, like Sarah said, my name is Kelsey Berkfield. I am the director of Advocates for Ohio's Future. We will refer to that probably throughout, uh, today as AOF. Uh, just to be clear as a little rolls off the tongue, a little easier. So we are a coalition of over 500 health and human service providers, policy folks, researchers, organizations, nonprofits, really across the state, uh, that are united to make sure that our state has strong services and supports for families and especially vulnerable populations, uh, in strong communities across Ohio. So we really run the gamut in terms of health and human center services sector. Uh, we cover things like access to healthcare, uh, food, nutrition, support, um, access to safe and affordable housing, uh, services for older adults at early education and access to childcare services for people with disabilities, uh, broadband access, uh, you name it.

Kelsey B. 00:02:46 Uh, we probably have a member who is fighting the good fight on that front at the state and local level to make sure that again, people really live a healthy and successful lives with opportunities. So we were really excited to be here today to tell you a little bit about our work and advocacy, uh, concerning the American Rescue Plan Act and all of the good things we've done in the past and our plan for the future to make sure that our state takes advantage of this opportunity that we have with the resources we've been given to recover from this ongoing two years later, uh, health and economic downturn that we've seen. So we're excited to, to tell you more about what we've been up to.

Sarah K. 00:03:29 Yeah, that's great. Um, coalition building and like crafting a shared message is so important to advocacy and I think that's what makes AOF so special. Um, and because of this, I think AOF is in a really, um, unique spot to lead the charge on calling on our state, um, to make sure that there is a fair and equitable recovery for all Ohioans. So Kelsey, could you give the listeners a

rundown on the American Rescue Plan and how the federal government is directing the funds to be used, especially those state flexible funds?

Kelsey B. 00:04:10 Absolutely. Thanks Sarah. So the American Rescue Plan Act, uh, so we will refer to this as ARPA it's, it's quite, uh, a great little acronym for lots of words. Uh, but the American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, was passed in March of 2021. And this was really the third in a series of very large federal packages, uh, from Congress, uh, spanning two administrations, uh, building upon the cares act that was passed in March of 2020. And then the consolidated appropriations act passed in December of 2020, really just kind of massive, uh, economic stimulus packages. Uh, the American Rescue Plan Act was, uh, over \$1.9 trillion in total are really intended to help speed up the country's economic and health recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession are really, uh, the provisions of the bill and the investments in this package. Again, span all sectors of state and local county government.

Kelsey B. 00:05:15 Um, and specifically today we'd like to discuss the discretionary, uh, fiscal recovery funds that were included in, uh, the ARPA bill. Um, and they total 350 billion with a B uh, package from the ARPA plan. Again, going out to state and local governments to use kind of at their discretion to best respond to the needs of their communities, of their constituents, um, and where they kind of best saw them fit into to make the biggest difference for the folks who lived there. Uh, so really the intention of the federal government when they pass our funds with these, uh, discretionary flexible, uh, recovery dollars, uh, we call them the four R's. So bear with me, uh, the first is recover. So really, uh, the intention was for states and local governments to use these dollars to respond to the pandemic, respond directly to the health consequences of the pandemic and prevent future outbreaks.

Kelsey B. 00:06:16 So really uplifting and, and maintaining public health, public safety, and making sure that folks have what they need to protect themselves from this terrible virus and protect themselves their families, and continue to maintain their health moving forward. Uh, second are repay. So this would be, uh, opportunities to repay and increased premium pay for essential employees who really never got time off and then have been on the front lines of the pandemic sense of very beginning, as well as grants to employers, uh, to help maintain capacity, retain their workforce, um, and really make sure that they can support their employees kind of through the pandemic. And through this process, we owe such a great deal to our frontline workers throughout this pandemic and your folks at the grocery stores, first responders, especially during the brunt of the pandemic. Uh, but as we continue to drag on continuing to support those workers and make sure that we have the workforce needed to support people moving forward and support families. The third R is rebuild.

Kelsey B. 00:07:20 So this would be investing in water sewer and broadband infrastructure again, public basic needs to ensure health and safety. And especially we know broadband infrastructure, the, the lack of internet access and connectivity across communities was exacerbated. And there was a huge spotlight, uh, placed upon it when the pandemic first began, uh, when we had things like learning from home and distance learning in schools and tele-health and applying for, for benefits and staying connected to people, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, getting folks connected, getting hardware, as well as extending things like, um, just access and connectivity. We know in Ohio specifically, there's over a million folks who don't even have connectivity, have access to connect to the internet where they live specifically in some of our more rural areas. So investments in broadband, and then of course, water and sewer, making sure that folks have access to clean drinking water.

Kelsey B. 00:08:18 And that the infrastructure is up to date in terms of led safety, as well as making sure that there's, there's no blockages and that people don't lose access to clean water moving forward. And then our fourth R uh, is restore. So this would be to help repay for government services that were affected by loss of revenue from the pandemic. And it also allows for public sector hiring, uh, to reinforce and restore government work. So this also is kind of a little bit of a boost could be used for a boost for a government hiring to kind of pay for those projects, that infrastructure that's going to be a rebuilt and reinforced throughout this process. So really banning the four R's recover, repay, rebuild, and restore. This gave states and local governments, lots of opportunities to use these dollars, incredibly flexible, again, giving them the discretion to realize the needs of their community and where these dollars will be best spent to help their constituents and help other people who live there.

Kelsey B. 00:09:19 Now, the breakdown of the \$350 billion investment from the federal government. So when \$195 billion went across the states, \$65 billion went to counties and then \$65 billion went to municipalities. So every level of local government and jurisdiction did have the opportunity to based on population, get these fiscal recovery dollars and again, decide what they wanted us to do with it. Within those four guidelines, Ohio, here we go. The big one. So Ohio received a 5.3, \$6 billion in the state recovery funds, not counting any of the dollars that went to the counties or the local governments. So the state of Ohio itself has 5.3, \$6 billion to invest in, in its people to recover from the pandemic. We received those dollars. They kind of split it in half. So the first half we got \$2.7 billion, uh, hit Ohio's banks in may of 2021, the second half, uh, we'll hit Ohio in May of 2022.

Kelsey B. 00:10:27 So these dollars, uh, really the, again, making sure that they are spent within the guidelines, those four R's, uh, set forth by the federal government also must be encumbered or kind of assigned. We have to have a plan for them, uh, by the end of 2020 for calendar year 2024. And then they have to be spent by calendar year 2026. Um, so I don't know about you, but if it was up to me and I had \$5 billion to spend, who knows where they could go, but, uh, the state of Ohio really set out their intention to spend these dollars. And this comes directly from the Ohio office of budget and management's 2021 report on their spending of these flexible dollars. So far, their intention was their plan for ARPA funding should be targeted to support a strong and equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn strong, and that equitable recovery.

Kelsey B. 00:11:27 I want you to keep that in mind, as we begin to talk about what the state has spent these dollars on so far and see if may be fits within your guidelines and your interpretation of strong and equitable recovery. So we very quickly would like to talk about how the state has spent their dollars so far and what good they're going to do. So their largest investment from ARPA dollars so far, uh, the state spent just about \$1.5 billion to repay the federal government for dollars that we borrowed for our unemployment insurance program. These dollars will be used to help relieve Ohio businesses, have the burden to repay those dollars over time. So rather than repaying over time, those \$1.5 billion Ohio, we're going to repay our debt immediately. So that, uh, debt was state was paid in December of 2021, the next kind of a big bucket of dollars that we spent on \$250 million in an investment in water and sewer infrastructure.

Kelsey B. 00:12:37 So the state identified this need in order to address disparities and health outcomes for households without access to clean water. Absolutely certainly want to make sure that we, our water system is as clean as possible. And this is a grant process and local governments could apply for these, these dollars to improve their systems. Uh, we allocated another \$215 million to first responders. Uh, so this included police, uh, firemen, as well as emergency medical personnel,

uh, to fight violent crime and recover from pandemic related hardships. Next allocation, I was for \$84 million and investment in Ohio's pediatric behavioral health care system. We know that the pandemic has had such an impact on our youngsters, uh, throughout Ohio. We know that a lot of children are looking for, uh, different supports, uh, from their families and from outside sources to kind of deal with the impacts of what's happened over the past two years, how their, their worlds in many ways changed overnight.

Kelsey B. 00:13:44 We were excited and happy to see this investment in the pediatric behavioral health system in Ohio. We know that will be put to great use. We spent \$5 million on Ohio's expo center, uh, for Ohio state fair we're from Ohio. You know, we love the fair \$5 million went to that. And then \$2.5 billion went into Ohio's behavioral health kind of infrastructure system. So if you've been keeping track of you've had your calculator out, you know, uh, that Ohio right now has about \$622 million left in that first \$2.7 billion allocation to the state. So we've been calling them trenches the first half, again, \$2.7 billion of that. We have \$622 million left to spend. Again, the deadline to spend those dollars is December or to allocate those dollars to think of a good way to spend them would be December of 2024.

Kelsey B. 00:14:50 So let's, again, let's, let's, let's get back to the original plan and intention, and we'll kind of just spend these dollars for a strong and equitable recovery. I feel like some sectors of Ohio certainly received attention and, and investments from Ohio first, uh, from the state. And it will be interesting to see how priorities fall, uh, from our state and from our elected leaders in terms of where they're going to invest the rest of these dollars, the only, uh, kind of media coverage we've seen any indication from a governor or a state elected leaders. Uh, let's just earlier this week where governor DeWine, uh, responded to in a news press conference that he believed some more dollars could be invested into water and sewer infrastructure, which is great. But as of now, uh, no additional plans or intentions from the general assembly as to where they're going to allocate the rest of these dollars, again, 622 million left in the first half, and then the state will receive the second \$2.7 billion in may of 2022. So that was a lot of information off the bat. Sarah, thanks for bearing with me, uh, but really kind of wanted to give you the, the grounds of where we're at in spending those dollars kind of what our priorities have been so far.

Sarah K. 00:16:13 Yeah, I definitely appreciate that. Um, I think there are some highlights there that we, we could definitely get behind, but I agree that those funds that are already allocated may not align quite as well to the strong and equitable recovery that we're trying to shoot for. And, you know, up until this point, Ohio has not had really a transparent, um, process with public input to allocate these funds. And that's also one of your calls, um, as AOF to the state government. So Sarah, could you go into detail about what AOF has done to push the state to prioritize, um, recovery for all Ohioans and to establish a process with public input?

Sarah H. 00:17:07 Definitely. Thanks, Sarah. So like Kelsey laid out AOF has been keeping a really close eye on American Rescue Plan funds since it was passed last year, last May, AOF hosted a webinar where 13 of our expert members broke down the funding that Ohio would be receiving for a number of health and human services issues, what the money could be used for and what our members believe the best use of funds would be. So right from the start we were providing ideas and we were communicating with the state and the public about what was coming down the pike in October last year, it was clear that the state had not yet engaged in public outreach for these funds. So AOF posted another webinar. And this time we gave our members a public platform to share their priorities and their needs for our funds. So nine of our members presented, and AOF used those

presentations to create a memo where we summarized our members asks and sent it to the governor's office.

Sarah H. 00:18:05 So in this webinar, um, some examples of, of what our partners presented our partners at Children's Defense Fund Ohio asks for an investment in school-based health centers. The Ohio Poverty Law Center asked for investments to address inequities created by the pandemic increased access to behavioral healthcare, increased childcare capacity and access expanded broadband access and affordability, reduce lead exposure and supporting local civil legal services. The Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio is advocating for an investment in a number of housing initiatives, such as the Ohio Housing Tax Credit, affordable rental units, the housing assistance grant program, and more enterprise community partners is asking for an investment in the Ohio housing trust fund and for community economic development programs, the Ohio Council of Behavioral Health and Family Services Providers is seeking investments in behavioral health, workforce recruitment and retention expansion of crisis services, access to housing supports mental health, peer services, school-based services and more the Ohio council for home care.

Sarah H. 00:19:15 And Hospice is seeking payments to providers for re recruitment retention and training of personal care aides and nursing staff. The Ohio Workforce Coalition is advocating for retroactive hazard pay to frontline essential workers, adult education, and technical training integration. And Policy Matters Ohio is advocating for one-time hazard payments to help low-income essential workers on the front lines. So that was a really long list. And as you can see, there's no shortage of need and there's no shortage of experts who could help the states use our funds to address these needs in a targeted way. So in December last year, we still haven't seen any public outreach and the state just continued to chip away at Ohio's ARPA funds. So AOF hosted a media event where we called on the state to focus future ARPA allocations on Ohio's most immediate needs and to engage in a public planning process for the second half of the ARPA funds that Ohio is going to be receiving in May this month, we're releasing a detailed plan to spend the remaining funding from the first allocation.

Sarah H. 00:20:21 And to begin to look at planning for the second allocation that's coming this spring. So the three buckets of our spending plan that we'll be really seeing are first to address the immediate public health needs throughout the state, which includes high quality masks access to testing funding for direct service providers who are keeping communities afloat and more, secondly, our plan would address Ohio's basic needs, which right now is food access. We know that rising prices, the loss of the monthly child tax credit payments this month and with the pandemic raging and its worst and highest point ever Ohioans are struggling. And the final part of our spending plan is long-term community resilience, which encompasses many of those AOF member proposals that I listed and would include investing in indoor air quality to help mitigate the effects of future variants and other airborne diseases.

Kelsey B. 00:21:18 Now, Sarah, what a great overview of what we've been up to so far, really, I believe kind of our overarching goal for our ARPA advocacy is to make sure that populations and communities across the state who so far haven't or have really been ignored by our state leaders, uh, in terms of investments and targeted investments to people who were desperately impacted by the pandemic and also addressing the underlying and existing far before the pandemic disparities, among communities of color, other populations around Ohio. This is an opportunity and unprecedented opportunity. We hate that word at this point, but it truly is. There's no other way to describe it, but with the amount of funding and resources that the state has is their opportunity to make targeting lasting impacts for these communities to enhance their wellbeing moving forward,

and to further shore up kind of defenses in infrastructure for, at one point in the future, any other kind of pandemic or public health emergency that we see, and of course, um, and, and to touch on Sarah's point in terms of basic needs support at this moment, uh, we are really proud to support, uh, the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, current requests, uh, to our elected leaders for \$183 million to again, support the basic food support and access and infrastructure and everything that our, uh, incredible workforce and network of food support and security throughout the state, uh, need during this time to make sure people have, I mean, the most basic of need access to healthy food to support themselves and their families during this time.

Kelsey B. 00:23:10 Uh, we are very happy to support, uh, that asks them we'll continue to, to echo, and it will be a part of our advocacy moving forward. So we thank you for your leadership and we are, we're happy to spread the word.

Sarah K. 00:23:21 Yeah, I appreciate that. I think that a lot of the things that you listed out Sarah are things that should really be invested in. And I think the pandemic has shown us that, um, we really need to invest in our workers, our people, um, and I'm really glad that we are a part of the coalition that is leading the charge to push the state a little bit further. So as we know, Ohio, of course is not the only state receiving these funds. And there's a lot of great examples out there from our fellow states. So Sarah, what are some of the notable and positive ways that other states have used these funds? Yeah,

Sarah H. 00:24:14 Definitely. Thanks Sarah. Like you said, there's no shortage of examples looking across the country of targeted investments that have responded directly to the impacts of the pandemic and address the struggles that people continue to face. So just to list a few, um, California is a bigger state than Ohio. They're receiving a lot more than we are. They're receiving \$27 billion for their state fiscal recovery funds, but they have spent \$4.9 billion on homelessness services, \$2 billion to help residents pay utility and water bills. And they're also spending \$450 million on affordable housing programs. New Jersey has spent \$250 million in utility assistance for low-income residents. Washington state spent a hundred million on food assistance and Texas is also spending a hundred million dollars on food assistance, which includes \$95 million for food banks, Virginia allocated \$77 million to raise salaries for direct care staff at state behavioral health facilities. Kentucky has spent \$69 million on a number of public health programs. And Kelsey mentioned broadband earlier in the program. Um, we know that broadband has been a vital lifeline to work and healthcare school and family throughout the pandemic and states are recognizing that with their investments, Indiana is spending \$1.4 billion on improving broadband access, especially in rural areas. Kentucky is investing 300 million in broadband. Montana is investing \$272 million in broadband. Tennessee's investing 500 million and Kentucky is investing 50 million in broadband access. So clearly Ohio could be investing these funds and health and human services needs. And they've plenty of states to look to for inspiration

Kelsey B. 00:26:11 As, as we see, um, definitely states, especially some of Ohio's Midwest neighbors are investing in people and direct services, right? Well, we would hope moving forward that Ohio would follow the lead of some of our neighboring states to make meaningful investments in people. And again, their wellbeing, public safety, especially during this time when the pandemic is, is almost at its worse, um, and, and the virus continues to spread. So we, uh, we will continue to monitor and keep our ear to the ground, the state's plan for these dollars and continue to supply different ideas. Again, many from our incredible partners, uh, who have, uh, submitted their plans with how they can shore up their infrastructure and really meet the needs of people. Uh, moving forward,

Sarah K. 00:26:59 There seems to be no shortage of proposals from Ohio's experts, as well as some of the states around the country. So, um, we're just about done, but I did want to ask if there's anything else you guys would like to touch on. Is there anything I missed?

Kelsey B. 00:27:20 Thank you so much for your questions today. I think we know that the just ARPA funding and, and really tracking all those dollars across programs and all the resources, uh, that have been provided by the federal government is such a huge undertaking. Uh, but it also, again, presents in such an opportunity to really change the lives of some folks and to ensure that folks during this time have what they need and their basic needs are addressed so that they continue to stay safe, stay healthy, keep their families safe and healthy. Um, as we all are, are in this together for however much longer, this lasts, hopefully we're near the end, but we want to continue, especially over the next couple months, our outcry, again, for a public health investment, keeping people safe, because I think we need to find a sustainable way to continue to live with this pandemic, which means continued access and free access, especially for folks in vulnerable vulnerable populations, to PPE, to high quality masks.

Kelsey B. 00:28:25 And of course, testing, which we know is incredibly important. We were encouraged by, uh, the decision to allow insurance companies to kind of reimburse for the cost of tests and an at home test moving forward. Uh, however, we do know that, uh, specifically at least Ohio's Medicaid program does not reimburse for those at-home tests. So we want to make sure that we continue to see a, an abundant supply of free tests, uh, available to, to folks around communities. Uh, we know that our partners at the libraries and public health centers, local health departments are great partners in that effort, but we want to make sure that we shore up that supply and that for people who again, want to do the responsible thing to help stop the spread of this, this virus have what they need to do. So, um, again at little to no cost to them moving forward. Because again, if we want to initially recover and move kind of past this and help stop the spread, that's exactly what we need to do to protect people and families.

Sarah K. 00:29:30 Absolutely. Well, thank you both for coming on. Um, where can the listeners follow your work on the ARPA funds and everything else you both work on?

Kelsey B. 00:29:41 Excellent. Thanks so much, Sarah. So we would love for you to visit our website. So we have a page dedicated specifically to our efforts in advocacy, around the American Rescue Plan Act. And you can visit us at [advocatesforohio.org](https://advocatesforohio.org) slash ARPA, A-R-P-A, uh, and make sure you follow us on Twitter and Facebook. And that's at advocates, the number four, and then O H and that's on both Twitter and Facebook. And please, as always, we encourage you to sign up. We send out a weekly newsletter on Friday mornings. It has everything you need to know about our activities, our partners, events, and ways you can make your voice heard, kind of in these advocacy drives. And as always, when we have calls to action around these issues to again, put people first when targeting these dollars. So please sign up again, [advocates for ohio.org](https://advocatesforohio.org).

Sarah K. 00:30:40 I hope that you enjoyed my conversation with Sarah and Kelsey. We are working together with them to call for a public process for these one-time funds. And we are just so thankful for their support for our own request. As we continue to see high demand for food assistance, all while dealing with supply change shortages and rising food and freight costs, um, for our food banks. So I wanted to share with you all today, a quote from our executive director, and then we'll go into a little bit more detail about our ARPA request. So our executive director, during our latest webinar with AOF on December 13th said, quote, it pains me to find ourselves here, now, talking to you about what seems like common sense that our state should listen to the people

harmed and the organizations that are helping them. We can't possibly keep up with purchasing food at these unpredictable levels we are at right now.

Sarah K. 00:31:57 This is not sustainable for us on our own. Like Lisa said so eloquently in that quo, we have submitted a request to the state for \$183 million with 153 million being divided up amongst our food banks and 30 million granted to the association to address rising food and personal care item costs. And to build up partner agency capacity, each food bank will use their share of the \$153 million to address their own unique needs. And the way they provide services, as the pandemic made really clear, our food banks are some of the most steadfast organizations within our communities. We must shift the ways we serve. Some of our food banks are taking this opportunity to change their model into a hub market model with locations outside of their distribution location, to not only address hunger, but also other social determinants of health. In our rural communities that have experienced increasing closures of direct support services.

Sarah K. 00:33:16 Others are expanding their reach by building up physical infrastructure, like warehouse additions, refrigerators, racking systems, and more as we meet the demand of so many families, um, getting food from our network, we are physically running out of space in our warehouses and to build off of that, many of our food banks need funding to address the current cost of food and personal care items. As we are serving more households than ever before. For the past two years, we are asking for this funding because in many ways we must expand out of necessity. Our warehouses are running out of space. As we try to keep up with the demand. Our workers are burnt out from being essential workers during the ongoing pandemic, risking their health and safety to ensure their community members have food on the table. We are serving more clients than ever before and do not see signs of it letting up.

Sarah K. 00:34:27 Although our food banks have been seeing and experiencing unprecedented need, they are some of the most creative and hardworking teams I've ever seen. Our food banks will be able to get through this, but need support from our government, the DeWine administration and the general assembly granting our request. Well, ensure that the needs of those hardest hit from the pandemic are being addressed and that our network will be prepared for future economic and public health crises, the demand and need that we're seeing needs to be addressed. Now, like Kelsey spoke about during our interview, the second trench of funding will be distributed in May. And so, because of this, we are asking for \$30 million of that request to be appropriated now from the first trench of American Rescue Plan dollars. Instead of during the second trench in May, you can learn more about the details of our, our funding requests in the show notes. I hope you enjoy this episode and we will talk to you soon.