



# Newsletter From Rep. Tara Shephard

## District 79

May 15, 2026

## Mental Health Awareness Month

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a time to recognize that mental health is just as important as physical health and to continue encouraging conversations that reduce stigma and connect people with support.

Across Arkansas, families, schools, healthcare providers, veterans, first responders, and community organizations see firsthand how mental health challenges can affect people of all ages and backgrounds. Whether it is anxiety, depression, grief, trauma, or simply the stress of daily life, these struggles are real, and many Arkansans face them quietly every day.

During the 2025 Regular Session, the Arkansas General Assembly passed several pieces of legislation aimed at improving access to care and supporting mental health services throughout the state. One measure, Act 794, allows public schools to excuse student absences related to mental health concerns. The law also provides excused absences for children of fallen service members or first responders attending events focused on grief support, resiliency, or traumatic loss. The legislation recognizes that mental and emotional well-being can directly impact a student's ability to learn and succeed. The General Assembly also passed Act 1022, which creates a framework for the Department of Human Services to explore funding options for a Behavioral Health Loan Forgiveness Program. The goal is to help recruit and retain mental health professionals in behaviorally underserved communities across Arkansas through student loan forgiveness assistance.

In addition, Act 389 prohibits health benefit plans from requiring prior authorization or precertification for healthcare services provided during a mental health crisis. The goal is to help individuals receive timely care during moments when immediate treatment may be critical. Mental Health Awareness Month serves as a reminder that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. It is also an opportunity to continue building communities where people feel supported, heard, and connected to the resources they need.

While there is always more work to do, these efforts reflect a continued focus on improving mental health services and support systems for Arkansans across the state.

