

# Baby Sharon Fund

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |

The Baby Sharon Fund provided \$95,286 in grants to 65 families in 2024, primarily at Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock, to cover transportation, housing, utilities and sibling childcare expenses for families struggling to care for a sick child.

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## Helping families with sick children at ACH

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



During tax season, Arkansans have an opportunity to give back to their community when filling out their state income tax form.

The Arkansas Children's Catastrophic Illness Grant Program, better known as the Baby Sharon Fund, gives out monthly grants to families with children treated at Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH). The grants cover non-medical bills, such as utilities, mortgages, car payments and repairs, as well as a host of the other expenses that add up when a child is in the hospital.

The namesake of the fund, Sharon Emmel, was born in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in 1999. She was born with a heart defect and needed immediate surgery. The surgery was scheduled at Arkansas Children's Hospital, but the Vietnamese government would not let her leave the

country without a mandatory payment of \$36,000 for the use of planes, doctors and hospitals in Singapore. These fees cost Baby Sharon her life.

Determined to make a difference after the loss of their granddaughter, and the loss of their youngest son to cancer, Richard and Sharon “Katie” Emmel worked with State Rep. Jeremy Hutchinson in 1999. Together, they created the Baby Sharon Fund to help alleviate the financial stress of having a sick child. The fund’s committee distributes donations and state contributions to families in need every month. One hundred percent of donations go to families in need.

In 2003, the state legislature passed Act 279, adding a check box on the Arkansas Income Tax form to give Arkansans the opportunity to contribute to the fund.

Richard Emmel, who along with his wife, Katie, are members of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock, said there are two ways to donate to the Baby Sharon Fund.

“Like all charitable organizations, we depend on money, so I’m hoping, especially this time of year...that people will consider the Baby Sharon Fund,” Richard said. “It’s really easy to do — on the income tax form, there’s a place to do what’s called a ‘checkoff.’ So if you’re getting money back, you can check off \$10 or whatever you choose. The other way is donating on the website.”

Katie said their experience of losing a granddaughter due to a lack of funds, and the generosity of a stranger after the loss of their son, motivated her to make a difference.

“To help others is what we’re here for on this earth,” Katie said. “Any of us could reach the point where we could be here (in the hospital). We had a son here at this (Arkansas) Children’s (Hospital) who died of cancer 0 years ago.

“We didn’t know how we were going to pay for it. Somebody helped pay for it. We don’t know who. It was a million dollars, and somebody helped. And I’ve never gotten over that, about how people really do care if they know how to help. It’s so important. ... If you can give a little, give a little. If you can give a little more, give a little more.”

Dr. Patrick Casey, a member of Christ the King Church in Little Rock and one of the committee members, has been a pediatrician at Arkansas Children’s Hospital for nearly 40 years.

“I was always...concerned about the burden of parents having their children hospitalized,” Casey said. “This burden was both emotional and financial. Parents may lose their jobs if their children have to stay for prolonged hospitalization. This might result in challenges in paying for gasoline, utilities at home, rent and other regular expenses. I’m pleased that we have the Baby Sharon Fund committee to help some of these parents with these types of expenses.”

The Baby Sharon Fund has awarded \$322,919.60 in grants since its creation, with \$500 to \$14,500 per family awarded each month.

“We primarily rely on the discretion of the ACH social workers who bring the cases to us,” Casey said.

Al Adams, also a member of Christ the King Church in Little Rock, joined the Baby Sharon Fund committee in the summer of 2023.

“The cases we hear about are catastrophic,” Adams said. “If you’ve got a child that’s really needing a lot of medical care, a lot of your normal budget is going to go towards that, and you’re not going to be able to meet your rent that month or pay your electric bill, and that’s where this fund steps up and provides some assistance. We don’t cover anything medical that would fall under insurance — that’s not what this fund is for. But we help with those other day-to-day expenses that add up.”

Rep. Andrew Collins helped secure more funding for the Baby Sharon Fund in the 2017-2018 legislative year, but there will always be sick children with families who need help. Richard Emmel said he is hopeful, though, that God will continue to provide.

“We’ve been around since 2000,” he said, “and I want people who share my faith to know about our organization.”

### **Want to donate?**

If you want to donate to the Baby Sharon Fund before filling out your income tax form, you can visit [babysharonfund.arkansas.gov/about/donate](http://babysharonfund.arkansas.gov/about/donate).