

UAMS News Bureau

Office of Communications & Marketing
4301 West Markham # 890
Little Rock, AR 72205-7199

uamshealth.com/news



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Media Contacts:

Leslie W. Taylor, 501-686-8998

Wireless phone: 501-951-7260

leslie@uams.edu

Yavonda Chase, 501-686-8994

Wireless phone: 501-416-0354

Yavonda@uams.edu

Michael Thomsen, Ph.D., Invested in Inaugural Governor Sidney S. McMath Endowed Chair in Obesity Prevention

LITTLE ROCK — Michael Thomsen, Ph.D., professor in the Health Policy and Management Department in the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health, was invested Oct. 6 in the inaugural Governor Sidney S. McMath Endowed Chair in Obesity Prevention.

“To be entrusted with this endowment is the honor of my career,” said Thomsen. “But it is more than that, and it is bigger than me. It is a gift that amplifies our ability to work together as an institution, and it is a responsibility to give back and make a difference for good in the lives of Arkansans.”

Thomsen joined UAMS in 2021 as a professor and director of the Center for the Study of Obesity in the UAMS College of Public Health. Thomsen’s research emphasizes the interface between the food distribution system and human health. His work has improved understanding of environmental contributors to excess weight gain among Arkansas children and has helped identify student populations at high risk for childhood obesity. He is also studying the role of nutrition programs in addressing food insecurity and improving diet and health outcomes.

An endowed chair is among the highest academic honors a university can bestow on a faculty member. A chair is established with gifts of at least \$1 million, which are invested and the interest proceeds used to support the educational, research and clinical activities of the chair holder. Those named to a chair are among the most highly regarded scientists, physicians and professors in their fields.

“I’d like to extend my congratulations to Dr. Thomsen for his accomplishments, which have merited this honor,” said Stephanie Gardner, Pharm.D., Ed.D., senior vice chancellor for academic affairs, provost and chief strategy officer. “And I’d like to offer a special thanks to those here today that made this chair a reality.”

The Governor Sidney S. McMath professorship was created from settlement funds obtained by the McMath Woods Law Firm in a health-related, multistate lawsuit.

McMath, governor of Arkansas from 1949 to 1953, is viewed by many as father of the modern-day UAMS because of his advocacy of a 2-cent cigarette tax to build University Hospital, now UAMS Medical Center, and to move the campus from MacArthur Park to its West Markham site.

The chair was established with a \$1 million donation from the McMath Woods Law Firm to foster and enhance research related to obesity, to contribute to the development of the Center for the Study of Obesity in the UAMS College of Public Health, and to provide leadership for the development of a plan to address Arkansas' major nutrition and diet-related problems.

McMath, who died in 2003, was a native of Columbia County, a graduate of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and a decorated veteran of the Pacific theater in World War II. He would become a leading figure in the Southern reform movement, making major contributions in race relations, labor relations, rural electrification and other matters that helped Arkansans.

“Governor McMath understood how issues like a lack of electricity were limiting people’s lives,” said Thomsen. “He developed and led successful efforts to connect the citizens of our state to a broader world of opportunity. As an attorney, he advocated for laws that addressed inequity, and he used the law to benefit those who needed and deserved help.”

The former governor’s efforts were crucial to the construction of the UAMS campus and the neighboring State Hospital, as well as the establishment of the UAMS Department of Psychiatry.

“The Governor Sidney S. McMath Chair in Obesity Prevention is a fitting tribute to his legacy,” said Mark Williams, Ph.D., dean of the College of Public Health. “Obesity is one of, if not the most important chronic condition in Arkansas. We expect Dr. Thomsen will be an exemplary scientific leader at UAMS and in the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health, and throughout the state of Arkansas.”

“Mike was a farm boy from Utah, and he went off to study agricultural economics,” said longtime colleague Andrew McKenzie, Ph.D., associate director of the Fryar Price Risk Management Center of Excellence in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness at the University of Arkansas, in a video recording. “But somewhere along the line, he became interested in ways that the food system was shaping human health.”

“Mike has such a broad range of expertise when it comes to the topic of human health, and this gives him a unique perspective on how to solve health issues and work with scientists in different fields,” said McKenzie. “Congratulations Mike. I know that you will take your research and teaching programs to the next level in your new position.”

In addition to the honor of being named chair holder, Thomsen received a commemorative medallion and an inscribed wooden chair.

“Over the years, I have been fortunate to have wonderful colleagues, like Dr. McKenzie,” said Thomsen. “These colleagues also include many here at UAMS, in the Arkansas Children’s Research Institute and in the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement. In fact, our research into the economics of obesity and nutrition achieved success because of these partnerships, and they are why I am at UAMS today.”

“I am convinced the opportunities here at UAMS to understand the mechanisms leading to unacceptably high and disparate rates of obesity are unparalleled,” said Thomsen.

Thomsen completed his Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in agricultural economics from Utah State University in 1993 and 1994, respectively. He received a Doctor of Philosophy degree in agricultural and applied economics from the University of Minnesota in 1998.

Thomsen comes to UAMS from the University of Arkansas and the UA System Division of Agriculture, where he has worked for the past 23 years. Most recently, he served as a professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness.

Thomsen will develop active research programs related to obesity prevention, collaborate with researchers across UAMS on obesity-related work and contribute to the college’s diverse doctoral and postdoctoral programs.

Thomsen’s mentoring and teaching has been recognized with the Jack G. Justus Endowment for Teaching Excellence and the Alumni Society Outstanding Advising Award at UA.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS' clinical enterprise including its hospital, regional clinics and clinics it operates or staffs in cooperation with other providers. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. *U.S. News & World Report* recognized UAMS Medical Center as a Best Hospital for 2021-22; ranked its ear, nose and throat program among the top 50 nationwide for the third year; and named five areas as high performing — colon cancer surgery, diabetes, hip replacement, knee replacement and stroke. *Forbes* magazine ranked UAMS as seventh in the nation on its Best Employers for Diversity list. UAMS also ranked in the top 30% nationwide on *Forbes*' Best Employers for Women list and was the only Arkansas employer included. UAMS has 2,876 students, 898 medical residents and six dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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