



Report

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August 8, 2018

Alabama Arise 30th anniversary dinner

Honoring Kimble Forrister upon his retirement after 27 years at Arise

Saturday, Oct. 13, 5:00 to 7:30 p.m.
Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Montgomery

Tickets: \$50 per individual;
\$500 for a table of 8

Space is limited! Visit alarise.org to secure your seats for the event today.

Comment by Aug. 30: Say NO to Alabama's cruel Medicaid plan!

Alabama Medicaid is pushing a catch-22 proposal to take health coverage away from thousands of parents in deep poverty no matter what they do. The state's failure to expand Medicaid would turn this "work requirement" into a work penalty. More than 700 people weighed in against the plan this spring, and now another public comment period is open through Aug. 30. Visit arisecitizens.org and click through to our comment tool to make your voice heard again!

Upcoming events

Sept. 10, Fairhope – Baldwin County Arise meeting, Fairhope Friends Meeting House, 6 p.m.

Sept. 11, Mobile – Mobile County Arise meeting, Dauphin Way United Methodist Church, 6 p.m.

Sept. 13, Huntsville – Arise executive director Robyn Hyden speaks at Interfaith Mission Service, location TBD, 5:30 p.m.

7 proposals vie for 5 slots on our 2019 agenda Members to chart course Sept. 8

By Chris Sanders, communications director

We expect another lively, uplifting day when Arise members gather to pick our 2019 issue priorities at our annual meeting Sept. 8 in Montgomery. (See details and voting rules at right.) Two new proposals will compete with five current priorities for the five available slots on Arise's issue roster next year. Two other issues are permanent priorities: tax reform and adequate state budgets.

Please RSVP by Saturday, Sept. 1, by visiting arisecitizens.org or calling us at 334-832-9060. This month's newsletter is a resource to help you choose our 2019 issue priorities next month. Inside, you'll find proponents' summaries of their new proposals, as well as our policy staff's overviews of the current issue priorities. We hope to see everyone Sept. 8 as you pick Arise's 2019 agenda and renew our shared commitment to building a better Alabama for all.

Annual meeting: What you need to know

When: Saturday, Sept. 8, 2018, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Registration starts at 9:30 a.m. RSVP by Sept. 1 at arisecitizens.org or 334-832-9060. (Attendance is free. Lunch is provided. Please bring \$10 if you can.)

Where: Aldersgate United Methodist Church, 6610 Vaughn Road, Montgomery

Voting rules: Member groups get up to 42 votes: up to 6 representatives with 7 votes each. Individual members get 5 votes each. (A person can vote as an individual or as a member group's representative, but not both.) Groups must be current on dues to be eligible to vote. Individual members must have given between July 1, 2017, and Aug. 9, 2018, to be eligible to vote.

Reminder: Members must be present for all seven issue presentations to vote. No voting dots will be distributed after issue presentations begin, and no votes may be cast until after the final presentation.



Nearly 200 people came to Aldersgate United Methodist Church for our 2017 annual meeting, and we expect another big turnout when Arise members gather for the 2018 edition next month. For live updates that day, be sure to like Alabama Arise on Facebook, follow @AlabamaArise on Twitter and use #Arise2019.



A welcome from Robyn

By Robyn Hyden,
executive director

It's a privilege to share this space with you. As an Arise organizer from 2013-17, I traveled the state and met with Arise members from all over. You can't imagine how inspiring it is to work with you day in and day out.

Y'all are passionate, dedicated, brilliant, fun-loving and often hilarious. After all, who believes we can change this state without a great sense of humor and hope? Some of y'all are grassroots and folksy. You tell it like it is, and you're not afraid to speak out. Some of you are quiet – but not timid. You work behind the scenes. You bring food to share. You show up early and stay late.

Some of y'all remember what it's like to struggle, and that's why you work to make life better for others. Some of you wake up every day still struggling, and that's why you show up, share resources and organize your community for change. Some of you never had to struggle much, but you know it's wrong for our state to have so much wealth, yet so much poverty.

You are the ones with incredible stories of transformation and courage, of coming together to change things in your homes, schools, city halls and capitols. You are the folks who print research and materials to share and host book clubs, film screenings and voter education events.

You're the people who say, "I love this place so much, and because of that, I want us to do better." Some of you moved away and came back. Some even crossed borders and risked death to get here. You welcome strangers, visit prisoners, feed the hungry, clothe your neighbors and ask only, "What can we do to create more dignity and justice for each other?"

You're the type of people who gather together, and when I look around the room with y'all, I think, "I must be in the right room." It is truly, truly a privilege.

Proposed new issue priorities

Jail food funding reform

By Patricia Smith, Trinity United Methodist Church (Huntsville)

Code of Alabama Section 36-22-17, dating from 1939, entitles county sheriffs to keep and retain allowances and amounts received for feeding prisoners. (This is stated as an exception to those counties where county commissions receive and manage food money.) This law has created a perverse incentive for sheriffs to underfeed the prisoners in their care and to purchase or accept donated expired or spoiled food.

We propose that the Legislature change the law to place full responsibility with county commissions for feeding prisoners, with any unused food money returned to the general fund. This would eliminate the possibility of sheriffs pocketing unused food funds for their personal benefit and assure that federal, state and local tax dollars are spent for their allocated purpose.

Additionally, prisoners would experience improved health and physical and emotional wellbeing. Families would not have the extra financial burden of supplementing the diet of their loved one.

The enormous amounts of money pocketed by sheriffs in recent years shock the conscience. While we don't know the full extent of this practice, hundreds of thousands of dollars have been taken by only a few sheriffs. Etowah, Monroe and Morgan counties are recent examples of sheriffs who have taken conspicuously large sums of money from food accounts.

According to several Southern scholars, the current law is rooted in racist practices that predate the 1939 law, going back to the period after the Civil War up to World War II. Sheriffs could pocket food money designated for prisoners (mostly black) leased as labor.

This issue clearly aligns with the stated vision of Arise of making government leaders responsive, inclusive and justice-serving. The situation that the legislation addresses is morally repugnant, and this change should be embraced by all Arise members.

There should be no cost associated with this legislation, which should result in more funds being available for the feeding and care of county prisoners.

Consensus is building in the state to pass a statewide bill as outlined in this proposal. Gov. Kay Ivey stated emphatically the week of July 8, 2018, that "public funds should be used for public purposes." She urged the Legislature to clarify the law to assure that funds no longer go to "sheriffs personally," but instead be put into general county funds or the sheriff's official account. Many state legislators also see a need to change the law on a statewide rather than piecemeal basis.

Alabama has an opportunity to change a law that is immoral and inhumane and racist at its root. The time to harness the energy surrounding this issue is now. We urge Arise membership to support this proposal as a 2019 Arise legislative initiative.

Automatic universal voter registration

By Ned Freeman, Birmingham Friends Meeting (Quakers)

Let's reframe the debate about voting rights in Alabama by pushing for Automatic Universal Voter Registration (AUVR). AUVR honors voting as the right that it is while saving money and improving security and integrity.

AUVR would require election officials to register eligible citizens automatically using reliable information from other government lists. Being registered would be the default, though everyone

[Turn to Page 3]

Overviews of permanent Arise issue priorities

Tax reform

Alabama's upside-down tax system requires low- and middle-income households to pay twice the share of income in state and local taxes that the top 1 percent pay. Arise has worked to bring this regressive tax system closer to balance by ending the state sales tax on groceries and replacing the revenue by limiting the state's federal income tax deduction, which overwhelmingly benefits high-income people.

Along with pushing for progressive changes to income and property taxes, Arise has endorsed tax increases on sugary beverages and cigarettes to improve Alabamians' health and shore up Medicaid funding in the short term. In 2019, Arise will continue to propose progressive tax solutions to prevent shortfalls for Medicaid, mental health care, child care and other services.

Adequate state budgets

The Legislature passed 2019 state budgets that once again built upon structural flaws that will continue to hold Alabama back until lawmakers and voters approve fundamental tax reform. A recovering economy and increased tax revenue from online sales helped boost the 2019 General Fund by 9 percent and K-12 education by 3 percent. But neither budget has kept up with inflation or meets the real needs of the state and its people.

Our work for affordable health care has taken defensive and constructive forms at both federal and state levels. Last fall, Arise members helped fend off yet another congressional attempt to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Our fight then turned to guarding ACA protections against piecemeal attacks and administrative

sabotage. In January, the extension of Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) funding for a decade was a major victory for ALL Kids that capped a vigorous advocacy campaign.

As that effort ended, another began. The Trump administration announced its willingness to consider Medicaid work requirement proposals from states, and Alabama has taken that cue. Under our state's plan, parents with extremely low incomes would face a catch-22: losing Medicaid coverage if they don't get jobs *and* if they do. Arise and our partners are using required public comment periods to generate member advocacy against this punitive proposal. We also keep pushing for strong consumer voices in Medicaid, including both the new Alabama Coordinated Health Networks and the Integrated Care Network, set to launch in the coming months.

New issue proposals

(Continued from page 2)

would be allowed to opt out, and no one would be required to vote. AUVR would ensure that registered voters remain registered when they move within Alabama, and it would allow voters to update their information online and at the polls, including on Election Day.

The state would immediately update registration based on the accurate information collected when citizens get a driver's license or ID, receive Social Security, apply for services, register for classes, etc. Transferring the information electronically would reduce errors and cut the cost of printing paper forms that must be collected, mailed and manually entered. Studies suggest this can reduce the cost of maintaining voter rolls by 90 percent. AUVR would require no new revenue since it would save money.

We need AUVR because Alabama's most vulnerable citizens are being

disenfranchised. This legislation will directly benefit Arise's constituency, and a campaign for AUVR will grow and unify our base by providing moral clarity during this period when American democracy is under threat.

In addition to this legislation's logistical improvements to voting infrastructure, passage of AUVR would send a positive signal and help undo psychological impediments to voting. There has been an atmosphere of confusion and intimidation since *Shelby County v. Holder*, the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It was a cruel irony that this lawsuit originating in our state would undermine the rights won by brave Selma-to-Montgomery marchers who were beaten and bloodied in Alabama.

Since 2013, our state has imposed an onerous voter ID law and briefly closed 31 DMV offices in underprivileged areas. Our chief elections official insists that voting should be hard and that it is a mere privilege, not a right. All this –

combined with arbitrary purges and our lack of early voting, no-fault absentee voting, pre-registration for teens, and same-day registration – makes Alabama one of the most anti-voter states in the country. We therefore have a moral imperative as Alabamians to make things right.

AUVR could be implemented easily within a year of passage. Oregon passed similar legislation in 2015 and implemented virtually all of it on Jan. 1, 2016. Five other states have followed suit. Even if passage here requires years of persuasion, making it an Arise legislative priority now will have the immediate effect of moving us from defense to offense, which would help prevent further erosion of voting rights in Alabama.

The name Alabama comes from a Choctaw word meaning "clearers of the thicket." Let's live up to our name by prioritizing AUVR so we can clear the thicket of impediments that have been amassed against voting in Alabama.

Overviews of current Arise issue priorities

Criminal justice debt

Court fees and fines impose heavy burdens on many struggling families. Driver's license suspensions over unpaid fines can cause low-income Alabamians to lose their jobs. And cash bail for minor offenses can imperil families' economic security. Multiple fees can stack up, making it impossible to move on from a conviction because the consequences never end. In Alabama, people are subject to 63 separate fees in the criminal justice system, including even a \$1 fee for paying fee installments.

For next year, Arise member group Humanists of North Alabama has urged us to place particular emphasis on reforming civil asset forfeiture. This practice allows police to seize people's assets without a criminal conviction, and sometimes without even a charge. Originally intended to fight drug kingpins, this practice is now used against people accused of minor crimes. Underfunded law enforcement agencies are incentivized toward civil asset forfeiture because they can keep a large portion of the seized property. A philosophically diverse coalition has emerged seeking to end forfeiture abuse, and reform efforts seem to have real momentum.

Death penalty reform

Our state's capital punishment system is out of sync with national trends. Alabama sentences more people to death per capita than any other state, and it is the only state with no state-funded program providing legal aid to death row prisoners. Alabama also has not updated its laws to conform with U.S. Supreme Court rulings that forbid the executions of people who were under age 18 or mentally incapable of understanding their actions. Arise has worked for increased transparency in the lethal injection process and a three-year moratorium on executions.

Today, 180 people sit on Alabama's death row. Many were sentenced to death against the recommendation of a jury. In 2017, the Legislature voted overwhelmingly to bar judges from imposing death sentences when a jury recommends life without parole, but the ban is not retroactive. In recent years, legislators also have introduced bills to allow electrocutions and firing squads. Much work remains to modernize Alabama's justice system and prevent erroneous executions.

Housing Trust Fund revenue

For many Alabamians, finding a safe and affordable home is only a dream. Alabama has a shortage of about 90,000 affordable homes for folks surviving on minimum wage or less, who must work 72 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom apartment. The Alabama Housing Trust Fund (AHTF) could help families make ends meet by allowing cities and nonprofits like Habitat for Humanity to build and renovate homes. But it needs funding for this to happen. Arise seeks to fund the AHTF by increasing the state mortgage record fee from 15 cents to 30 cents for every \$100 of a mortgage.

Every child deserves a safe place to call home. Veterans deserve to return to a safe and affordable home after their services. And hard-working Alabamians should not have to choose between rent and food. AHTF funding would help families, create thousands of jobs and boost the state's economy.

Payday/title lending reform

Many Alabama borrowers, especially people lacking access to traditional banking, end up with high-interest, predatory loans. Payday loans are short-term (usually two-week) loans charging an annual percentage rate of up to 456 percent. Auto title loans charge up to 300 percent a year and carry the risk of repossession of the

family vehicle. These high-cost loans strip wealth from borrowers and hurt communities across Alabama. In the next decade, more than \$1 billion will leave Alabama communities and households, with most of it flowing to out-of-state companies.

Arise is part of a statewide coalition promoting interest rate caps on payday and title loans. In 2018, we supported a bill to give payday borrowers a 30-day repayment period, the same as other monthly bills, up from as few as 10 days now. The bill passed the Senate but stalled in the House. The momentum gained last year makes the possibility of progress more likely in the future, though the lending lobby's strength means progress will occur only with heavy citizen engagement.

Public transportation

Alabama is one of just five states with no state public transportation funding. Our jumble of local systems fails to meet the needs of many people in rural, suburban and urban Alabama. For many low-income folks and people with disabilities, the transit gap is a barrier to daily living because they can't get where they need to go in a reasonable amount of time, whether for work, education or medical care. Alabama took a big step forward by creating a state Public Transportation Trust Fund in 2018, but the law did not appropriate any funding.

Each \$1 million invested in public transportation creates 41 full-time jobs. Those jobs lead to more hiring, fuel economic growth and help people get to work and enjoy a better quality of life. By not funding public transit, Alabama leaves millions of available federal dollars on the table each year. Appropriations for the state Public Transportation Trust Fund would be eligible for a 4-to-1 federal match, making state-level funding a high-return investment in Alabama's future.