

THE ARISE REPORT

VOLUME 24, NO. 4 • DECEMBER 9, 2021

Arise unveils members' 2022 roadmap for change

By Chris Sanders, communications director
chris@alarise.org

Nearly 300 Alabama Arise members selected our 2022 legislative agenda following our online annual meeting on Sept. 25. The seven issues chosen were:

- Tax reform
- Adequate budgets for human services
- Voting rights
- Criminal justice reform
- Death penalty reform
- Payday and title lending reform
- Public transportation

Arise will work hard to advance positive change on these priorities throughout the Legislature's 2022 regular session, which will begin Jan. 11. One key advocacy opportunity will be **Arise Legislative Day on Feb. 15** at the State House in Montgomery. We plan to offer both in-person and virtual participation opportunities for our members.

See the enclosed insert or visit alarise.org for more on our 2022 agenda. And watch your email for further details on Legislative Day.

Special sessions set stage for fast-paced 2022 regular session

By Dev Wakeley, policy analyst | dev@alarise.org

The Alabama Legislature's two special sessions this fall brought mixed results on Alabama Arise issue priorities. Lawmakers improved the state's post-incarceration reentry policies in the first special session in September. And in the second session, which ended in November, they allocated \$80 million of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for costs related to COVID-19. Hospitals and nursing homes will split that amount.

But the first session ended with a misguided appropriation of \$400 million – nearly a fifth of Alabama's ARPA money – toward prison construction. (See [page 2](#).) And the second session saw a rush to pass bills that will slow COVID-19 vaccinations in a state with one of the nation's lowest vaccination rates.

Continued on page 3

A year to strengthen our communities

By Robyn Hyden, executive director
robyn@alarise.org

We can't even begin to summarize all the momentous federal policy advances realized in 2021 in one newsletter. This year brought passage of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the infrastructure package. It brought expansion of the Child Tax Credit. And we hope it will bring the forthcoming passage of the Build Back Better (BBB) Act. That means 2022 will be a year of working diligently to advocate for fair, equitable implementation of these new investments in Alabama.

ARPA provided millions of new dollars in incentive funding to support Medicaid expansion. It also provided \$2.1 billion for state COVID-19 relief and \$1.9 billion for local governments. Check out our ARPA toolkit at alarise.org for resources to ensure ARPA funding goes to the priorities we all share to strengthen our communities.

If the Senate passes BBB this month, we anticipate more than 220,000 Alabamians gaining immediate access to no-cost health insurance via healthcare.gov for the next three years. Then the work of enrollment will begin! It's not a permanent solution to our state's health care coverage gap, but it would be a major step forward for Alabamians with low incomes. Stay tuned for alerts and ways you can support – and celebrate! – when the time comes.

Funding boost brings opportunity to invest in Alabama's future

By Carol Gundlach, policy analyst | carol@alarise.org

Alabama's broken tax system usually starves our state of money to fund basic responsibilities adequately. But 2022 may be different. Record tax revenues and a surge of federal recovery dollars could allow lawmakers to address longstanding state needs and inequities – if they have the political courage.

State revenues that pay for our schools, including income taxes earmarked for teacher salaries, went up 16% in 2021, according to the Legislative Services Agency. Internet sales taxes and other revenues for non-education programs grew more than 11% in 2021. Alabama also has received federal funds under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to aid recovery from the COVID-19 recession. Alabama has \$580 million remaining in 2021 ARPA funds, plus another \$1.06 billion coming in 2022.

Coming fast behind ARPA are federal infrastructure dollars for roads, bridges and public transportation. And if the U.S. Senate passes it, the Build Back Better Act

Continued on page 4

Arise keeps up advocacy to prevent evictions

By Dev Wakeley, policy analyst | dev@alarise.org

Emergency rental assistance programs are falling short in Alabama even as tens of thousands of renters remain at risk of eviction. The Alabama Housing Finance Authority (AHFA) has received more than 70,000 applications for federal rental assistance. But fewer than 4,000 households had been helped as of Oct. 31. The AHFA has distributed only about 17% of the state's federal rental aid dollars.

Horne LLP, the AHFA's third-party application processor, stated on Sept. 24 that bank account verification was the only step necessary to bring Alabama's number of assisted households from 3,300 to more than 10,000. But the delays have continued. Problems have plagued the state since the AHFA signed its no-bid contract with Horne. As of Sept. 24, the company had received more

Continued on page 4

Welcome, McKenzie!

McKenzie Burton joined Arise as a development associate in October. She has a background in electoral campaigns at many levels, where she worked to develop and implement grassroots field strategies. Before then, she worked in youth ministry and outreach in the Episcopal Church. McKenzie graduated high school in Birmingham and has a dual B.A. from the University of Georgia in history and women’s studies.



*We’re still growing! Alabama Arise is hiring both a **health policy advocate** and a **Southeast Alabama organizer**. Visit alarise.org/employment to learn more and apply.*

2022 SESSION PREVIEW

From page 1

The second session’s primary purpose was to draw new districts for the Legislature, U.S. House and state school board. Lawmakers approved maps after little debate, in part because they understand litigation is nearly certain. Concerns about diluting Black voters’ power will be a major aspect of those suits.

Federal funds to be major topic in 2022

Next up is the 2022 regular session, beginning Jan. 11. One pressing issue the state faces is ensuring equitable, transformative use of federal funds. That includes remaining ARPA money, plus funds from the infrastructure package and potentially the Build Back Better (BBB) Act. The U.S. House passed BBB in November, and the Senate may vote on it later this month.

That money could advance several Arise issue priorities. Public transportation, Medicaid expansion and adequate emergency relief for people facing eviction are a few ways those funds could improve life for every Alabamian.

Alabama also faces a U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit over atrocious conditions in the state’s broken prison system. Arise will advocate for expanded safe releases for older and severely ill people, alongside sentencing and death penalty reforms. And we will continue beating back attacks on voting and democratic participation. Legislators’ desire to hit the campaign trail means this session likely will be fast-paced. Advocates must act quickly to move policy decisions toward an Alabama that works for everyone.

Join Alabama Arise today!

By Amber Haywood, development director
amber@alarise.org

This year, Alabama Arise deepened our commitment to ensuring we center those most impacted by poverty as we forge a new path toward a more equitable Alabama. This means we must be intentional about expanding the demographics of our membership base to be more reflective of the populations we serve.

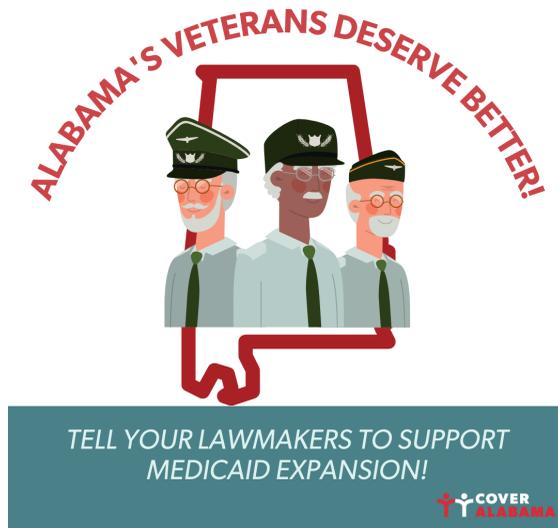
On Giving Tuesday (Nov. 30), we launched a gift membership campaign to realize this vision. We were blown away by our members’ generosity. Together, we raised more than 1,200 gift memberships to bring in more young people, people of color and people with low incomes.

As you know, so much is at stake for families with low incomes in Alabama. But these challenges are not insurmountable. When we come together across lines of difference to demand fair and just policies for all Alabamians, we can hold our lawmakers accountable. It means we can make a difference, together.

I hope you will consider renewing your membership today. Your contribution makes you eligible to vote during our annual meeting, where members choose our issue priorities. But more importantly, your gift allows us to sustain our efforts to promote better policies to alleviate poverty.

One of Arise’s generous partners will match all new or increased gifts, **DOUBLING** your impact this year. Please use the enclosed envelope or donate at alarise.org to join or renew your membership!

Veterans to Ivey: Cover Alabama!



Nearly 150 Alabama veterans wrote to Gov. Kay Ivey and legislators in November urging them to expand Medicaid. Closing the state's coverage gap would ensure affordable health care for about 5,000 veterans and 8,000 family members. The joint letter is part of Alabama Arise's Cover Alabama campaign. Read it at coveralabama.org/veterans-health.

RENTAL ASSISTANCE

Continued from page 2

than \$2 million for administration while paying out less than \$20 million in assistance.

Alabama's statewide payout rates lag significantly behind neighboring states. Alabama Arise and partner groups are building public and legislative pressure on the AHFA to speed fund distribution. We have driven news coverage on the issue, and we testified at a legislative oversight hearing in September.

Several local ERA programs have performed much better than the statewide program. Jefferson and Mobile counties have done particularly well, distributing more than 80% of their available funds.

AHFA distribution also increased significantly in October after a troubling slowdown in September. These increases must continue to reduce the application backlog — and to keep Alabamians housed during a pandemic winter.

BUDGET OVERVIEW

Continued from page 2

will include new funds for child care, health care and senior services.

Transformative changes for a better Alabama

Legislators already have begun talking about how to spend this money. Alabama Arise believes wise use of these funds can make Alabama a better place for generations to come. Many of our recommendations are in our statement of principles for spending recovery dollars, available at alarise.org/rescueplan. A few key Arise recommendations include:

- **Untax groceries.** Tax cuts should help struggling Alabamians who already pay a disproportionate share of state taxes. Ending the state grocery tax is a good place to start.
- **Expand Medicaid.** Federal recovery dollars can help free up state money for Medicaid expansion. This would save hundreds of lives and ensure affordable health coverage for more than 340,000 Alabamians every year.
- **Make the criminal justice system more just.** Legislators just made a misguided decision to spend \$400 million of ARPA money on new prison construction. (*See page 1.*) They now should invest in meaningful policy changes like sentencing reform and other alternatives to incarceration.

Alabama lawmakers have a chance to make far-reaching and lasting changes in 2022. Arise and our members will work hard to ensure they seize this opportunity.



LEGISLATIVE DAY

Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2022

9:30 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Alabama State House Room 200
11 South Union Street, Montgomery



**EXPAND
MEDICAID**



**UNTAX
GROCERIES**



**FUND
TRANSIT**



**VOTING
RIGHTS**

OPTION 1: We have reserved a limited number of seats for those who wish to join us in person for Legislative Day. Because we value health and safety, all attendees are asked to wear masks, be vaccinated and observe social distancing during the event. **Registration is required since seating is limited.** To participate in person, register online by Feb. 8 at alarise.org/2022legislateday and **register at the in-person link.**

OPTION 2: To participate virtually, visit alarise.org/2022legislateday and **register at the virtual option link.**

9:30 a.m. - Registration

(Registration by Feb. 8 required for in-person attendance)

10 a.m. - Briefing & news conference

12:15 p.m. - Lunch & legislative meetings

2:30 p.m. - Membership meeting

No cost for in-person attendance (suggested \$10 donation for lunch)



2022 Issue Priorities

Our policy roadmap to a better, more inclusive Alabama

Tax Reform



A better tax system can help struggling people make ends meet. Alabama should untax groceries and ensure fair, sustainable funding for vital services.

Adequate State Budgets



Strong public services broaden opportunity for all. Alabama must expand Medicaid, boost child care and help people facing hunger and hardship.

Criminal Justice Reform



Our justice system must ensure fairness and equity for all. Alabama should repeal the Habitual Felony Offender Act and modernize other sentencing policies.

Voting Rights



Everyone deserves a say in our democracy. Alabama should pass automatic voter registration and lift barriers to voting rights restoration.

Payday and Title Lending Reform



Borrowers in a sea of deep debt need a lifeboat, not an anchor. Alabama should strengthen consumer protections on high-cost payday and title loans.

Death Penalty Reform



All Alabamians deserve equal justice under the law. Lawmakers should require juries to be unanimous in any decision to impose a death sentence.

Public Transportation



Community connection is vital. Alabama should fund public transportation so everyone can get to work, school, medical care and more.

Join Arise's movement for change! Visit alarise.org to learn more.