

THE ARISE REPORT

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Alabama Arise Action
2021 Membership Meeting

Thursday, April 22, 2021
Noon – 1 p.m. via Zoom

At our 2021 Alabama Arise Action meeting, Arise staff will review our progress during the 2021 legislative session. Staff members also will share opportunities for you to engage with your lawmakers.

To register, visit alariseaction.org. Member groups in good standing will receive details on sending member group representatives.

Participants will receive updates on the Alabama Arise Action budget, board nominations and new member groups who have joined our coalition. (Alabama Arise Action is Alabama Arise's 501(c)(4) sister organization.)

Arise Membership Mondays

Our organizers are convening monthly membership meetings to review opportunities for action during the 2021 regular session.

We also will schedule a May meeting after the session ends. To register, visit alarise.org/2021membershmondays.

American Rescue Plan Act offers path to recovery

By Chris Sanders, communications director | chris@alarise.org

As vaccinations continue across Alabama, COVID-19's viselike grip on our lives is loosening. The pandemic has caused immense physical, emotional and economic suffering, and those aftereffects will not fade quickly. But the American Rescue Plan Act – the federal relief package that President Joe Biden signed March 11 – includes many important policies to begin the healing.

Some of the most crucial investments come in health care. The law increases subsidies for marketplace health coverage under the Affordable Care Act. It also creates new incentives that would more than offset the cost of Medicaid expansion. The incentives would remove Alabama's last financial barrier to extending coverage to more than 340,000 adults with low incomes.

If Gov. Kay Ivey agrees to expand Medicaid, Alabama would receive between \$740 million and \$940 million over two years. That would result from a 5-percentage-point federal funding increase for traditional Medicaid coverage.

"Medicaid expansion is the single biggest step Alabama can take to recover from the pandemic," Alabama Arise campaign director Jane Adams said.

Continued on page 4

In 2021, big changes are possible in Alabama

By Robyn Hyden, executive director
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We knew going in that this year's legislative session would be tricky. Lawmakers returned to Montgomery in early February determined to pass bills to protect big businesses and did so immediately. Bills designed to help the rest of us have been a different story, and access to legislators remains limited. Despite these challenges, Arise members are doing what you do best: demanding that lawmakers do more to help people struggling because of poverty and economic oppression.

Halfway through the 2021 regular session, legislators have failed to pass one of any number of bills from our agenda for change. But it's not for a lack of member engagement, education and lobbying. And we can't let them off the hook.

With an unprecedented amount of federal funding, Alabama has an opportunity to distribute massive support to people who are struggling. We can reduce racial and economic health disparities by expanding Medicaid. We can supplement new federal tax credits for low-income families and point our tax code in the right direction.

If we have learned anything from the last year, it's that a whole lot can change overnight. With your support, we're ready to see those changes you helped us envision become a reality.

Money matters: Budgets top priority for session

Lawmakers also discussing Medicaid expansion, criminal justice reform, voting rights, this year

By Jim Carnes, policy director, and Carol Gundlach and Dev Wakeley, policy analysts

As the Alabama Legislature approaches the 2021 regular session's final days, both state budgets are halfway to passage. The Education Trust Fund (ETF) budget has passed in the Senate and is in the House's education budget committee. The General Fund (GF) budget, which funds all non-education services, has cleared the House and awaits Senate committee approval. Despite the COVID-19 recession, both budgets eked out small increases – 3% in the GF and 6% in the ETF. This will allow pay raises for teachers and state employees. It also will fund one-time additional 2022 teacher units and a new salary matrix for certified math and science teachers.

While budgets progressed, the Senate divided over whether to pass a gambling bill that would increase revenue for one or both. After Sen. Del Marsh's lottery and gaming bill failed March 9, Sens. Garlan Gudger, R-Cullman, and Jim McClendon, R-Springville, introduced lottery bills. Meanwhile, Marsh, R-Anniston, introduced both a new lottery and a new gaming bill.

The Senate may consider some combination of these measures later this session. If approved by legislators and voters, expansion of gambling could increase state revenues anywhere from \$118 million to \$550 million. (Arise takes no position for or against gambling legislation.)

Health care



A big change on the health care front this year is the prominent role of Medicaid expansion in legislative discussions, both on and off the chamber floors. Gov. Kay Ivey can propose expansion through administrative steps, but lawmakers still control the purse strings. So legislative advocacy is essential!

As the pandemic highlights the need for rigorous health data, Alabama had been one of only two states lacking a statewide hospital discharge database. Now we'll be shedding that dubious distinction with the enactment of HB 210 by Rep. Paul Lee, R-Dothan, a bill that Arise supported.

The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) has been the target of

Continued on page 4

You give me hope for a brighter future in Alabama

A farewell column from Brenda Boman, former Arise development director

When I joined the Alabama Arise staff 16 years ago as its development director, I came to this work with little to recommend me other than a sincere desire to help the organization achieve its mission: to improve the lives of Alabamians with low incomes.

As a retired English teacher who had spent several years at a small rural school in the Black Belt, I had seen the struggles my students and their families faced on a daily basis. I observed how circumstances beyond their control compounded on one another to push them deeper into poverty.

Alabama's lopsided tax structure creates great inequities in educational opportunities compared to more affluent communities. This can forecast a future of low-paying jobs without the benefits of health insurance, paid sick leave or child care.

Without public transportation, keeping a job often depends on being able to purchase a vehicle and keep it running. That's a need that can send a panic-stricken mama or daddy to high-cost payday lenders. And Alabama's insistence on taxing groceries makes this one of the most expensive states for struggling families to keep food on the table.

What I came to realize is that changing these and other conditions would take policy shifts at the state level. And that's what led me to Arise.

I wish I could say that more progress has been made. But I do know one thing: As Arise has grown, so has its reputation and influence. With my retirement effective Jan. 31, 2021, I leave Arise with the hope for great opportunities on the horizon.

I have great confidence in the current staff and membership, many of whom have become friends as well as supporters. I'll be cheering from the sidelines as I continue to support Arise, and I hope you will, too!



Brenda Boman retired in January after 16 years as Alabama Arise's development director. We're grateful for her hard work to build our membership and strengthen our movement for change.

We want to raise another \$50,000 toward Medicaid expansion. Will you join us?

By Amber Haywood, development director
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Alabama Arise members have worked diligently to fight for the equitable policies that Alabamians with low incomes deserve. We have come together to hold lawmakers accountable, taking action on our state's most critical issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shined a light on one issue that simply can't wait: health care. Right now, more than 340,000 of our friends and neighbors would benefit from Medicaid expansion because they are either uninsured or struggling to afford coverage.

That means more than 340,000 members of our communities live in fear of a minor injury. More than 340,000 of our neighbors would be financially ruined by an unexpected hospital visit. And more than 340,000 of our loved ones don't have access to vital preventive care and ongoing treatment.

With your support, we're on a mission to change this. With your additional gift, you can be a part of expanding Medicaid in Alabama!

Will you consider an additional gift toward our year-end campaign? We have set an ambitious goal of raising another \$50,000 in individual contributions before our budget year ends June 30.

We can't do this work without you. Will you join today and help us work to expand Medicaid? Please donate today at alarise.org.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Continued from page 2

several proposals to increase political control over the agency's leadership and decision-making. McClendon's SB 240, for example, would abolish the State Board of Health, the medical body that appoints the state health officer, and make ADPH's director a gubernatorial appointment. Other bills would limit state and county health officials' authority to declare health emergencies. One such measure, SB 97 by Sen. Tom Whatley, R-Auburn, passed the Senate in early April.

Criminal justice reform



Several criminal justice improvements have moved forward this year. These include partial reform of sentencing under the Habitual Felony Offender Act (HFOA) and expanded alternatives to imprisonment. Bigger reforms like HFOA repeal and abolition of driver's license suspension have been slowed due to opposition, though. That inaction has persisted even in the face of a U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit over unconstitutional prison conditions.

Voting rights



Efforts to protect and expand voting rights continue to face an uphill battle. Bills prohibiting curbside voting have advanced, despite the practice's success in Mississippi and other states. Meanwhile, a bill allowing no-cause absentee voting stalled, as did measures on early voting and same-day voter registration. Legislation improving voting rights restoration did advance, but only after removal of a provision that would have ended a de facto poll tax: the requirement for people with convictions to pay all fines and fees before regaining voting rights.

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

Continued from page 1

"Congress did their job. Now it's time for the governor and state lawmakers to do theirs."

The act also slashes poverty by boosting unemployment insurance and nutrition assistance benefits and expanding the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit. It funds rental and mortgage assistance to help prevent evictions and foreclosures. And it provides Alabama's state and local governments with \$4 billion of federal assistance to help avoid cuts to education and other vital services.

PERSISTENT DISPARITIES – AND HOW TO END THEM

The relief package provides opportunities to begin dismantling longtime structural barriers in Alabama. Arise offers many such policy recommendations in our recent report, *The State of Working Alabama 2021*, which details how COVID-19 cost hundreds of thousands of Alabamians their jobs and fueled a rapid surge of hunger and hardship across our state. (*The executive summary of the report is enclosed.*)

COVID-19's toll has been especially heavy for women and people of color, the report finds. The pandemic exacerbated Alabama's preexisting racial, gender and regional disparities in health care, housing, nutrition and economic opportunity. These inequities – the legacy of bad policy decisions – prevent Alabama from reaching its full potential.

"Alabama's economic, racial and gender inequities are preventable and reversible," Arise policy director Jim Carnes said. "By making better policy choices now and in the future, we can chart a path toward a more equitable economy."