

# THE ARISE REPORT

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## Building on our momentum for the new year

By David Stout, legislative director | [david@alarise.org](mailto:david@alarise.org)

As we close out 2025, Arise members and member organizations can reflect on a very successful year. Reducing the state sales tax on groceries from 3% to 2% and guaranteeing more students in public schools get a free breakfast with a \$7.3 million budget appropriation were two of the biggest highlights worth celebrating.

We also made improvements in maternal health, including tax cuts passed for maternal and infant care products as well as those that fell under the “pink tax” such as diapers, baby formula and feminine hygiene products. Expecting mothers will have an easier time accessing Medicaid during the early days of their pregnancy, creating an increased opportunity for healthy pregnancies and babies. For the first time, a progressive model for parental leave for education employees and state workers became law.

Arise aggressively fought to ensure SNAP benefits remained intact among federal changes. These successes come from the dedicated and engaged members who have remained steadfast in Arise’s mission to make Alabama more responsive to its citizens.

The 2026 legislative session, the last session of the quadrennium before lawmakers will face the public in the voting booth, is gearing up to be another busy time for Arise. Below is our roadmap for how we will prepare for the challenges ahead.

### HEALTH EQUITY

Arise will continue our commitment to expand Medicaid and ensure health

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## Arise’s 2026 priorities highlight our roadmap for change in Alabama

By Matt Okarmus, senior communications associate | [matt@alarise.org](mailto:matt@alarise.org)

Nearly 600 members voted to affirm Alabama Arise’s 2026 legislative priorities after this fall’s Annual Meeting. In order, our priorities for the next four years will be:

- Health equity
- Hunger relief
- Adequate state budgets
- Inclusive democracy
- Justice reform
- Tax reform
- Worker power

Arise adopted a new approach to member voting on legislative priorities for 2026, helping us better commit to multiyear advocacy on the issues that matter most to our members. This approach better reflects the depth and breadth of Arise’s work (*See page 1 for more*).

Read the enclosed flyer for more on our 2026 legislative priorities and email organizing director Presdelane Harris at [pres@alarise.org](mailto:pres@alarise.org) to set up an issue review event in your area to prepare for the Legislature’s 2026 session, which starts on Tuesday, Jan. 13.

# My trip to South Africa: learning from another young democracy

By Robyn Hyden, executive director | [robyn@alarise.org](mailto:robyn@alarise.org)

I was fortunate this fall to join a unique learning exchange of 10 leaders from across the U.S. and nine colleagues from South Africa. We spent a week traveling in their country and meeting with grassroots leaders.

We started in Johannesburg and later moved to the coastal town of Durban to learn from their nation's struggle to defeat an apartheid government and establish a multiracial, multifaith and multiethnic democracy.



Our own multiracial democracy is not so well-established, given that many Alabamians were legally barred from voting rights in our state until 60 years ago, and these rights remain consistently under threat. Black voters are still blocked from voting at a rate three times that of white voters due to unequal sentencing and felony disenfranchisement laws, and numerous rules have been proposed just this year that would effectively disenfranchise naturalized immigrants.

From our South African colleagues, I learned coalitions of solidarity to protect the rights of everyone across lines of race, religion and ethnicity are hard-won. These relationships must be carefully fostered and protected in our movements. Democracy itself is fragile and under continuous threat in both of our nations. We must become consistent champions of democratic participation at every level for a free society to flourish.

When our colleagues come to Montgomery next spring for the 2026 Selma Jubilee Celebration, I imagine continuing our fellowship by sharing lessons, camaraderie, joy — and most of all hope — for a more democratic and inclusive future.



Above: Robyn pictured with the U.S. / South Africa Community Organizers' Exchange at the Mandela Capture Site in Howick, South Africa, in October. Photo courtesy Gladys Ryan. Left: Robyn pictured with the U.S. / South Africa Community Organizers' Exchange at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2025. Photo courtesy 16vphotography

# Long federal road ahead for SNAP, health care

By Carol Gundlach, senior policy analyst | [carol@alarise.org](mailto:carol@alarise.org)  
and Debbie Smith, Cover Alabama campaign director | [debbie@alarise.org](mailto:debbie@alarise.org)

Alabama Arise believes that society should care for the most vulnerable in our nation — children, the elderly, those who are disabled and those who have fallen on temporary hard times. Since the Great Depression, Americans have been assured that, no matter how hard times get, our basic nutritional needs would be met by our government.

But 2025 has been a head-spinning and traumatic year for the 750,000 Alabama recipients of SNAP food assistance (commonly called Food Stamps), a stable pillar in America's response to poverty and hunger. For 60 years, through multiple federal shutdowns, budget crises and wars, SNAP assistance has reliably fed hungry Americans. 2025 was different.

## BILL DOESN'T HELP THOSE WHO NEED IT

HR 1, the budget reconciliation bill (or "One Big Beautiful Bill") passed by Congress in July, made it harder for people to receive food assistance and reduced the amount of assistance available, even as grocery costs rose. Existing time limits and burdensome paperwork requirements for some SNAP recipients were expanded to include unhoused people, veterans, children aging out of foster care and elderly recipients.

Non-citizens and refugees legally in the U.S. were denied food assistance. And states, for the first time, will have to pay for some SNAP benefit costs. By mid-2027, Alabama will have to come up with approximately \$175M to pay for our existing SNAP program.

## SHUTDOWN DEEPENED IMPACT

The October federal government shutdown only made the food crisis worse. The United States Department of Agriculture refused to use its emergency funds, and instead, cut off food assistance to 42 million Americans, including all SNAP recipients in Alabama.

Food banks and pantries, bolstered by small state grants, tried to fill the gap but many of our neighbors faced hunger as the holidays approached. The ending of the shutdown allowed the Department of Human Resources to get SNAP benefits out in record time, but legal immigrants face immediate termination of SNAP

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## Join us this holiday season

By Jacob Smith, advancement and operations director | [jacob@alarise.org](mailto:jacob@alarise.org)

We know people are struggling because of bad public policies, especially this year. We're grateful to our partner organizations leading the charge with direct services.

At Alabama Arise, we are focused on the root of the problem - improving policies for all Alabamians.

Because you're a member, you know that you can go to [alarise.org/donate](https://alarise.org/donate) to make a one-time gift. But there are other ways to give that you may not have thought about:

You can give to our 501(c)(4) partner organization Alabama Arise Action at [alariseaction.org](https://alariseaction.org). Funding for Alabama Arise Action allows us to send action alerts and increase lobbying efforts at the State House.

You can also make a gift that lasts! When we receive a bequest, it has a lasting impact. Leave us in your will so that we can keep working on our shared vision.

Finally, make a monthly gift! Go to [alarise.org/donate](https://alarise.org/donate) and select "make my gift recurring."

We work year round to engage everyday people in policy — it's not just during the legislative session.

As always, please feel free to reach out to me at [jacob@alarise.org](mailto:jacob@alarise.org). Thank you for your generosity this holiday season.

# STAFF SPOTLIGHT

## Southeast Alabama organizer Bernadette Allen brings new energy to Alabama Arise

By Whitney Washington, communications associate | [whitney@alarise.org](mailto:whitney@alarise.org)



Bernadette Allen is one of Arise's newest staff members, joining our team as the Southwest Alabama organizer in May 2025. Like many other staff members, she began her career in a different field before joining Alabama Arise.

Bernadette worked in the federal government for 18 years, retiring last May. In her free time, she sought opportunities to serve her community by volunteering with Stand Up Mobile and Black Voters Matter. Her colleagues and friends suggested she apply at Arise. And as she says, "The rest is history."

In less than a year, Bernadette has learned a great deal from her colleagues on the organizing team.

"Formeeca and Tamela have suggested we use video shorts on social media platforms to engage young people in our work. I believe their vision will soon be a major medium through which we attract new Arise groups, individual members, partners and employees," she says.

She's especially fond of Arise's longest-serving organizer, Stan Johnson.

"I would like to trade places with [Stan] as long as I had access to the knowledge he has gleaned from at least half of his lived experiences, personally and professionally," she says. "To me he is the 'triple OG' of organizing."

She's learned to practice self care to do her job as well as she can.

"I care for myself by intentionally balancing work and personal life activities," she says. "I treat myself to fine dining, live entertainment, golfing and traveling multiple times in a year."

A Mobile native, Bernadette loves celebrating Mardi Gras.

"Alabamians and tourists celebrate the season in harmony without regard for race, color, religion, gender, sexuality or

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## BERNADETTE

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socioeconomic status.”

Bernadette has lots of dreams for her tenure at Arise. She’d love to bring more young people into our work and hopes to have Arise active in as many areas as the state as possible.

Members have had an impact on Bernadette. She sees them as integral to our mission and looks forward to all the ways she can continue to work with them. From attending events like listening sessions and Legislative Day to sharing action alerts, members make Arise’s mission a reality.

Bernadette is an unmistakable new force at Arise, and she’s excited to see what’s next.

“I have a passion for advocating for people who are marginalized in any way, shape or form,” she says. “I make no apologies for meeting the moment with the same energy and enthusiasm that comes from the opposition.”

# 2025 Annual Meeting

Arise celebrated record participation in our 2025 Annual Meeting — nearly 300 attended between in-person and virtual, not to mention various watch parties hosted by our wonderful members. We had a packed room at the Legacy Annex in Montgomery in September, as information was shared to inform our selection of 2026 legislative priorities. Top right: Clyde Jones, outgoing Arise board president, speaks to our members. All other photos, including front page: Members gather and participate in our annual meeting. Visit our Facebook page — [facebook.com/AlabamaArise](https://facebook.com/AlabamaArise) — to see more photos. Photo credit: Julie Bennett.



## SESSION

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care for more Alabamians. With the growing lack of access to maternal health care, we will also continue the fight to protect and improve access for life-saving maternal care and contraception.

In the realm of improving our current Medicaid coverage, Alabama is ranked 49th for dental care. We will work to expand access to adult dental benefits for Medicaid members.

### HUNGER RELIEF

While 2025 saw a significant step forward in no-cost school meals, almost 30 percent of students still lack access to school breakfast or lunch. Arise will work to protect and expand funding for school meals as well as the Summer EBT program (now SUN Bucks) for low-income students. Arise will also be a voice of reason to block limitations on the purchase of certain items under SNAP guidelines.

### ADEQUATE STATE BUDGETS

With the constant waste of lucrative tax incentives going to big corporations, we must remain vigilant to protect our budgets from excessive giveaways, ill-conceived tax exemptions and tax credits. The biggest threat to the Education Trust Fund is the relatively new tax credit for private school students from the CHOOSE Act that allows up to \$7,000 per student, a drain on public school resources.

If income caps are removed, more than \$500 million in school tax dollars could go to previously enrolled private school students. In 2026, Arise will continue to

oppose any expansion of the CHOOSE Act.

Alabama does not currently provide any state funds for the Housing Trust Fund to support more affordable housing for low-income, elderly, and disabled citizens. Equally insufficient is the state's failure to fund the Public Transportation Trust Fund, which could secure up to an 80% match in federal funds. Arise will continue efforts to fund the Alabama Housing Trust Fund and the Public Transportation Trust Fund.

### INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

The constant effort to suppress voting in Alabama demands we expand voting rights with comprehensive legislation, including allowing people to cast an absentee ballot without unnecessary, trivial restrictions. We will work to remove barriers for people who have been banned from voting because of a criminal conviction. We will also continue to oppose laws attacking the inclusion of immigrants, Black Alabamians and other racial and ethnic minorities in our society.

### JUSTICE REFORM

In 2018, Arise worked to eliminate judicial override, a policy that allowed judges to impose a death sentence against the will of the jury. Unfortunately, the law was not retroactive. With nearly 30 people still on death row because of this outdated and now illegal policy, it's time to make judicial override retroactive and seek justice for those condemned.

We must also work to reform Alabama's three-strikes law, which

disproportionately impacts low-income defendants. Under this law, a person could be serving a life sentence because of a series of minor infractions. Adding to the burden of prison overcrowding, Alabama's parole system has been plagued by unworkable guidelines, driving our prison overcrowding crisis and making our system more punitive, not restorative. It's time to make the parole system more fair, transparent and efficient.

### TAX REFORM

Faced with tariffs and increasing food costs, there's never been a better time to fully eliminate Alabama's tax on groceries. A larger share of the burden falls on those with lower incomes, who spend more of their income on food than the wealthy. Arise supports a more progressive and fair income tax that recognizes the inequities in our tax rates.

### WORKER POWER

The newest priority on our 2026 legislative agenda is supporting worker power legislation in partnership with organized labor. Our primary goal will be to remove tax incentives from companies that employ child labor and violate workers' rights.

We will also work to expand paid parental leave policies to cover more state employees, teachers and other workers. Often, the person most abused is the temporary worker, who has no rights. Arise will work to pass workplace protections in a Temp Workers' Bill of Rights to improve on-the-job conditions, along with a pathway for full-time jobs.

# Thank you for a great year!

As a statewide organization, the staff of Alabama Arise rarely are parked in an office setting. From listening sessions, to meeting with lawmakers, to community trainings and meetings (and a lot in between!), we love the opportunity to interact with people all over the state! Top left: Worker Power Campaign Director Adam Keller speaks to University of North Alabama social work students. Bottom left: Southwest Alabama organizer Bernadette Allen, left, and Northeast Alabama organizer Tamela Glover, right, pose with Aisha Jones with the Women's Rights & Empowerment Network while at Ignite the South. Top right: Worker policy advocate Dev Wakeley, right, and Legislative Director David Stout, left, met in Mobile with Rep. Barbara Drummond, Rep. Napoleon Bracy, Jr., and Rep. Adline Clark. Middle right: Senior development associate McKenzie Burton and communications associate Whitney Washington take part in a letter-signing party in Huntsville. Bottom right: Formeeca Tripp, right, senior organizer for Southeast Alabama, sits with Veronica Ayala with Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice at a town hall in Opelika.



## SNAP, HEALTH CARE

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benefits. And many more people face new, draconian time limits that began in December.

And many of the same people face huge increases in the cost of their health care.

### HEALTH COSTS WILL SOAR

As of this writing, Congress has not extended enhanced premium tax credits (ePTCs), which lower monthly premiums for nearly 500,000 Alabamians who get their coverage through the ACA Marketplace. As a result, 130,000 Alabamians are expected to lose coverage. This decision threatens to roll back the significant progress Alabama has made

in reducing its uninsured rate.

The enhanced tax credits have played a central role in that progress. Lowering premiums opened Healthcare.gov plans to workers who had long been locked out of affordable coverage. Nearly half of Healthcare.gov enrollees in Alabama fall into income ranges that would qualify them for Medicaid expansion if they lived in the 40 states that have expanded. Without the credits, many will face premiums they simply cannot pay, increasing the number of uninsured at a time when families are already navigating high costs of living.

This shift will place additional pressure on Alabama's health care system,

especially rural hospitals and clinics that already struggle with staffing shortages, rising uncompensated care and service reductions.

### HR 1 COMPLICATES HEALTH CARE ACCESS

Federal changes under HR 1 create additional challenges. The law eliminates financial incentives meant to help states like Alabama adopt Medicaid expansion, including extra federal funding that would have supported expansion startup costs for the first two years. It also places new restrictions on increasing provider taxes, which Alabama uses to help fund its share of Medicaid. These limits would become more restrictive if Alabama chose to expand Medicaid in the future, and, even now, they place a long-term cap on our state's flexibility to finance Medicaid as health care costs continue to rise.

HR 1 also shifts new SNAP funding responsibilities to states. This will strain the state budget at a time when food insecurity is rising and families are struggling to meet basic needs.

Taken together, these issues ensure that health care and food access will be unavoidable priorities in the 2025 legislative session. The coming year will bring real challenges, but it also offers Alabama lawmakers an opportunity and a responsibility to strengthen the state's health and nutrition safety nets at a moment when Alabamians need them most.



LaTrell Clifford Wood, left, and Whit Sides, right, speak at a Lunch & Learn at Trinity United Methodist Church in Homewood about the reconciliation bill in November.

# 2026 Legislative Priorities



## Our roadmap to a better Alabama

### Health Equity



Alabama should save lives, create jobs and protect rural health care by closing the Medicaid coverage gap and improving access to high-quality maternity care.

### Hunger Relief



Alabama should help families thrive by ensuring all public schools can offer free school meals for all of their students and by protecting vital nutrition programs.

### Adequate State Budgets



Strong public services broaden opportunity for all. Alabama should protect funding for public schools and invest in affordable housing and public transportation.

### Inclusive Democracy



Everyone deserves a say in our democracy. Alabama should allow no-excuse absentee voting and lift barriers to voting rights restoration for disenfranchised people.

### Justice Reform



Alabama's justice system should focus on rehabilitation, not cruelty. Our state should stop executing people sentenced to death against a jury's recommendation. Alabama also needs to reform parole and sentencing.

### Tax Reform



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

### Worker Power



Alabama should support working people by removing tax incentives from companies that violate child labor laws, extending paid parental leave to more workers and improving safeguards for temp workers.

Join Arise's movement for change! Visit [alarise.org](http://alarise.org) to learn more.

ALABAMA   
**Arise**

**PRIORITIES REVIEW:  
PREPARING FOR THE 2026  
LEGISLATIVE SESSION**



- The 2026 legislative session starts Jan. 13.
- Legislators will be making decisions about our lives.
- We must speak up to advocate for ourselves, our families and our state.
- We must build on last year's wins!

Join us online for a review of Arise's  
2026 legislative priorities.

**MONDAY, JAN. 12, 2026  
6 - 7:15 P.M.**

This session will inform and equip us for action  
during the legislative session.

We can make a difference and help build  
a better Alabama for all.

**ACT  
NOW**

**ACT  
NOW**

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