

Arise Town Hall Tuesday – Getting civic July 21, 2020

Discussion focused on protecting voting rights and boosting Census responses during a pandemic.

Kim Clark's Breakout Session

Voting rights

- AL pursue automatic registration similar to GA. CO allows registration when you obtain your driver's license.
- To have a "no cause" absentee ballot. To be allowed to request an absentee ballot without having to state a reason.
- Initiate early voting – 2 weeks prior to an election
- End the requirement that fines/fees must be paid in order to vote.

Census – did not have any suggestions for this topic

Presdelane Harris' Breakout Session

About 12 people were in the breakout group. Here are highlights of discussion from participants.

- Participants joined this session because they are passionate about voting and voting rights issues. The consensus is that voting is a basic right that should be easy to access, not hindered by multiple barriers.
- **Issues/Ideas raised by participants:**
 - One participant relayed her experience with voting absentee. It was full of hoop and barriers – needed transportation to get to a required notary, access to a printer to print the ballot, etc. All agreed that the process should be simplified so that voting absentee is easier.
 - ADAP participant discussed current lawsuit to make voting more accessible to people living with disabilities.
 - Before the pandemic, one participant had organized a project to register Auburn high school students. He was only able to get to one high school before the pandemic shutdown.
 - Part of simplifying the voting process and removing barriers should include enough resources to curtail long lines thus shortening waiting times. This is especially important to people who have to return to work.
 - Participants were interested in "drive by" voting or "curbside" voting. This issues especially of interest to the disability community.
 - Participants also would like to see "mail-in" voting.
 - AVR was affirmed by participants.
 - One participant raised the idea of "election day" as a state holiday to make it easier for working folk.

- In addressing the need to reach hard to count populations about the Census, one participant suggested collaborating with food banks. Many of the folk we want to reach are accessing more food banks.
- Participants covered other issues including:
 - Need for student loan debt relief. Depending on amounts of debt and jobs available, student loans can seriously impact incomes. Student loan debt should not hold students in poverty. One solution is a state loan relief program similar to the federal relief program.
 - Need to untax groceries!
 - Environmental issues particularly those things impacting low-wealth communities need attention.
 - Income inequality and the widening gap is an issue of concern.
 - Need to repeal the state's law that prevents localities from setting their own minimum wage level.
 - AL's Constitution hinders efforts to move forward in the state.
 - One participant suggested making the Secretary of State's salary dependent on the percentage of eligible voters who are registered and the percentage of those eligible who vote!

Stan Johnson's Breakout Session

1. We began the breakout session with Census 101 from Jay Williams, an Alabama census worker. He shared information on ways to complete the census and offered encouragement to others to get their family members signed up.
2. It was announced that Birmingham is performing very low in getting the census in and that the state overall is performing badly compared to other states.
3. There was a question concerning undocumented residents being counted. Jim Williams spoke to the undocumented issue being resolved by the US Supreme Court. The census is not an Arise legislative issue, but members were encouraged to help out with the digital campaign.
4. The absentee voting process was clarified for the upcoming election during the pandemic. Furthermore, the group is encouraging Arise to continue working on legislation legalizing no-cause absentee early voting plus the elimination of barriers like requiring two witnesses, a notary and a picture ID.
5. The Board of Pardons and Paroles is broken and needs to be fixed. The group did not know if there was a legislative fix for this issue. The fact that very few inmates are being parole is troublesome.
6. Early voting should be an issue. The group felt GBM might already be preparing to deal with this issue.
7. Linsey brought up the issue of returning folks from prison being denied the right to vote. This has been a long-standing practice in southern states. Prisoners can do all their time and still be denied the right to vote.

Mike Nicholson's Breakout Session

- My breakout room had number of folks from Birmingham that offered many stories and perspectives.
 - Several were there to talk about Medicaid Expansion.

- A few of the participants were particularly concerned with our system of fines and fees and how it traps poor people in poverty and prevents them from participating in society.
 - She proposed working to set up a fund to help these folks pay off their fines and fees.
- One participant advocated for the possibility of putting the money our state received from the Federal CARES Act into the Housing Trust Fund, although none of us was sure if this was legal or possible.
 - She also passionately argued for a permanent reinstatement of a no-cause absentee ballot.
- One participant emphasized the lack of affordable housing in her area.
 - She advocated for creating a system that allows more compassion and cooperation with landlords and property owners.

Debbie Smith's Breakout Session

- People had questions about previously incarcerated people having to pay fines and fees before they could vote.
- People also expressed concern about there potentially being a shortage of poll workers; need to train younger people to be poll workers
- Ways to increase access to voting
 - Allow people to vote over a course of days and weeks (early voting)
 - Give people a longer time to vote by absentee ballot
 - Mail-in voting.
 - Note: Participants said that some Black people may be hesitant to vote by mail because they don't trust the system. They'd rather cast their ballot in-person to make sure their votes count.
 - Native Americans may also experience vote by mail difficulties because some do not have traditional home addresses.
- Ways to increase participation in the census
 - Put informational flyers in food distribution boxes
 - Bring iPads to schools for carline & allow people to do their census on the iPad