

Arise Town Hall Tuesday – Justice for all July 7, 2020

We discussed Alabama's unjust criminal justice system and how to fix it.

Presdelane Harris' Breakout Session

About 19 people were in the breakout group. Here are highlights of discussion from participants.

- Some participants were new to Montgomery and Arise and joined this session to learn more about criminal justice issues and what they can do to help.
- Some participants had backgrounds in law enforcement and juveniles. They were particularly interested in wanting to see change in that area of criminal justice.
- **Issues raised by participants:**
 - Eliminating capital punishment, death penalty
 - Ending unfair sentencing – sentencing reform to address the lack of consistency in sentencing. Readdress cases involving non-violent offenders.
 - Creating a path to defund the police and invest in community services – child care, housing, mental health services, etc. Decrease police budgets & reallocate funds.
 - Bail system reform – end cash bail system, especially when it's known that the person can't afford it.
 - Address civil asset forfeiture
 - Address prison conditions, abolish prisons. Need a better state response than to build mega prisons.
 - Decriminalize marijuana.
 - End the school to prison pipeline, especially for youth of color.
 - Rural areas need resources! Wilcox city schools don't have social workers and students carry the weight of issues/problems without skills to articulate those issues. Need trained specialist in rural areas to help support and guide students.
 - Tax reform needed so schools in poorer areas have resources they need.
 - Education is key part of helping women and girls achieve their highest success as well as remove barriers to prosperity for women and girls. Many participants affirmed the need to invest in education, recognizing that it is significant to moving folk out of poverty.

- Participants also mentioned health equity and the need for government to be more responsive to everyone, not just the monied few.

Stan Johnson's Breakout Session

1. The opening question on the floor for discussion was, "Is it too late to change the governor's mind on building new prisons." The members felt money would be better spent on education and rehabilitation programs for the prisoners.
2. Members would like to see life skills taught to prisoners. One member wants prisoners to be able to survive once they get out. As she put it be able to boil an egg and apply for a job.
3. Band the box came up in the group. Folks would like to see Arise back the issue once again in the legislature.
4. The group was extremely concerned about private prisons. They were against private prison. They want the state to be responsible for running the prison for accountability reasons. The group felt the state is not hearing Alabamians' objections to private prisons.
5. Fines/Fees ... a real problem. How can we do away with the fines? A group member shared his experience working in the Birmingham court system for 31 years. It was routine to receive pressure from superior court staff about bringing in more fines to help financially support the court's operational budget. The group felt the courts are living off the back of the poor. A total unjust system.
6. Social Justice is the answer... the group strongly felt the system is geared to eventually lock up poor black and brown Alabamians. If Alabama invested on the front end of poor Alabamians we could cut the cost of prisons and untold lost human potential.

Mike Nicholson's Breakout Session

- We began our breakout with some personal experiences trying to translate knowledge and leverage political power to influence local politics.
 - Many in the room had brought information and evidence to local and state representatives only to be ignored.
- Many folks were eager for information about the upcoming prison construction plans.
- We talked about the lasting impacts of our state's criminal justice program, and how the effects of imprisonment can impact a person's success after release.
 - It's harder to get a job, find housing, find insurance, and people ultimately are denied the opportunity to reintegrate and, unfortunately, end up back in jail/prison.
 - We talked about past work to "Ban the Box"
- We also talked about the tendency we have as a state lump all crime into one broad category, and this generalization prevents a nuanced discussion of the problems within our criminal justice system.
 - Nonviolent offences, drug addiction, and mental illness are all impossible to address when we label them all as criminal and put them in prison.
- A few participants were particularly worried about the impacts that COVID-19 will have on those in our state prisons and jails. Especially since we have a severe over-crowding issue.
- One person was quite focused on issues with our state's pardons and paroles system.
 - The racialization of our paroles process exacerbates the disproportionate impact of our criminal justice system and people of color. These folks are offered no opportunities to reform while in prison as our facilities are underfunded.

- Several participants felt the state needs to have discussion about the goals of our criminal justice system. Specifically, there is tension between the goals of rehabilitation vs punishment.
 - Our system is all punishment and no rehabilitation.
 - This led to a conversation about the idea of “defunding the police,” and what that would mean for Alabama and our local communities.
- One participant also spoke about the requirement that people who’ve lost the right to vote in Alabama are forced to pay off all fines and fees before their voting rights can be restored.
 - To most in the room, this is no different than a poll-tax.
- Several of the participants from the Birmingham area have attempted to talk to their local police about the training requirements their department requires, especially in de-escalation. They had little success.
- One participant knew of an officer who had been fired for excessive force, only to be immediately rehired by a nearby city/county.
 - She proposed a database that tracks incidences of police infraction in order to keep better track of police abuse and keep these officers from simply moving to a new area.

Celida Garcia’s Breakout Session

Our group discussed prison privatization & its ill effect on ensuring inmate safety, particularly during a pandemic.

Group members noted crowded prison systems’ failures in offering adequate healthcare & inmate protections from disease. They also agreed in the vast race disparity as Alabama prisons disproportionately house Black residents & a need to identify race-related triggers in our criminal justice system, which too often falls short of extending true justice to black/brown “offenders”. Shared solutions included advocacy measures such as contacting local & state elected officials to demand accountability & transparency.

Other topics included decriminalizing marijuana & reducing law enforcement focus on minor offenses to decrease prison populations. The group discussed local efforts to prevent building additional privatized prisons by petitioning Gov. Ivey’s intervention alongside urging governmental promotion of Medicaid expansion.