

Arise Town Hall Tuesday – Money talks

June 23, 2020

Examined how we can strengthen education, health care, child care and other services that help Alabamians make ends meet. We explored ways to fund those services more equitably.

Presdelane Harris' Breakout Session

Nine people were in my breakout group. Here are highlights of discussion from participants.

- One participant noted how Arise's issues aligned with the Poor Peoples Campaign. She had participated recently in their online mass meeting.
- Public transportation raised as a major concern by several participants, especially in rural areas. Without it, people lose access to many necessities – doctors' appointments, jobs, stores, etc.
- Rural hospital closings coupled with the lack of transportation creates dire situations for many people.
- Would really like to see us eliminate the FIT deduction.
- Participants also talked about racial problems and a monuments problem in Alabama.
- Great concern expressed over voting rights – voting suppression. There was lots of concern about the November election – absentee voting, mail-in voting, etc.
- Housing was a big issue for a couple of participants who work in that area. Would like to see relief in the coming threat of foreclosures because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some who got behind on mortgage payments may not recover and thus end up in foreclosure. Housing/home ownership connected to wealth.
- Need to address prison system reform, which also impacts housing.

Stan Johnson's Breakout Session

1. A discussion on paying for the grocery tax by eliminating the Federal Income Tax kicked off the breakout session. Dev was in the group and stated, most Alabamians would not be affected by the elimination of the FIT state deduction. He said you would have to be in the 90% income earning range to be affected.
2. Secondly, it was brought up taking the tax off of groceries is a moral issue. Basically, the poor is subsidizing the top earners who benefit from the FIT deduction while the poor continue to suffer under the taxes on grocery.
3. The tax issue is poison in Alabama, was put on the table by a participant. Dev added doing away with FIT would be actually closing a loophole. Everyone felt changing the language from raising taxes to closing a loophole would be more beneficial.

4. We briefly discussed the housing fund which then morphed into a discussion about the \$55 million to help with housing under the CARES act. Some participants were concerned about immediate help for evictions due to Covid-19.
5. One participant brought up a need to offer a long-term state program to offer rental eviction support. Dev mention other states do offer remedies and support to renters facing eviction.
6. Public transportation funding/Medicaid expansion was discussed. A participant brought up the intersection of medical and problems with rural transportation. The report from his friend living in Autauga was that the van could only carry one person to Montgomery at a time for medical appointments due to COVID 19 distancing rules. We generally mention Alabama's larger cities when we talk about public transportation, but the discussion highlighted the transportation problems of rural Alabamians which are many and hardly ever mentioned.

Mike Nicholson's Breakout Session

- Overwhelmingly, the most discussed aspect of our breakout room was healthcare access, and especially the benefits of Medicaid expansion.
 - As people lose their jobs, they lose insurance coverage, and this feeds into the cycle of poverty.
- Another major discussion was on the importance of transportation and how almost all other barriers and services are irrelevant if a person can't get to work/doctor/etc.
- There was some additional discussion on the importance of investing in public housing and public transportation, and how, without these investments, we would continue to lag behind as a state.

Debbie Smith's Breakout Session

- People spoke about the importance of expanding Medicaid
 - Keep rural hospitals open, create and keep jobs (hospitals are needed for communities to thrive), emphasize that expansion is not just a problem for lower income communities - it's a problem for the entire community
- Housing is a concern for the immigrant community
 - Landlords are unsure about who they can lease their property to because of HB56. Undocumented people in particular may lose their housing and have a difficult time finding it again. (HB56 was an anti-immigrant bill that was passed in 2011 that put many restrictions on immigrants making it difficult to live in Alabama. There's still a lot of confusion about what remains in the law after litigation struck down parts of the law.)
- Rising rents and misinformation about tenants rights is a concern during the Covid crisis.
- There is not enough affordable housing across the state. The pandemic is only exacerbating the problem.
- There's not enough access to public transportation.
 - Public transportation that does exist doesn't meet people's needs. They don't run enough hours or have enough lines to get people where they need to go.
 - Public transportation is basically non-existent in rural areas.
 - Getting people to the doctor is a huge issue.
 - Transit is also incredibly important in accessing and maintaining employment.
 - Transit also affects low-income families. They need access to transportation in order for their children to participate in extracurricular activities and afterschool programs.

- The Alabama tax system currently charges low-income people too much. It's a regressive tax system.
 - Get rid of the grocery tax as a good first step.
- Arise and partners should be more strategic about giving names to bills and packages that we work on. We should really think more about the marketing aspect.