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## Left behind

### THE ISSUE

A report by Arise Citizens' Policy Project found that Alabama's working poor are not gaining access to the state's economic surge, and makes recommendations to help open opportunities to them.

Alabama's job growth in the past four years has been impressive, outstripping the nation on many fronts, and the future holds even greater promise of employment.

But there is a segment of the population that is not sharing in the economic good fortune, according to Arise Citizens' Policy Project. Its "Bridging the Gap" report found that families making less than double the federal poverty level of \$41,300 would benefit from changes in tax and education policies. The report contains recommendations for opening better employment and education opportunities to the working poor. The recommendations don't include a price tag, but it's clear that some changes in the state tax code would be required to enact the recommendations. And the code certainly needs to be rewritten - for a number of reasons.

Most of the recommendations in the report are common-sense changes that would reduce the dependency of the working poor on direct public assistance by making educational and job training programs more accessible and reducing their tax burden.

Among the recommendations:

- Allocate money for need-based financial assistance for education and adult education.
- Actively market training programs to the 500,000 residents who lack a high school diploma or equivalency degree.
- Provide more funding for child care for low-income workers and reduce the waiting list.
- Raise the threshold where a family of four starts paying state income tax from \$12,600 to the federal poverty level of \$20,650.
- Remove the 4 percent state sales tax on groceries.
- Expand the Medicaid program to cover more of the 500,000 workers between the ages of 18 and 64 who lack health insurance.
- Require new and expanding industries getting tax credits to provide health insurance for workers and target a certain percentage of new jobs toward low-income workers.

Many of the recommendations would require additional funding to expand existing programs, but with a careful rewriting of the tax code, it would be money well invested. The recommendations contained in the report have been long overdue anyway, and there has been a push from a few legislators and from Gov. Bob Riley to get some of them accomplished, but the changes have died in the Legislature.

Arise's recommendations are common-sense investments in lifting the working poor to a higher economic station. Without some changes, they will continue to be left behind.