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Calendar notes

THINKING A YEAR AHEAD

Watch this space for upcoming announcements about the Equal Voice for America's Families campaign. The year-long grassroots organizing effort will bring 3,500 people from across the South to **Birmingham in September 2008** to announce a national family platform for change. Alabama's part in the campaign will be led by the eight grantees (including ACPP) of the Marguerite Casey Foundation. To find out more, or to follow the progress of Equal Voice, visit www.caseygrants.org/equalvoice2008.

New policy analyst

Chris Sanders has joined the ACPP staff as a tax and poverty policy analyst. His first assignment was a formidable one – researching and writing ACPP's recent *State of Working Alabama 2007* report (see his overview on Page 2). A loyal University of Alabama alumnus, Chris edited the daily *Crimson White* his senior year and won numerous awards at the School of Law, where he graduated in May. Chris likes to spend his Saturdays watching Alabama football games. We're following up on reports of his secret talent for radio announcing. Welcome, Chris!

Report

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September 27, 2007

Annual meeting 2007

Policy agenda stirs lively debate

By Jim Carnes, communications director

"We've gotten our marching orders," declared ACPP board chair Lynn Douglas as a spirited Sept. 15 annual meeting drew to a close. The gathering at Montgomery's Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship culminated in the selection of ACPP's 2008 policy priorities. Discussion of the issue proposals highlighted the sometimes tough call between long-haul commitment and legislative feasibility in the allocation of staff and member resources. In addition to tax reform and budget adequacy, which the membership identified as "permanent priorities" last year, member group representatives placed the following issues on the 2008 agenda:

transparency proposals) and public transportation – received endorsements from the members after failing to win slots on the priority agenda.

Members also voted two new groups into membership: the International Community Center (Irvington) and the Center for Fair Housing (Mobile). Both

[Turn to Page 2]



Members attending the 2007 annual meeting included (top) Sister Janet Connorton of Pine Apple, Roger McCullough and Bobby Cardwell of Columbiana; (below, from right) Rita and Lawrence Johnson of Coden, Judy Roy of Bessemer, DeForrest Brown of Birmingham, and Ella Ervin of Mobile; (left) Lisa Thomas of Brenton and Sister Judith Smits of Mobile.

a moratorium on the death penalty, fair and adequate Katrina relief, constitutional reform, environmental justice, and a state investment in asset-building for low-income Alabamians.

These issues will, in turn, drive the legislative advocacy work of Alabama Arise. Two other issues – "money & politics" (a package of governmental



**A few words
from Kimble —**

Our overarching strategies swing like a pendulum. Should we focus our efforts narrowly? If we devote our energies to the 20 swing districts, we can have a greater effect. That's why we want to reach House members who are undecided on our tax reform plan. Why devote as much effort on the 55 who supported it last year? (Of course, we still have to reach all 35 senators.)

But the narrow approach can leave us unprepared for larger struggles. A case in point was the statewide tax reform vote in 2003. For a referendum, you need numbers — it doesn't matter where they come from. And now we're being challenged to broaden our strategies in two large campaigns.

Next September, 3,500 people will gather in Birmingham to promote a national family platform for change. Similar gatherings will happen the same day in Los Angeles and Chicago. While we will have the help of some 50 groups across the Deep South that are funded by the Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Alabama groups are responsible for recruiting 1,500 of the total. As you know, we've had nearly 500 turn out for a conference before, but recruiting 1,500 is a much bigger challenge. The excitement of raising our issues in the presidential campaign will help us out. Watch for more information to come.

Arise and Greater Birmingham Ministries are joining the Pushback Network (see Page 3), a six-state effort to get more people involved in voting. Over the next year, we hope to sign up 20,000 people who haven't historically been as engaged in civic life as the population in general. Imagine: If our efforts can add 20,000 voters each year over the next five years, the numbers start to make a real difference. And that will require that we all pitch in and do our part, so please help!

Yours in peace and hope,

State of Working Alabama 2007

Report finds gaps in economic gains

By Chris Sanders, policy analyst

Many Alabamians aren't sharing in the gains that the state's economy has made in recent years, according to a new report released earlier this month by Arise Citizens' Policy Project. The report, *The State of Working Alabama 2007*, examines data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other sources to assess trends in employment, income, wages and other areas affecting state residents' economic status in the last few decades.

The report finds that Alabama's median household income fell for the third straight year in 2005-06 and that median wages have been stagnant since the decade began. Those trends mirror national patterns and come even though the state's gross domestic product has grown more than the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 2001. Alabama continues to trail the region and nation in median income and wage measures, the report says.

Alabama remains one of the nation's poorest states, the ACPP report finds, despite a record-low unemployment rate and almost 100,000 new jobs added since 2002. More than 21 percent of children and more than 15 percent of all residents fell below the federal poverty line in 2005-06. In addition, Alabama's percentage of residents without health insurance, though still below the national level, has grown in the last two years.

Other findings include:

- Racial disparities persist in the Alabama economy. African Americans' median wages are almost a third lower than those for Whites, and the unemployment rate among African Americans is more than double that for Whites.
- The wage gap between men and women in Alabama is larger than in the South or nation as a whole. In addition, women's workforce participation rate in the state is more than 20 percent lower than that for men.
- University graduates have seen meaningful wage growth in Alabama in the last few decades. But median tuition and

fees at the state's four-year colleges and universities have soared 78 percent since 1996-97, making an undergraduate degree less accessible to low-income Alabamians.

- Alabama's share of unionized workers, which stands at 8.8 percent, is well below the 12 percent national level but is higher than that for all of our Deep South neighbors.
- Alabama's regressive tax system continues to hinder lower-income workers trying to escape poverty, even after a long-overdue increase in the income tax threshold last year.

ACPP executive director Kimble Forrister said the report shows that everyday Alabamians still face many challenges. "We've seen growth in the state economy, but most of it isn't making its way to low-income residents," Forrister said. "It's still tough out there for working people trying to get ahead."

The full report is available online at www.arisecitizens.org. To request a hard copy, contact the ACPP office.

Annual meeting 2007

[Continued from Page 1]

groups have been active in the coastal coalition addressing the inadequacies and inequities of Katrina relief funding for Alabama.

The organizing committee of the ACPP board presented for discussion a proposal to extend voting privileges to individual members. At present, only contact persons for member groups are entitled to vote on issue priorities and other membership decisions. In offering one possible model for weighting individual and group votes, the committee acknowledged the complexity of the matter and responded to member concerns by tabling the proposal to work out details.

Also at the meeting, members signed up for visits to present their legislators with the 2008 Arise issue priorities. Issue brochures are in the works.

Washington update

By Jim Carnes, communications director

The fate of SCHIP

By the time this newsletter goes to press, state governments and low-income working families across the country will know whether health insurance for millions of children remains secure or suddenly disappears. A dozen states, including Georgia and Mississippi, will be unable to maintain their State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) after Sept. 30 if funding is not extended, according to estimates by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Congressional Research Service. Alabama's ALL Kids program began operating in 1997 as the first SCHIP to be approved in the nation after Congress authorized the federal-state partnership. ALL Kids is not considered to be on the high-risk list as this week's vote nears.

Whatever the immediate outcome, the stand-off between President Bush and Congress over reauthorization of the 10-year-old SCHIP has raised public awareness about a critical component of our nation's health care system and expanded the already broad alliance of SCHIP supporters. With the election year upon us, the pressure to strengthen the safety net for low-income working families is sure to grow.

Katrina funding at issue

Thirteen Alabamians joined other Katrina victims and allies from Louisiana and Mississippi in Washington on Tuesday, Sept. 25, to attend a Senate Banking Committee hearing on the Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act, S. 1668. Of special concern to the south Mobile County contingent is the omission of Alabama from additional funding authorized in the current bill. The group met with Sen. Richard Shelby, the committee's ranking Republican, before the hearing to urge his support for the bill and an amendment to add Alabama funding. The committee has not yet announced a date for moving the bill forward.

Some 2,000 Mobile Countians remain in FEMA campers more than two years after the storm and one year after environmental tests revealed dangerous levels of formaldehyde in the temporary housing. Community Development Block Grants allocated for recovery in south Mobile County have yet to be released. When they do become available, the grants will serve only 10 percent of the 1,200 applicants, and hundreds were unable to meet the application deadline.

To receive e-mail alerts on these and other upcoming actions in Congress and the Legislature, go to arisecitizens.org and click "Join the e-mail list."

Housing issues gain new voice

By Ron Gilbert, senior policy analyst

Recent Census data reflects that almost 72 percent of all Alabama residences are owner-occupied, among the highest rates in the nation. But that figure fails to take into account the condition of the state's housing stock, the number of homeless Alabamians, the availability of accessible and affordable housing for people with disabilities, and the overall increase in housing costs. These factors are among the concerns that led to a series of meetings among housing advocates, consumers, developers, social service providers and governmental representatives over the last 18 months.

Sheila Crowley of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, while in Alabama for a the 2007 ACPP conference in February, met with this diverse group to consider strategies for addressing Alabama's housing needs. From the connections and consensus forged

at that meeting came the Low-Income Housing Coalition of Alabama (LIHCA), launched at a gathering in Birmingham in July.

A steering committee of 26 statewide volunteers is working to develop the coalition's infrastructure and membership base, obtain nonprofit status, review state housing policies and draft a long-range plan to increase low-income housing opportunities, including the possible establishment of an Alabama housing trust fund. The coalition has engaged a Birmingham nonprofit agency, Collaborative Solutions, to provide start-up technical support.

LIHCA offers Alabamians with an interest in low-income housing issues an opportunity to speak with a common voice. To join the effort or to find out more about the coalition partners and plans, contact Ashley Kerr at (205) 939-0411 or by e-mail: Ashley@collaborativesolutions.net.

ACPP joins Pushback Network

Participatory democracy is one of the threads that runs through ACPP's varied work in community organizing and public policy analysis. This summer, ACPP joined the Pushback Network, a two-year-old coalition of state-based organizations that share the goal of "creating a democracy where grassroots communities, who have been historically pushed to the political margins, lead toward social change rooted in progressive values." The network fosters strategies for engaging under-represented constituencies – people of color, low-wealth and working-class communities, and young people – in the electoral process.

ACPP and Greater Birmingham Ministries represent Alabama in

the network. The other states currently participating are California, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico and New York. ACPP executive director Kimble Forrister and organizing team leader Pres Harris were among the more than 100 advocates and grassroots leaders from the six Pushback states who attended the network's first National Convening in Louisville, Ky., in mid-July.

"The promise of identifying potential voters," Harris said, "means reaching a new group of potential leaders, activists and world-changers. We hope our work with the Pushback Network will help make ACPP a greater force of citizen advocates."

Your support makes a difference!

Every gift extends our message about the need to change policies that affect low-income Alabamians. ACPP thanks the following for their generous gifts received between July 23 and Sept. 21, 2007:

ACCR Foundation, Birmingham
Steven Adkison & Elizabeth Wheat, Birmingham
William Anders, Sheffield
Bill Baird, Auburn
Jere L. Beasley, Montgomery
Cala & James Bobo, Florence
Brenda & Jerry Boman, Notasulga
Jon Broadway, Montgomery
Joel Brouwer, Tuscaloosa
Rhonda Brownstein, Montgomery
Bobby Cardwell & Roger McCullough, Columbiana
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Freda Winegar, Opelika
Carol & Ralph Womer, Auburn
Carol Woodcock, Montgomery
Teri Wright, Birmingham
Eldon Zimmerman, Birmingham

The extra mile

Special thanks to the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Tuscaloosa for an additional gift of \$162 toward the reprint of *The Alabama Tenants' Handbook*. With the first 20,000 copies gone in five months and requests still pouring in, we ordered another 15,000 at a cost of \$2,000. We've received a total of \$227 to cover this unbudgeted expense. If you'd like to help more Alabama tenants learn about their new rights and responsibilities, make your check to ACPP and mark it "Tenant Handbook."



Health care documentary draws ACPP supporters

The Sept. 15 ACPP benefit showing of *Sicko*, Michael Moore's new documentary about the U.S. health care industry, drew an enthusiastic response from the 135 people in attendance. Thanks to everyone who helped make the event a success.

"Adequate, affordable health care is one of ACPP's core issues," said development director Brenda Boman. "We wanted to give folks the opportunity to consider the connections between the national health care crisis and our chronic underfunding of health coverage for low-income Alabamians."