

The Anniston Star

Poverty's price in Alabama

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board
08.23.11 - 02:59 am

Poverty's tentacles twist and turn their way into innumerable areas of Alabamians' lives. Age isn't a determining factor. Poverty doesn't discriminate like that.

Yet, the high prevalence of childhood poverty is a blight on this state; it affects too many children in too many counties.

What's needed isn't another academic study on the depths of poverty's reach. Instead, what's needed are substantive programs — in Montgomery and elsewhere — that combat poverty's root causes and help thousands of children to escape deprivation.

Understandably, the Annie E. Casey Kids Count annual report released last week unleashed a torrent of thoughts on Alabama's plight, and for good reason. Alabama ranks in the nation's bottom five of the Kids Count report — again. One in 4 Alabama children lived at or below the federal poverty line in 2009. That's a 19 percent increase since 2000.

Following the Kids Count report's release, we urged lawmakers to treat childhood poverty in Alabama as a legislative priority in the next session. If the Legislature can finally pass an impressive set of ethics-reform laws — as it did late in 2010 — it can surely make the well-being of Alabama children a similar concern.

Today, we're urging Alabamians to join in on this needed cause. As a story in Sunday's Star explained, childhood poverty doesn't produce a single offspring; it affects earning potential, educational opportunities, health-care issues and long-term financial and job-creation concerns.

Consider that Alabama had more than 24,000 high-school dropouts in 2010. Had they graduated, they would have earned an additional \$118 million over an average year. The tentacles of poverty, for adults and children alike, are often traced to missed opportunities in education.

That's but one example of why childhood poverty in Alabama must be addressed.

The voices of groups such as Alabama Arise, which advocates on behalf of low-income residents, carry weight, particularly when pursuing sensible options such as revamping the state's upside-down tax structure to help those with little. That Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said Arise "is a group that is always unhappy with the tax structure of Alabama" sounded a bit shrill and, yet, correct.

Alabama Arise is unhappy with the tax structure because it needs revamping. That message must not be silenced. Neither should the call to dedicate ourselves to lessening childhood poverty in Alabama. It's time to act, not to blame or offer excuses.