

# The Anniston Star

## **A \$498 bill for the poor: Why won't Alabama lawmakers do more for those in poverty?**

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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There is a sad truth in Alabama: When it comes to the state's tax fairness, too many have little for which they're thankful. That's a solemn thought during the holiday season.

For those at the bottom end of Alabama's economy, the state treats them poorly — as it has for years. Alabama's upside-down tax structure is renowned for inequality and injustice. Those who preach the sermon of this Alabama wrong have long rallied for a humane change in how Alabama taxes its residents.

Thus far, little has changed.

Recently, the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities released a study that solidified our call for a fundamental alteration of the state's tax system. According to the report, an Alabama family of four that earned \$22,314 at the federal poverty level paid nearly \$500 — \$498 — in taxes last year.

In this instance, perspective is the key. That \$498 tax bill placed Alabama as the state that most severely taxes families at the federal poverty level. No other state is close. Alabama is unrivaled in this inequity. Hawaii, the second-worst state, taxes its poorest families at \$292 a year. Georgia, No. 3, collects a \$238 tax bill.

Mississippi, Alabama's habitual sister state, taxed its poverty-line families only \$81 in 2010. How's that for a shocker? Our neighbor to the west, showing us how it's done.

Remiss we'd be if we didn't point out that woeful Alabama also ranks first nationally in how severely it treats single-parent families who exist at the federal poverty line of \$17,374 per year. Alabama's tax collectors hit those families with a \$343 annual tax bill.

We'd also be remiss if we didn't restate the obvious: Alabama historically has shunned the notion of taxing the poor less and the rich more, but that upside-down, destructive logic doesn't have to be an ironclad rule in Montgomery. Change is possible.

Eventually, someone in state government will see the light and move Alabama into a stronger moral stance, one that befits people who have caring hearts and goodwill for their fellow man.

"Alabama may be called a 'low-tax state,' but our taxes aren't low for most people," said Kimble Forrister, director of Alabama Arise, which advocates on behalf of the state's low-income residents. "Low- and middle-income Alabamians pay a high sales tax on groceries, and they pay twice the share of

their incomes in state and local taxes that the top 1 percent of earners do. Our state's tax system will remain upside down and out of step with our neighbors unless our leaders do something about it."

Under a strong Republican majority, Montgomery has been a capital of change during the last year. Ethics reform finally happened. A landmark illegal-immigration bill passed — despite its obvious and massive failings. Legislative changes for public education are expected during the 2012 session.

This holiday season, we urge those GOP legislators who wield so much power in Montgomery to open their eyes and see how the state's unfair tax system is inhumane and unnecessary. They should in this instance follow the lead of state Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, who this week proposed scrapping the sales tax on groceries. It doesn't have to be this way. Alabama should be better than the worst in the nation.

What better message to carry into this time of year?

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