

The Huntsville Times

Fight the good fight

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For 20 years, Alabama Arise has worked to help the state's poor

Alabama Arise is a statewide nonprofit organization whose purpose is to improve the lives of Alabama's poor. But improving the lives of the poor in Alabama necessarily requires reform of government policies. Thus, Arise's agenda remains a work in progress.

This past weekend, Arise, made up of 150 civic, religious and community groups, celebrated its 20th anniversary on the grounds of the state capitol. Featured speaker was U.S. Rep. Artur Davis, a Birmingham Democrat, who has all but declared as a Democratic candidate for governor in 2010.

But Arise isn't waiting. It has released its policy priorities for 2009. If some of them sound familiar, they should. Arise, through its Citizens Policy Project, has been promoting many of the same worthwhile goals for years:

Inadequate state funding for health care, child care and education have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income families. Further cuts should be opposed and more money provided for expansion.

On tax reform, poor and working families need additional income tax relief and an end to the imposition of the state sales tax on groceries.

Alabama should declare a moratorium on the death penalty.

State voters should be allowed to decide whether they want a new constitution.

Public transportation should have dedicated state funding, something it doesn't have now.

The state should join the new Individual Development Account program to help people pay for education or for starting a business or buying a home.

Alabama families affected by Hurricane Katrina, especially in Mobile County, still need help.

Poor families should not be disproportionately affected by environmental hazards.

In past years, the debate in the Legislature has usually focused on the sales tax on groceries and constitutional reform. But the hard times that have descended on the state make the former a distant goal, and perennial opposition all but dooms the latter.

Even so, over the years Alabama Arise has succeeded in raising public awareness about the plight of the poor, and it has even seen some measure of income-tax reform enacted into law.

Social progress in this state, as in every other, occurs at an agonizingly slow pace, but Alabama Arise has at least provided a powerful voice for the disadvantaged and those who care about them. Let's hope Arise and its member organizations keep fighting the good fight.

(For more information, see www.alarise.org.)

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