

The Huntsville Times

Poverty & state taxes

Tuesday, November 04, 2008

None

A new study highlights problems facing the poor in this state

In Alabama, the poor aren't just always with us; they also face more problems than those with low incomes elsewhere. And one reason is state government.

The latest bad news about how the poor take it on the chin in Alabama comes from a national survey of the amount of income tax each state levies.

The national poverty level for a family of four is \$21,023. Only 18 states levy an income tax on people trying to struggle to survive on that amount of money. It's no surprise, given its history of coddling the Big Dogs and kicking the poor, that Alabama is one of those 18. It's probably not a bombshell that of those 18 states, Alabama levies the highest taxes - \$423 per family.

Hawaii is next with \$409. Neighboring Mississippi, the state we can usually look down on when it comes to short-shrifting those in need, levies a state income tax of only \$48 on such poor folks.

Alabama Arise, the nonprofit advocacy group for the poor and whose depressing job it is to keep track of such matters, has noted that myriad other obstacles face poor people in Alabama.

From 2002 to 2006, for example, a third of the state's working families didn't earn enough to make ends meet, the group reported.

And the best means by which poor families can break the poverty cycle - education - is too often a dead end. State and federal grants provide only about a fourth of the money needed to help Alabama's poor seek better education.

But this isn't just a one-source report. First Focus, a national nonpartisan children's advocacy group, found that 22.5 percent of this state's children live in poverty. That's far above the national average of 18 percent. And the 22.5 percent figure - a snapshot of the situation in 2007 - was an increase from Alabama's average of 18.8 percent in 2006.

This bleak picture would be even bleaker if the Alabama Legislature, spurred on by Gov. Bob Riley, hadn't supported bipartisan legislation in 2006 to raise the state income tax threshold from \$4,600 to \$12,600. That didn't help much, but it helped some.

What would have helped more would have been for the Legislature earlier this year to pass a bill that would have allowed state voters to cut taxes even more on poor people and to remove the sales tax on groceries.

That bill, like many pieces of progressive legislation, passed the House but failed by one vote in the Senate, which was mired as usual in partisan, personal disputes.

The bottom line is that the bottom line for poor people remains more like a tightrope over which families must tread gingerly from month to month, praying that layoffs or medical emergencies or even high gasoline prices don't destroy the family budget beyond repair.

Their only hope remains that Alabama's leaders at some point will be shamed or inspired into action so that families that work but live at the margins can make their lives a little less desperate.

No one expects the government to make the poor vanish from our midst. But, through simple tax fairness, we could reduce the numbers of those who fall short of self-sufficiency appreciably.

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