



Getting Over in the Heart of Dixie

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When people think about progressive battles in the U.S., they probably don't think about Alabama. Instead, the state is known as the home of U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and the kind of conservative, populist politics that led Drew Pendergrass of the *Harvard Politics Review* to describe the Trump phenomenon as "[The Alabamafication of America](#)." The state also has a reputation for political scandal. In recent years, two governors and the state House speaker have been involved campaign finance fraud, bribery, and other ethics violations. Then there's Conservative Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore, who was suspended for telling state probate judges they could ignore the [SCOTUS marriage equality decision](#) - and who is also running for Sessions's seat in the Senate.

But despite this "Alabamafication," progressives here, including many working-class people (who now make up the majority of the state's population), have ramped up the fight for economic justice. And there's plenty to fight about. A few weeks ago, [CNBC ranked Alabama as the "worst" state](#) in the U.S. to live in. Working-class Alabamians navigate a formidable obstacle course toward the "American Dream":

- **Regressive Tax Policies:** Alabama has among the lowest effective [property tax rates](#)

(4.8%), but because property taxes and corporate taxes cannot fund adequate services, [state coffers rely heavily on sales taxes](#), disproportionately penalizing the working poor and robbing the budget of potential Federal matching funds (*The Alabama Tax and Budget Handbook*, 2015 edition). Alabama is also one of just [fourteen states that tax groceries](#), and one of only four to charge the full sales tax rate on food.

- **Predatory Lending:** [Interest rates for payday loans \(capped at \\$500\) can be as high as 456% APR](#), much higher than in North Carolina, which implemented on a trial basis the 36% APR cap allowed by federal law for active military service. Based on public support, NC kept the cap. Georgia effectively banned payday lending services with a 60% APR cap, heavy regulation, and strict enforcement of the regulations.
- **Mass Incarceration:** Alabama ranks third highest in [imprisonment rate](#), [highest death sentences per capita](#), and [among states with the most overcrowded facilities](#), which prompted a Federal intervention and a [proposed \\$845-million prison-building bill](#). The state's Julia Tutwiler Prison was the only women's facility to make the [Mother Jones list of worst prisons in the U.S.](#)
- **Health Outcomes:** As of 2015, Alabama has the [second-highest obesity rate](#) in the nation, resulting from high poverty rate, high uninsured and underinsured population, prevalence of cheap empty calories, inadequate nutritional literacy, food deserts, and the [scarcity of physicians and facilities in rural areas](#). In addition, state leaders have been unwilling to expand Medicaid coverage through the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare), [denying thousands sufficient healthcare](#).

Yes, Alabama has a multitude of serious problems, but it also has plenty of assets. Alabama's [132,000 miles of rivers and streams](#), along with its geology and warm climate, nurture the [highest level of biodiversity east of the Mississippi](#). Our culinary diversity embraces many barbeque creations, including a [unique white sauce](#) that produces the best chicken and pork you ever put in your mouth. Forrest Gump numbers among [hundreds of famous Alabamians](#). Music artists the world over travel here to achieve the ["Muscle Shoals Sound."](#) [Mardi Gras originated in Mobile](#) (1703), not New Orleans (1730s).

Along with all this, Alabama the Beautiful is home to several social justice organizations. Montgomery is ground zero for much of the key work of civil rights groups, and it is also the birthplace of [Morris Dees' Southern Poverty Law Center](#) (SPLC) and Bryan Stevenson's [Equal Justice Initiative](#) (EJI). Both work tirelessly to end racial injustice by tracking and prosecuting hate groups and by remedying inequities in the justice system, respectively.



Alabama Arise staff and volunteers lobby lawmakers, speak at committee hearings, and attend legislative sessions.

In addition, diverse comrades in Alabama, including Southern Scots-Irish “Crackers” like me and working-class [Black Belt Blacks](#), are [uniting to fight economic oppression](#). One focal point for our efforts is another state asset: [Alabama Arise](#), a nonprofit, non-partisan grassroots coalition of congregations, community organizations, and individuals. Arise consists of *Alabama Arise*, a 501 (c)(4) advocacy organization formed in 1988 and *Arise Citizens’ Policy Project*, a 501 (c)(3) research and organizing group founded in 1994. Arise defines its mission as “promoting state policies that improve the lives of low-income people.” Through policy analysis, statewide organizing, and citizen advocacy, Arise envisions an Alabama where all people have resources to reach their full potential, people participate actively in their own governance, and the state government promotes the common good and respect for each person’s humanity.

[Kimble Forrister](#) became Executive Director of Alabama Arise in 1991, when the organization had 60 member groups and a mailing list of 170 donors. Now the membership rolls have grown to 150 groups and 1,094 donors, as well as over 5,000 Facebook likes and some 2,400 Twitter followers. Early on, Arise worked on tax reform and welfare issues. In the early 1990s, Alabama provided the nation’s lowest monthly welfare benefit for a mother of two at \$118, but Forrister recalls that Arise lobbied state lawmakers to raise the amount to \$215. Later, Arise worked to raise the income tax threshold for a family of four from \$4,600 to \$12,600, and their efforts led to the first tenants’ rights law.

As Arise grew, Forrister reallocated its staff and funding to provide balance between organizing and advocacy initiatives. Currently, Arise employs two policy analysts, two organizers, a communications director, a development director, and an executive director. Members prioritize issues at annual meetings, which draw about 250 people – attendance

that has more than tripled from 80 over the past decade. Staff have used listening sessions with low-income clients to identify key elements of welfare reform. Those sessions revealed that in order to transition from welfare to work, people needed “jobs, child care, and transportation.” In addition, clients pointed out the need for second chances for those released from prison. Based on these conversations, Arise focused on restoring SNAP (food stamps/Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) and TANF (welfare/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) benefits to ex-felons, as well as narrowing the list of crimes that denied them the franchise.

Partnering with organizations such as [Greater Birmingham Ministries](#), the [Federations of Child Care Centers of Alabama](#) (FOCAL), and [Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama](#), Arise strives to make progress on what Forrister describes as “key issues like health care, predatory lending, criminal justice issues, and housing.” Stakeholders collaborate to develop strategies and tactics to enact successful campaigns, including this year’s issue priorities:

- **Adequate state budgets**, including a push for tax revenue increases and Medicaid expansion;
- **Tax reform**, including ending the grocery tax and restructuring income tax;
- **“Ban the Box,”** removing criminal history checkboxes on job applications;
- **Death penalty reform**, increasing indigent defense funding, instituting an execution moratorium, and abolishing judicial override (in which judge’s sentencing decision supercedes a jury’s);
- **Housing Trust Fund**, garnering sufficient funding to sustain the Housing Trust Fund set up in 2012;
- **Minimum wage effort**, raising state wage above federal level;
- **Payday/title lending reform**, instituting tighter industry regulations; and
- **Public transportation**, allotting state money in order to obtain Federal matching funds.

In light of recent victories such as banning judicial override (see “death penalty reform” above), Forrister remains optimistic. He believes that long asleep Alabamians have “become woke,” in part because of the election. “After the 2016 election,” Forrister says, “activism flourished in a number of Alabama cities.”

Looking at efforts around healthcare, Forrister sees a “spirit of collaboration, from agency

staff to providers to advocates.” Teamwork helped make Alabama the first state to offer health insurance to children in low-income families (CHIP), convince courts to overhaul child welfare, and design a non-profit structure for Medicaid and long term care (a model Arise and lawmakers are teaming up to implement).

If Alabama activists can “get over” and achieve such gains, imagine what could happen in other communities when citizens join forces. Find out what is happening in your community and get involved. When we all do better, we all do better.

Author



• [Helen Diana Eidson](#)

She is writing a rhetorical biography of Stetson Kennedy (1916-2011), a folklorist, journalist, and historian whose 70-year career spanned labor, civil rights, peace, and environmental movements.