

❖ **Make Child Care, Safe Care:**

Require uniform licensing & inspection for all child care programs in Alabama

Roughly 60,000 children are born in Alabama each year, the majority of whom will experience nonparental care before entering kindergarten. An estimated two-thirds of Alabama children have all parents in the workforce, greatly underscoring the need for healthy and safe environments for young children.¹ Following child care licensing standards and commonly adhered to best practices is a critical step to providing safe and quality early care and education. Unfortunately, Alabama currently operates a dual system of child care as one of seven states that do not require all child care programs to be licensed and inspected —threatening the health, safety and optimum development of young children every day.² One-third of total child care and nearly half of center-based child care in Alabama operate unregulated and with no legal requirement to conduct criminal background checks on all staff, meet appropriate staff-to-child ratios, or receive First Aid and CPR training. According to projections in the *2016 Alabama Kids Count Data Book* by 2025 70.9% of all child care will be unregulated.³ **In 2017, VOICES for Alabama's Children advocates uniform licensing and inspection by the Alabama Department of Human Resources of all child care programs in the state of Alabama.**

❖ **Bring Healthy Food Closer to Home:**

Fully fund and operationalize Alabama's Healthy Food Financing program

Nearly half a million Alabama children live in areas with limited access to fresh, healthy food placing them at increased risk for diet-related illness.⁴ Healthy Food Financing is an effective, viable and economically sustainable policy solution to addressing food access. Such initiatives, structured as public-private partnerships, attract grocery stores, farmers' markets and other vendors of healthy, affordable foods to underserved communities. In 2015, VOICES for Alabama's Children led a 100-plus member coalition in a successful legislative campaign resulting in the creation of a statewide Healthy Food Financing Initiative housed at the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA). **In 2017, VOICES for Alabama's Children advocates \$3 million in state investments and matching private seed dollars to fully operationalize Alabama's Healthy Food Financing program. We endorse recommendations of the Healthy Food Financing Study Commission (established in 2016 by the Alabama Legislature) which if fully implemented will bring fresh food retailers to communities where they are needed most.**

❖ **Invest in Pre-K:**

Expand state investment in Alabama's First Class Pre-K program

High quality pre-k improves educational achievement, closes the achievement gap among children entering kindergarten and helps build a skilled workforce for Alabama. A study by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama analyzed student achievement through the 6th grade and found that Alabama's First Class Pre-K alumni consistently outperformed their peers in reading and math. In that same study, researchers found that First Class Pre-K closed the achievement gap for participating low-income students by 25 percent.⁵ Alabama's First Class Pre-K program has ranked No. 1 in the nation for quality for ten consecutive years, yet only one in four Alabama four-year-olds have access.⁶ **In 2017, VOICES for Alabama's Children, as a founding partner of the Alabama School Readiness Alliance, advocates a \$20 million increase in state investments for First Class Pre-K as part of a ten-year strategy to fully fund pre-k by the 2022-2023 school year or before based on recommendations from Alabama's Pre-K Task Force.**

❖ **Healthy Kids, Healthy Start:**

Establish statewide nutrition, physical activity and screen time standards for all early care and education (ECE) settings throughout Alabama

Currently about 1 in 4 young children in the U.S. aged 2 to 5 years are overweight or have obesity.⁷ In Alabama, the only available data show that 16.3 percent of children ages 2-to 4-years-old from low-income families are at unhealthy weights.⁸ Combine those two statistics and the fact that two-thirds of young Alabama children have all parents in the workforce, and there is a clear illustration in the value of early care and education programs-- such as Head Start, Pre-K, child care centers and family child care homes-- as ideal settings and opportunities for obesity prevention in young children. Starting early can help young children build a solid foundation of healthy lifestyle habits that will follow them into adulthood. Currently regulations and standards around physical activity, nutrition, and screen time may vary among child care settings by type. **In 2017, VOICES for Alabama's Children advocates improved and standardized statewide nutrition, physical activity, and screen time standards for early care and education settings in Alabama.**

❖ **Protect Appropriations for Kids**

Ensure adequate state funding for child-serving programs and services

Fiscal policy is a children's issue and a permanent priority on VOICES' policy agenda. Each year, we advocate for protection of state appropriations to child-serving programs, services and state agencies that will impact the health, safety, education, and economic security of children birth to 18. We support certain measures that increase revenue to the state and oppose measures that in our assertion further erode services to children and other vulnerable populations. **In 2017, VOICES for Alabama's Children specifically advocates for sustainable and permanent revenue solutions that provide working parents the critical work support of child care assistance and improve health care for children through CHIP and Medicaid.**

2017 Educational Priority

❖ **Eliminate Predatory Lending Practices**

In Alabama, nearly 19 percent of adults and 27.5 percent of children live in poverty.⁹ In addition to providing families with critical work supports and safety nets, the state of Alabama must also eliminate harsh policies and practices that prey on low-wealth families and place them further in the throes of economic instability. Alabama laws governing payday lending allow interest rates of 456% and 300% APR, respectively.¹⁰ **In 2017, VOICES for Alabama's Children joins the Predatory Lending Project in advocating to cap the annual percentage rate (APR) at 36 percent on both payday and title loans. This significant policy change would mirror trends in other states as well as the rate passed by the U.S. Congress for all active duty military personnel and their dependents.**

Endnotes

¹ Administration for Children & Families Office of Child Care - Alabama, October 2016, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ>

² Child Care Aware® of America, <http://childcareaware.org/families/types-of-child-care/>

³ VOICES for Alabama's Children, 2016 Alabama Kids Count Data Book, http://www.alavoices.org/alabama_kids_count

⁴ The Food Trust, *Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Financing in Alabama* https://d3n8a8pro7vnmx.cloudfront.net/alavoices/pages/27/attachments/original/1428409463/2015_AL_HFA_Mapping_Report_FINAL.pdf?1428409463

⁵ Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, Birmingham, AL, Adams, Joe. (2012). *Analysis of ARMT Scores for Recipients of First Class/OSR Pre-K*, <http://parca.samford.edu/education/Analysis%20of%20ARMT%20Scores%20for%20Recipients%20of%20First%20Class%20OSR%20Pre-K.pdf>

⁶ Department of Education, *A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America*, April 2015, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/early-learning/matter-equity-preschool-america.pdf>

⁷ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Early Care and Education State Indicator Report, 2016. http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/ece-state-indicator-report.html](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/ece-state-indicator-report.html)

⁸ Robert Wood Johnson, *The State of Obesity, The State of Obesity in Alabama*, <http://stateofobesity.org/states/al/>

⁹ VOICES for Alabama's Children, 2016 Alabama Kids Count Data Book, http://www.alavoices.org/alabama_kids_count

¹⁰ Payday Loan Consumer Information, Alabama, <http://www.paydayloaninfo.org/state-information/8>