Our Mission
To ensure the well-being of Alabama’s children through research, public awareness, and advocacy.

POLICY COUNTS:
2017 LEGISLATIVE REPORT

www.alavoices.org
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ABOUT VOICES FOR ALABAMA’S CHILDREN

VOICES for Alabama’s Children, founded in 1992, is a 501(c)(3) statewide nonpartisan organization whose mission is to ensure the well-being of Alabama’s children through research, public awareness, and advocacy.

VOICES for Alabama’s Children serves as the voice for children at the State Legislature each year, working on policy that benefits all children, birth to graduation. In 1994, VOICES for Alabama’s Children published the state’s first Alabama Kids Count Data Book, and has continued to annually publish and distribute this important information on child well-being to help shape policy and to help others identify and address issues in their communities.

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Prepared and published by VOICES for Alabama’s Children
Melanie R. Bridgeforth, MSW
Executive Director
THE 2017 LEGISLATIVE SESSION
Dear Advocate,

The 2017 legislative session left me pondering one question—who’s for kids and who’s just kidding? That’s the question we should all be asking ourselves and more importantly the people we send to Montgomery to represent our interests and values.

So, did we value our children in the 2017 legislative session? The answer is complicated. If you consider the continued state investment in Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program or the commitment for public seed money to Alabama’s Healthy Food Financing program to eradicate food deserts (both of which are top legislative priorities for VOICES for Alabama’s Children) - the answer is a resounding yes. On the other hand, if you take the historic opportunity left on the table for lawmakers to walk away magnanimous by protecting young children in uninspected and unregulated child care across the state - the answer is a resounding no. You be the judge.

We at VOICES for Alabama’s Children, believe our children deserve all of the above and so much more.

Our tag line says it all. Because powerless children need powerful voices. And it’s because of you that we walked away with any policy wins for kids. Your support allowed us to reach right at two million Alabamians through media, social media and community outreach, raising the awareness level on critical children’s issues. And you helped grow our voice in the first quarter of the year by 400 new advocates. If that’s not enough, you – our advocates – made 37,724 calls, visits and online contacts with members of the Alabama Legislature.

We didn’t get everything we demanded for kids this year, but boy were we one collective force to be reckoned with. For that I couldn’t be more proud.

On behalf of the entire VOICES for Alabama’s Children family, thank you for allowing us to be the trusted policy and data voice for kids since 1992. As we celebrate 25 years of excellence in advocacy, we have you to thank for wholeheartedly being a part of the movement creating a brighter future for Alabama’s children.

I hope you enjoy the Policy Counts: 2017 Legislative Report, and take pride in the critical role you play for Alabama’s children.

Yours in advocacy,

Melanie R. Bridgeforth, MSW
Executive Director

2017 Key & Educational Policy Priorities:

- Require Uniform Regulation and Inspection of Child Care
- Fully Fund and Operationalize Alabama’s Healthy Food Financing Program
- Promote Healthy Early Care & Education (ECE) Settings
- Expand Funding for Alabama’s First Class Pre-K Program
- Defend Adequate State Funding for Child-Serving Programs and Services
- Eliminate Predatory Lending Practices

Our work on HB277 is in response to the many children who have been harmed in unregulated child care. We dedicate the 2017 Legislative Report in memory of Amiyah White.
First, allow us to welcome Alabama’s 54th Governor, The Honorable Kay Ivey. Governor Ivey was sworn in during the legislative session as the first Republican female governor. Governor Ivey is a long-time supporter of issues impacting Alabama’s children, including Alabama’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative, as well as a strong champion for ending child hunger in our state. VOICES for Alabama’s Children looks forward to working with Governor Ivey to prioritize needs of children in the decision making process.

Though many would agree that the 2017 regular legislative session was quite eventful, depending on whom you ask, the question of productivity is hit or miss. On Friday, May 19, 2017, the legislature adjourned sine die after several added distractions and tensions. All things considered, leaders joined together and passed the General Fund Budget and Education Trust Fund Budget.

**Budgets**

Lawmakers passed the General Fund Budget, which includes a $9.6 million increase for insurance for state employees and retirees; $701 million for Alabama Medicaid Agency plus $105 million from the BP oil spill settlement plan that lawmakers approved last year and $93 million to be carried over for 2019 or to use as a contingency against possible changes that could affect Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (ALL K ids). The 2018 GF Budget does not include the 4 percent raise for state employees proposed by former Governor Robert Bentley. Governor Ivey has signed the 2018 General Fund Budget, and it will go into effect on October 1, 2017.

The Education Trust Fund Budget, also signed by Governor Ivey, makes appropriations for the support, maintenance and development of public education in Alabama, for debt service and for capital outlay for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2018. An increase of $13 million will go to Alabama’s First Class Pre-K. The Education Trust Fund Budget provides money to hire about 150 more teachers and boosts direct funding for schools but otherwise shows little changes over the current year’s budget. The Education Trust Fund Budget will go into effect on October 1, 2017.

**2017 Policy Priorities**

VOICES for Alabama’s Children kicked off the 2017 Alabama Legislative Session with the release of our 2017 Agenda for Children, detailing our top policy priorities for the year. See page 14. This year, our targeted priorities include: uniform licensing and inspection for child care programs in Alabama, fully funding and operationalizing Alabama’s Healthy Food Financing program, expansion of Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program, promoting healthy Early Care & Education (ECE) settings and defending state funding for child-serving programs. Additionally, we supported efforts to eliminate predatory lending practices.

We would like to commend the Alabama Legislature for moving the needle on VOICES for Alabama’s Children’s top priority issues, including:

- Increased funding for Alabama’s First Class Pre-K by $13 million

This year, the long awaited bill to extend common sense protections to all children being served in the state’s child care system became a reality. During the third week of the 2017 Regular Legislative Session, VOICES for Alabama’s Children partnered with 35 legislative champions from both sides of the aisle in both chambers to introduce landmark legislation. A top legislative priority for VOICES for Alabama’s Children, lead House sponsors Rep. Pebblin Warren (D-Tuskegee) and Rep. K.L. Brown (R-Jacksonville) and lead Senate sponsor Sen. Cam Ward (R-Alabaster) introduced HB277/SB236, also known as the Child Care Safety Act. The bill called for uniform licensing and inspection for basic health and safety standards for child care programs in Alabama.

In an historic effort, HB277 passed unanimously out of the House Children and Senior Advocacy Committee, and on April 20th, members of the House overwhelmingly passed a substitute version of HB277 by a vote of 88-9. The substitution version of HB277 proposed the following enhancements to
protections for kids, but not limited to:

• Explicitly protect religious freedoms of faith-based child care providers

• Require licensing of all child care programs that receive state or federal funds operating for profit; or have at least one child who receives a child care subsidy. **This would have covered roughly 500 centers**

• Require annual inspections of all license exempt providers—a HUGE step up from virtually no oversight for some programs

• Require license exempt faith-based facilities to provide DHR the following, annually, and when changes occur: fire/health inspection reports, criminal background checks on employees and proof of liability, casualty and property insurance

• Require license exempt centers to post in plain view that the facility is NOT licensed by DHR

HB277 went on to pass unanimously out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. But, in the final days of the session after two failed attempts for a vote on the Senate floor, the doors closed on this much needed win for children. The bill came up for a vote in the Senate and Sen. Shay Shelnutt (R-Trussville) took to the mic with objections. Under the perceived threat of a filibuster, the bill was requested to be carried over at the call of the chair, for the second time. The Senate ultimately adjourned leaving children unprotected. In a press statement, VOICES for Alabama’s Children’s executive director said about the bill:

“Tonight, House Bill 277, the Child Care Safety Act, that would have protected tens of thousands of children being served in uninspected child care facilities was left on the table in the Alabama Senate,” said Melanie R. Bridgeforth, Executive Director for VOICES for Alabama’s Children. “After weeks of tireless negotiations and amid much compromise, less than a handful of Senators stood in the way of extending greater protections to young children. Now, our most vulnerable residents - our children - must wait for justice.”

“While disheartened by the outcome and what it means for children, we must, and we will, continue to fight for basic health and safety in child care across the state of Alabama. It is the very least we can do for our children who are silenced on this issue because they have no vote.”

“I would like to express sincerest gratitude to all of our supporters, including each and every one of our legislative champions in the House and Senate who put a lot on the line in this historic step to right a horrific wrong to kids. A very special thank you to our lead sponsors Rep. Pebblin Warren (D-Tuskegee), Rep. K.L. Brown (R-Jacksonville) and Sen. Cam Ward (R-Alabaster) for their tireless efforts to make young children a priority in the 2017 legislative session. Their leadership should be applauded and mirrored by all members of the Alabama Legislature and beyond.”

In other news, the state’s First Class Pre-K program saw increased funding by an additional $13 million for the 2017-2018 school year. The additional funds bring the total funding for First Class Pre-K from $64.5 million to $77.5 million and will provide approximately 2,100 more four-year-olds access to high quality program. For 11 consecutive years, Alabama’s First Class Pre-K Program has ranked No.1 in the nation for quality by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). Though the increase falls shy of the $20 million advocates requested and the recommendations of Alabama’s Pre-K Task Force, the investment represents a huge stride toward the overall goal to fully fund Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program by 2022-2023 or before.

As you may recall, last year in the 2016 regular session, VOICES for Alabama’s Children led efforts to create the Alabama Healthy Food Financing Initiative Study Commission through Senate Joint Resolution 105. Under the leadership of Senator Bobby Singleton (D-Greensboro) and Senator Greg Reed (R-Jasper), the Alabama Legislature took unprecedented action to address the growing issue of food access. As a result, three successful meetings of the Study Commission, facilitated by Melanie Bridgeforth, VOICES for Alabama’s Children’s Executive Director and Co-Chair of the Study Commission, were held. The goal of the Study Commission was to determine a best scan of practices for Alabama’s Healthy Food Financing program, consult with retailers and other experts to identify potential grocery store and food retail projects,
develop a pipeline of projects and to report the findings and recommendations to the Alabama Legislature in 2017.

This year, as a result of Senator Singleton’s (D-Greensboro) leadership, Alabama’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative (ALHFFI) received a commitment for an initial state investment of $300,000 to fund projects and communities across the state. Once lawmakers make the investment official it will be a huge win for kids and communities.

This legislative session, VOICES for Alabama’s Children continued our focus on predatory lending practices as our educational priority to address pay day lending reform. Several bills were introduced this session in an effort to curb skyrocketing interest rates, two of which had the potential to provide relief to families. Payday lenders in Alabama require lump-sum payments, which includes all of the principal and fees. Current law sets the term of the loan from 10 to 31 days. Typical interest rates are 456 percent (APR). Harsh policies and practices that prey on families and place them further in the throes of economic instability points to the need for payday lending reform in our state.

The Alliance for Responsible Lending in Alabama (ARLA) is a coalition of payday lending reform advocates, consisting of Alabama Appleseed, Alabama Arise, Southern Poverty Law Center, Women’s Fund of Greater Birmingham, YWCA Central Alabama and others. The coalition continues to work with lawmakers to find policy solutions that will work for everyone. The 2017 session saw the following bills introduced:

- HB321 by Rep. Bob Fincher (R-Rocky Branch) offered a constitutional cap of 36 percent on consumer loans. It failed to be considered in the House State Government Committee.

- SB284 by Sen. Arthur Orr (R-Decatur) offered true reform by severely limiting payday lenders. After advocates made compromising changes to gain support, the bill set a 30-day term for all payday loans, and created a mandatory 3-month off-ramp for any defaulted loan with equal installment payments. The Senate adjourned before bringing SB284 up for debate.

- HB535 by Rep. Danny Garrett (R-Trussville) set the minimum payday loan term at 14 days, required a 48-hour cooling off period for the customer as opposed to 24 hours in current law, technically eliminated rollovers, capped the insufficient funds fee to $30, kept interest rates at 456%, allowed 22 loans per year, did not contain a mandatory off-ramp for borrowers who defaulted and guaranteed payday lenders the right to market other products to customers trapped in six or more loans. HB535 failed to pass out of the Senate on the final night of the session.

Other Bills of Interest

In other news, HB24 sponsored by Rep. Wingo (R-Tuscaloosa), the Alabama Child Placing Agency Inclusion Act, was introduced again this year. HB24 provides that the state may not refuse to license, discriminate or take adverse action against any provider that is licensed or is required to be licensed by the state as a child placing agency on the basis that the provider declines to make a child placement that conflicts, or under circumstances that conflict, with sincerely held religious beliefs. HB24 will affect only those child placing agencies that do not receive federal funding. HB24 passed out of the Senate, and on May 3rd Governor Ivey signed it into law. The bill will go into effect immediately.

Also, HB440 sponsored by Rep. McMillan (R – Bay Minette), the Alabama Youth Residential Facility Abuse Prevention Act, was sent to Governor Ivey on May 17th for her signature. This bill would put in place registration and regulatory requirements for programs that offer on-site residency of children for periods over 24 hours for counseling, therapeutic, behavioral or educational purposes. VOICES for Alabama’s Children is a proponent of HB440, the Alabama Youth Residential Facility Abuse Prevention Act, and thanks Rep. McMillan for fighting for kids.

In addition to our policy priorities, VOICES for Alabama’s Children tracked nearly 60 pieces of legislation that could impact the lives of Alabama’s children and families. For a detailed account of some of those bills see the Legislative Billboard on page 10.
ISSUE IN FOCUS
CHILD CARE

Child advocates worked tirelessly in the final days and hours, not only to protect funding for high-quality pre-K and healthy food access, but also to implement common sense protections for children in child care facilities. Check out how your elected officials voted on HB277, and see who’s for kids and who’s just kidding.

HB277
(Substitute Version)

HOUSE VOTES: 2017

|-----|-----------|---|----------|---|-------|---|------|---|-------|---|---------|---|--------|---|-------|---|---------|---|--------|---|------|---|-------|---|--------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|

| Yes | Henry | Y | Hill | Y | Hollis | Y | Holmes (A) | Y | Holmes (M) | Y | Howard | Y | Hurst | Y | Ingram | Y | Jackson | Y | Johnson (K) | Y | Johnson (R) | Y | Jones | Y | Knight | Y | Lawrence | Y | Ledbetter | Y | Lee | Y | Lindsey | Y | Lovorn | Y | Martin | N | McCampbell | Y | McClammy | Y | McCutcheon | Y | McMillan | Y | Milican | Y | Mooney | Y | Moore (B) | N | Moore (M) | Y | Morrow | A | Nordgren* | P | Patterson | Y | Polizos | Y | Poole | Y | Pringle | N | Rich | Y | Rogers | Y | Rowe | Y | Sanderford | Y | Scott | N | Sells | N | Sessions | P | Shedd | N | Shiver | Y | South | Y | Standridge | N | Todd | Y |

| Yes | Treadaway | Y | Tuggle | Y | Wadsworth | Y | Warren | P | Weaver | P | Whorton (I) | Y | Whorton (R) | Y | Wilcox | Y | Williams (JD) | Y | Williams (JW) | Y | Williams (P) | N | Wingo | Y | Wood | Y |

SENATE VOTES: 2017

VOICES for Alabama’s Children routinely monitors and takes action on issues and legislation that does not appear on the organizational Policy Agenda. This is a list of important bills (but not a complete listing) the organization monitored throughout the 2017 regular session.

**Health**

HB284 – Representative Patterson (R-Meridianville) – PASSED ACT 2017-337

Requires health benefit plans to cover the treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder for all insureds under certain insurance plans and contracts. This bill would also require the Department of Insurance to file an annual report with the Legislature on the costs of providing treatment for Autism Spectrum Disorder.

HB95 – Representative Mooney (R-Birmingham) – PASSED ACT 2017-189

Known as the Health Care Rights of Conscience Act allows a health care provider to refuse to provide health care services that conflict with the health care provider’s moral, religious or ethical principles by objecting in writing prior to being asked to provide the health care services.

SB296 – Senator Beasley (D-Clayton) – FAILED

Requires the training of public school educators in mental health first aid and in the detection of students at risk of committing suicide or with other mental or emotional disorders.

SB96 – Senator Holtzclaw (R-Madison) – PASSED ACT 2017-257

In instances of allegations of child abuse and/or neglect, requires DHR to determine military status of parent or guardian and, if appropriate, notify the Department of Defense Family Advocacy Program at the installation about the allegation.

**Education**

HB97 – Representative Collins (R-Decatur) / SB153 – Senator Singleton (D-Greensboro) – FAILED

Creates a state longitudinal data system for Alabama, called the Alabama Network of Statewide Workforce-Related Statistics, or ANSWERS, which would utilize existing data assets to provide education and training workforce for Alabama residents. Additionally, data would be used to provide for assessment of availability of skilled workforce, effectiveness of education programs, information regarding career path decisions, information regarding effectiveness of workforce training and workforce outcomes.

SB32 – Senator Orr (R-Decatur) – PASSED Act 2017-173

Beginning with the 2018-2019 school year, requires students to successfully pass a civics test identical to the civics portion of the naturalization test used by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to graduate from high school or obtain a high school equivalency diploma.

**Safety**

HB21 – Representative Weaver (R-Alabaster) – FAILED

Requires the Department of Human Resources to make every effort to place an infant of a dependent minor mother together with the minor mother in foster care.

HB24 – Representative Wingo (R-Birmingham) – PASSED ACT 2017-213

Establishes the Alabama Child Placing Agency Inclusion Act that would prohibit the state from discriminating against child placing agencies on the basis that the provider declines to provide a child placement that conflicts with the religious beliefs of the provider. This bill would affect only those child placing agencies that do not receive federal funding.
HB29 – Representative Holmes, M. (R-Wetumpka) – PASSED ACT 2017-358

Provides restrictions on the issuance of driver’s licenses to persons under 18 years of age, to revise the penalties for a violation of the restrictions on a Stage II license; to provide for the assessment of a fine against a parent or legal guardian who knowingly allows a driver with a Stage I or Stage II license to drive a motor vehicle in violation of applicable restrictions.

HB67 – Representative Sells (R-Greenville) – FAILED

Provides that repeated acts of physical or mental abuse on or causes serious physical injury to a child under the age of 12 years is a Class A Felony. Currently the age cap is children under six years of age.

HB203 – Representative Weaver (R-Alabaster)/ SB154 – Senator Ward (R-Alabaster) – FAILED

Adds certain named chemical compounds of Fentanyl and synthetic controlled substance Fentanyl analogues to Schedule I of the controlled substances list. Possession, distribution and trafficking of these compounds would be deemed unlawful, and violations would be subject to the existing criminal penalties, as well as enhanced penalties, for distribution and possession.

HB216 – Representative Butler (R-Rainbow City) – FAILED

Adds paid firefighters and volunteer rescue squad members to the list of professions subject to the mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect law.

HB239 – Representative Hill (R-Moody) / SB191 – Senator Figures (D-Mobile) – FAILED

Revises existing definitions regarding child custody to be consistent with terminology used in case law and to move away from the concept that one parent has sole physical custody, while the other parent has visitation rights. Would also authorize the court to establish a parenting plan when the parties are unable to agree upon one.

HB277 – Representative Warren (D-Tuskegee)
Representative Brown (R-Jacksonville)/ SB236– Senator Ward (R-Alabaster) – FAILED

Establishes the Child Care Safety Act which would protect religious teachings in faith-based child care providers, require licensing of any provider that receives child care subsidies, require criminal background checks on all employees that come in contact with children, require inspection of all child care programs and require each facility have at least one employee that is CPR certified. Additionally, these changes would go into effect August 1, 2018.

SB9 – Senator Brewbaker (R-Montgomery) – FAILED

Repeals the provision relating to the automatic charging of 16 year old children as adults. This would result in a child age 16 or older formerly charged as an adult for certain designated offenses being subject to the initial jurisdiction of the juvenile court. The bill would also provide that existing provisions relating to the continuing jurisdiction of the criminal courts for defendants convicted before the repeal would remain in place.

SB16 – Senator Brewbaker (R-Montgomery) – PASSED ACT 2017-131

Requires a verdict of death to be based on a unanimous vote of the
jury and would prohibit a court from overriding a verdict by a jury in a capital case.

**SB73 – Senator Ross (D-Montgomery) – FAILED**

Known as the Roderic Deshaun Scott Seat Belt Safety Act requires each occupant of a passenger motor vehicle to have a safety belt fastened while the vehicle is in motion.

**SB186 – Senator Stutts (R-Tuscumbia) – FAILED**

Deletes from existing law the statement that joint custody does not necessarily mean equal physical custody. This bill would revise existing definitions regarding custody to be consistent with terminology used in case law and to specify that both parents share all aspects of parenting and establish uniform guidelines to be used in all child custody determinations and remedies for violations. This bill would require a parenting plan in all cases.

**SB227 – Senator Dial (R – Lineville) – FAILED**

Increases state sales and use tax, phase-in period, while decreasing sales and use tax on food to be phased out and exempt by September 1, 2018. Counties and municipalities would be prohibited from increasing sales tax on food.

**Economic Security**

**HB70 – Representative Poole (R-Tuscaloosa) – FAILED**

Lowers the age of majority to 18 years and provides for certain exceptions.

**HB206 – Representative Coleman (D – Birmingham) – FAILED**

Prohibits use of restraints on juveniles in court proceedings, except under certain conditions.

**HB303 – Representative Wadsworth (R – Arley) – FAILED**

Reduces sales and use tax on food by one-percent, beginning October 1, 2017.

**HB321 – Representative Fincher (R-Woodland) – FAILED**

Caps the maximum interest rate on certain consumer loans, lines of credit and other financial products at 36 percent per annum.

**HB454 – Representative Williams, JD (R – Birmingham)/SB360 – Senator Smitherman (D – Birmingham) – FAILED**

Establishes the Alabama Public Transportation Trust Fund which would be administered by ADECA.

**HB535 – Representative Danny Garrett (R-Trussville) – FAILED**

Provides for deferments, repayments, fees and interest of pay day lending loans. Also required internet lenders be licensed by the state of Alabama.

**SB194 – Senator Orr (R – Decatur) – FAILED**

Provides for additional procedures and limitations for various public assistance programs administered by DHR including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF).

**SB284 – Senator Orr (R-Decatur) – FAILED**

Provides for regulation of minimum fees, acquisition charges, other fees, interest and terms for small loans, title loans, deferred presentment transactions, and other loans in certain circumstances.

**Budgets**

**HB155 – Representative Clouse (R-Ozark) – PASSED**

The General Fund Budget of $1.85 billion makes appropriations for the ordinary expenses of the executive, legislative and judicial agencies of the state, for other functions of government, for debt service and for capital outlay for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2018.

The 2018 GF Budget includes a $9.6 million increase for insurance for state employees and retirees; $701 million for Alabama Medicaid Agency plus $105 million from the BP oil spill settlement plan that lawmakers approved last year; $93 million to be carried over for 2019 or to use as a contingency against possible changes that could affect Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (ALL Kids).

**SB129 – Senator Orr (R-Decatur) – PASSED**

The Education Trust Fund Budget of $6.4 billion makes appropriations for the support, maintenance and development of public education in Alabama, for debt service, and for capital outlay for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2018. An increase of $13 million would go to Alabama First Class Pre-K. The ETF Budget would provide money to hire about 150 more teachers and boosts direct funding for schools but otherwise shows little changes over the current year’s budget.

**HB178 – Representative Warren (D-Tuskegee) – PASSED**

Makes an appropriation of $37,725,742 to the Children First Trust Fund for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2018. Funds will provide services to more than 160,000 children through twelve state agencies. Remaining funds at end of fiscal year will remain in the CFTF and not revert to General Fund or any other fund.
Thank you advocates! Your hard work and advocacy efforts paid off during the 2017 legislative session. VOICES for Alabama’s Children’s advocates rallied on the State House steps to encourage lawmakers to make children a priority.

4th Annual Child Advocacy Day


On Thursday, March 16th more than 200 child advocates joined VOICES for Alabama’s Children during our 4th Annual Child Advocacy Day and Kids Count Rally. Advocates in attendance used their VOICES to speak directly with lawmakers, showing their gratitude for pre-k funding and calling on them to make child care, safe care and VOTE YES for HB277, the Child Care Safety Act.
Require Uniform Licensing and 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. 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. 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 70.9% of all child care could be unregulated. 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.

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 an increased risk for diet-related illness. 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.

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. Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program has ranked No. 1 in the nation for quality for 11 consecutive years, yet only one in four Alabama four-year-olds have access.

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.

Promote Healthy Early Care & Education (ECE) Settings

Currently about 1 in 4 young children in the U.S. aged 2 to 5 years are overweight or obese. 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. 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.

Protecting Adequate State Funding for Child-Serving Programs & 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 PRIORITIES

Eliminate Predatory Lending Practices

In Alabama, nearly 19 percent of adults and 27.5 percent of children live in poverty. 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. 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


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


4 The Food Trust, Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Financing in Alabama https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/alavoices/pages/27/attachments/original/1428409463/2015_AL_HFA_Mapping_Report_FINAL.pdf?1428409463


PHOTO CREDITS

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