Alabama Arise 2021 Town Hall Tuesdays Session Notes

Following are the notes from the three Town Hall Tuesdays held June 15 - July 13, 2021. These are the brainstormed notes directly from the breakout sessions. Few edits have been made as we wanted to capture the responses of participants as authentically as possible.

Arise Town Hall Tuesday – A better Alabama for all, June 15, 2021

Participants discussed their answers to the discussion question: “If you could wave a magic wand and fix one issue that addresses poverty in Alabama, what would that issue be?”

Presdelane Harris’ Breakout Session

Drawing from a book - Clash: How to thrive in a multicultural World - one participant said we need a shift in our culture toward on that supports government and people’s participation in the process, especially a culture that encourages “rocking the boat” to create the society we want,

Building on that theme, another expressed the need to invest in Education. Ideally, an education system that passes on a culture that encourages boat rocking. Another participant said “I wish we valued education like we valued football.”

A long-time transit advocate said it was needed most for people to have a good quality of life. She urged signing a petition that advocates for statewide funding of public transportation. Another participant agreed with the need for public transportation and discussed how it intersects with climate change (she does not drive, but bikes).

Others agreed with the need for public transportation and added emphasis to our need for Medicaid Expansion as it impacts job creation and health care in prisons.

Participants discussed the need to untax groceries.

A couple of participants agreed that we need an “anti-poverty strategy (mindset) that relates to the shifting culture idea. We need to create a vision for culture with an anti-poverty strategy that minimizes the number of people in poverty which includes education, transit, living wages, racial equity, etc. Others agreed with this idea to have a larger approach to eliminating poverty. It’s frustrating to live in a state and country where we have not yet solved poverty.

Stan Johnson’s Breakout Session

Issues raised by participants:

1. Medicaid on the governor’s plate not the legislators’
2. Raise the minimum wage to $15 hr.
3. Overturn Home Rule … constitutional reform if need be.
4. Develop a strong open meets law, especially when it comes to Alabama Power …

5. Coal ash dumps should be better regulated by passing state laws forbidding coal ash dumps on waterways.
6. If Medicaid is not expanded the states should come up with other means to provide health care coverage for the poor.
7. Make election day a state holiday.
8. Instant runoff voting or rank choice voting should be adopted statewide. It would save money.
9. Restore voting rights for felons – full restoration of voting rights. Study Maine's laws when it comes to restorative voting rights.
10. Public transportation: Provide bicycles or motor bikes so people can get to work.
11. Habitual offender act – abolish it.
12. Veteran courts … Mandate statewide.
13. Modifications should be implemented to the Habitual offender act if not abolished.
14. Community corrections implemented statewide.
15. Now that Broadband legislation has passed … constant monitoring of its implementation by Arise Members.
16. CoverAlabama needs to convene a faith leaders' delegation to support Medicaid expansion.

Mike Nicholson & Debbie Smith's Breakout Session

Participants:
· A long time Arise member interested in removing the grocery tax and constitutional reform. Also a member of the League of Women Voters
· From Huntsville – interested in constitutional reform. She's also interested in education and expanding Medicaid. She's also a member of AAUW
· From Tuscaloosa – interested in constitutional reform, Medicaid expansion, prison reform, and an advocate for rural Alabama.
· Founder of I Vote Madison. She's been with Arise for a couple of years. Interested in Medicaid expansion. Would like Arise to help with transparency in government. There needs to be rules in place to record and archive local meetings. She would like to see recordings archived for at least 5 years so they're available during an entire election cycle.
· From Montgomery appreciates Arise's work on helping marginalized people.

<u>General discussion:</u>
· Would like to see the grocery tax go away. Arab has a 13.5% grocery tax rate. It's unfair, but it could help everyone if it goes away.
· Would like to see the prescription tax go away.
· A participant was a part of a demonstration against the grocery tax in Trussville. A man was very angry that they were demonstrating. All he saw was the word "tax" and automatically got angry because he thought they would want to raise taxes.
· Would like to see Medicaid expansion happen.
· One participant shared that a retired professor researched about Medicaid expansion, and less people would lose their homes. BCH has taken many homes in the Tuscaloosa County area because folks went into bankruptcy over medical debt. What are all the areas that expansion would benefit? We should point out how much Medicaid expansion could benefit other areas too.
· Another would also like to see Medicaid expansion.
· A participant would give full reparations and that would include environmental justice as well.

Arise Town Hall Tuesday – Health care for all, June 29, 2021

Building on the idea that everyone should have access to the health care they need to live a long and healthy life. Participants discussed closing the gap by expanding Medicaid in Alabama and other health care strategies and solutions.

Presdelane Harris' Breakout Session

1. A participant reported a strategy of making one call a day to the Governor, urging her to expand Medicaid. Other participants reported making some calls and said they will try to call more often as well.
2. A couple of participants are willing to meet with legislators and others if it will help gain support for Expansion.
3. Other participants reported various actions they have taken to advocate for Expansion - op eds, community meetings, letters/calls to legislators & Governor, and outreach to get other organizations and individuals involved. Participant expressed some degree of burnout, but will continue to work.
4. Several participants suggested telling stories of people impacted by the lack of Expansion. Some social media story sharing.
5. Participants also stressed the importance of talking about Medicaid as a benefit to everyone, even those who are not directly Medicaid recipients.
6. A participant from the AL Medicaid Agency stressed the need to have a way to pay for expansion and to sustain that funding for future years.
7. Some participants said they were willing to talk to Whit sides or help her identify Medicaid gap stories.

Stan Johnson's Breakout Session

1. We need to spotlight frontline workers who will benefit from Medicaid expansion: Child care workers, Nursing home workers, service industry workers … Also Medicaid Expansion helps stabilize the workforce in these industries.
2. Get Business Council of Alabama support
3. Publish the poll numbers of Alabamians supporting Expansion. Use Billboards to get the word out. Billboards would add more credibility to the expansion campaign.
4. Get celebrities to make pitches supporting Medicaid Expansion … put them on flyers, Billboards and Cover Alabama website.
5. Request from group participant to get folks to sign the statewide Fund Public Transit petition at Transit City Advisory Board

Mike Nicholson's Breakout Session

1. Pretty much everyone in the breakout session repeatedly emphasized the importance of Medicaid expansion, and most of our discussion involved specific aspects of expansion
2. One member spoke of the important impact that expansion would have on the mental health of Alabamians.
3. One member spoke of the important impact that expansion would have on the health of Alabamians with disabilities.

4. Multiple members discussed the need for a tool (or set of tools) that would allow them to more effectively and confidently discuss expansion and what it would mean for their communities.
5. One member emphasized a need for an approach that uses multiple mediums to humanize Medicaid expansion and the impact it would have on all Alabamians. Specifically, they were interested in a short video with interviews of those on Medicaid and those who would receive Medicaid were we to expand.

Debbie Smith's Breakout Session

1. One participant suggested that folks working on the Cover Alabama campaign should reach out to the mayors who recently had a conference on gun violence and mental health. We should seek their support for Medicaid expansion because access to health care could help with meeting people's mental health needs and substance abuse disorders which are often underlying causes of violence.
2. Participants also suggested that we should reach out groups that assist formerly incarcerated people to get their support.
3. Participants suggested that we should talk more about the cost of NOT expanding Medicaid more often. They wondered if we had a precise number of how much money is spent on paying for healthcare for people who don't currently have coverage. We should also look into how much it costs for hospital caseworkers and billing specialists to spend their time on helping uninsured patients access coverage.
4. Participants said that we should bring in more mental health groups to push Medicaid expansion.
5. Participants suggested asking about Medicaid expansion at municipal election town halls. While candidates for local government would not have any power over whether Medicaid expansion happens, they could still have influence with their state legislators. Questions asked in these forums could also raise awareness of Medicaid expansion for the people in attendance.

Arise Town Hall Tuesday – Justice for all, July 13, 2021

Voting rights barriers and an unjust criminal justice system have disenfranchised many of our neighbors. Participant discussed their priorities for improving access to voting and reforming our criminal justice system.

Presdelane Harris' Breakout Session

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and to state their priorities in the areas of voting access and criminal justice reform. Highlights from participant discussion:

1. Deep concern rooted in many years of being voting rights advocates for the barriers people experience to both registering and being able to vote.

2. We need to address the violence and overcrowding in the prison system. Maybe it's not such a bad thing for the Federal Government to take over - they may not be any worse than the state.
3. Some participants are working closely with other organizations around voting rights restoration and registration challenges,
4. Some concern about attempts to limit voting rights during a state of emergency.
5. Concern about fees, including increases in expungement fees, some must pay before voting rights are restored. Participant works with people trying to pay expungement fees to get their voting rights restored.
6. In light of COVID, it's important to allow voting by mail, curbside voting and other emergency measures that make it possible for people to vote during a pandemic (or other health emergency).
7. Other participants were also concerned about how the prison system is a human rights crisis.
8. There was concern about voter registration in rural areas and limitations with transportation. Some can't get to locations to register. We have a long way to go to make it easy to register and to vote.
9. Participants raised making Election Day a state holiday. We discussed the work of Rep. Matt Simpson who is looking at making one of the current Confederate holidays an Election Day holiday. He is also looking at making another Confederate day a Juneteenth holiday.
10. A unique idea from one participant - consider linking the salary of the Secretary of State to voter turnout! The more voters who vote, the higher the salary.
11. A participant raised another issue: the need for open records legislation in the spirit of governmental transparency.

Stan Johnson's Breakout Session

1. Improve the laws for offenders voting … restoration.
2. Support repealing HFOA.
3. How can you be pro-life and be for the death penalty?
4. Diversity on the bench
5. Voting rights … Get rid of straight ticket voting.
6. Term limits
7. Redistricting

Mike Nicholson's Breakout Session

- One participant was extremely focused on learning how she can better communicate what Medicaid expansion is, how we can pay for it, and how to be convincing.
- One participant expressed her growing sadness over the political divide, and wondered if our polarization is preventing us from achieving what's best for Alabama.
- One participant was mostly focused on the prison reform crisis. She wanted to know how the current leasing project was going, and what Alabama would have to do if it fails.

- One participant was particularly interested in voting rights, especially disenfranchisement of felons and voter ID laws.
- One participant, from Birmingham, was worried about the upcoming local elections and the noticeable lack of young candidates and voters.
- Another participant echoed these concerns, and discussed her desire to motivate and engage more young people in criminal justice and voting rights reforms.
- One participant was mostly interested in judicial reform – where do we go from here?
- One participant was heavily involved with state advocacy, and shared her experiences working to legalize medical marijuana for people with pain from disabilities.
- Multiple participants commented that having a state holiday to vote should be a no-brainer.

Debbie Smith's Breakout Session

1. Participants were interested in the no-excuse absentee bill from Laura Hall. They asked if it will be introduced again & Dev said he would be surprised if it was not reintroduced in 2022.
2. Participants asked about the civil asset forfeiture bill and if Arise will continue to advocate to improve the law. Arise intends to continue to push for forfeiture linked to only be used in conjunction with criminal convictions in the future as long as our members continue to want us to work on it.
3. Participants expressed concerns about the upcoming special legislative session on redistricting. They asked questions about when Census data would be available & what they could do to help prevent gerrymandering.
4. Participants said they were interested in partnering with organizations to Get out The Vote
5. A participant mentioned the importance of funding for public transportation. They would like to change the state constitution so gas tax dollars can go towards public transit projects.
6. Participants brought up Medicaid expansion and said they wanted to make sure that immigrants, documented and undocumented, have access to the program.
7. One participant said that they were concerned about making sure that domestic violence organizations get the funding they need to operate. They said that the federal infrastructure bill could potentially provide this funding.