

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

# POLICY COUNTS: 2016 LEGISLATIVE REPORT



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# OUR MISSION

To ensure the well-being of **Alabama's children** through research, public awareness, and advocacy.

## 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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Rhonda L. Mann, Policy & Research Director

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# THE 2016 LEGISLATIVE SESSION



# A LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Photo: Mickey Welsh / Montgomery Advertiser

**Melanie R. Bridgeforth, MSW, Executive Director,**  
VOICES for Alabama's Children

## 2016 Key & Educational Policy Priorities:

- Increase Healthy Food Access for Children & Families
- Institute Uniform Regulation and Inspection of Child Care
- 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 & Services
- Protection of Child Trafficking Victims
- Eliminate Predatory Lending Practices
- Medicaid Expansion



*Dear Advocate,*

On behalf of our Board and staff, allow me to express our deepest gratitude for **allowing us to be the trusted voice for children since 1992**. What an incredible platform to lead one of the greatest organizations for children in the state. Doing so alongside warriors like you makes it even more meaningful.

As I reflect on the 2016 legislative session, while disheartened by the many opportunities left on the table, I can't help but be inspired by the collaboration and successes secured in a tough political environment. From moving the needle on food access, to expansion of high-quality pre-k, to protecting child trafficking victims, progress was made to improve child well-being in our state.

I hope you find our 2016 legislative report, **Policy Counts**, both informational and a useful tool to keep the drumbeat for children even while session is out.

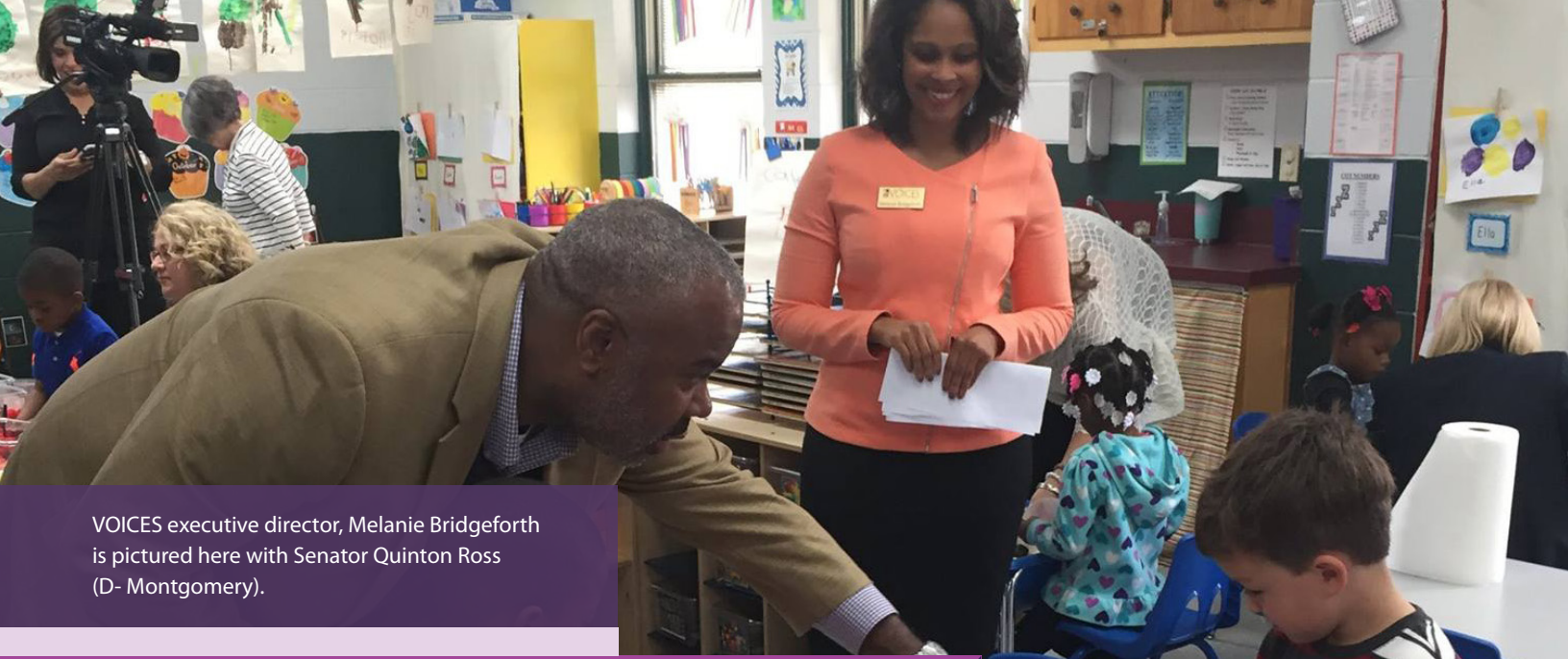
We have a long journey ahead to ensure that **every Alabama child is at least guaranteed the opportunity to succeed**, but there is no better group of advocates to travel that road with than you.

Thank you for your vision and leadership, but most importantly thank you being a voice for Alabama's children.

Yours in advocacy,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melanie R. Bridgeforth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Melanie R. Bridgeforth, MSW  
Executive Director



VOICES executive director, Melanie Bridgeforth is pictured here with Senator Quinton Ross (D- Montgomery).

Photo: Alabama School Readiness Alliance

# LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

**2016 Highlight:** The Education Trust Fund Budget, HB-117 increased Alabama's First Class Pre-K program funding at a historical level of \$16 million in state investments.

VOICES for Alabama's Children kicked off the 2016 Alabama Legislative Session with the release of our Public Policy Priorities. See page 14. Our key priorities included: implementation of the newly created healthy food financing program, increased funding for Alabama's First Class Pre-K program, promoting uniform inspection of all child care programs and defending state funding for child-serving programs. Additionally, we supported efforts to enhance protections for child trafficking victims, eliminate predatory lending practices and fully fund Medicaid.

Allow us first to commend Governor Bentley and the Alabama Legislature for moving the needle on VOICES' top priority issues, including:

- Creating the Alabama Healthy Food Financing Study Commission to further address implementation of the state's Healthy Food Financing program and next steps of bringing healthy food closer to home for the 1.8 million Alabamians living in communities with limited access to fresh food.
- Enhancing protections for child victims of human trafficking by enacting the Alabama Human Trafficking Safe Harbor Act.
- Increased funding for Alabama's First Class Pre-K by \$16 million.

The Education Trust Fund Budget, HB-117, increased funding for the state's First Class Pre-K program by an additional \$16

million for the 2016-2017 school year. The additional funds bring the total funding for First Class Pre-K from \$48.5 million to \$64.5 million. Thanks to Alabama lawmakers, this historic increase in state investments for high quality pre-k is now accessible to 25% of our state's four-year-olds. This additional funding will provide approximately 2,800 more four-year-olds with access to this high quality program. What a significant win for Alabama's children! For ten 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), and is one of only five states to receive this distinction. Though the increase falls slightly shy of the \$20 million advocates requested and the recommendations of Alabama's Pre-K Task Force, this historic investment in pre-k is an incredible stride toward the overall goal to fully fund Alabama's First Class Pre-K program by 2022-2023 or before.

Lawmakers also took steps to protect child safety. As part of the federal Strengthening Families legislation, the Alabama Legislature moved one step closer to ensuring the protection of sexually exploited children who fall victim to human traffickers by passing HB-433, Alabama Human Trafficking Safe Harbor Act sponsored by Rep. Jack Williams (R-Birmingham). The legislation strengthens Alabama's existing human trafficking law by protecting minors who are victims of human trafficking from criminal charges and makes social and community services available to them. More specifically, it ensures that victims cannot be convicted of the crime of



prostitution and allows the state to hold a foreign national in detention for 72 hours in cases where the person is arrested for prostitution to ensure they have access to any needed resources, such as shelter, health care or counseling.

As you may recall, last year in the 2015 regular session VOICES for Alabama's Children led a successful legislative campaign resulting in the passage of a bill, which was signed into law by Gov. Robert Bentley on May 27, 2015, creating a statewide Healthy Food Financing program. Under the leadership of legislative bill sponsors Sen. Greg Reed (R-Cordova) and Rep. James Buskey (D-Mobile), the Alabama Legislature took unprecedented action to address the growing issue of food access. The Healthy Food Financing Act established a statewide revolving loan fund program to incentivize grocers and other fresh food retailers to develop, renovate or expand in communities with limited access to fresh, healthy food. The program is housed at the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) where we continue our advocacy support to ensure full implementation and seek funding from both private and public sectors to seed the program. An attempt to secure \$1.25 million dollars for the Healthy Food Financing Program from the Education Trust Fund was proven unsuccessful. However, VOICES was successful in passing resolution, SJR105 setting up the Healthy Food Financing Study Commission. The passage of Senate Joint Resolution 105 established the Healthy Food Financing Commission Study, made up of members from the public,

private and philanthropic sectors who will conduct a scan of successful Healthy Food Financing Programs and identify a pipeline of potential food retail projects across the state to improve food access.

While we applaud state decision makers on the historical funding for Alabama's First Class Pre-K, the creation of the Healthy Food Financing Commission Study and passing the Alabama Human Trafficking Safe Harbor Act, a critical opportunity to improve child well-being was left on the table. Fully funding Medicaid was left undone. Earlier this legislative session, the Alabama Legislature overrode a veto by Governor Bentley and passed the General Fund Budget. The Governor vetoed the budget because it underfunds Medicaid by \$85 million. This shortfall in Medicaid funding could have a devastating impact on our state's most vulnerable populations, especially the 570,000 children who rely on Medicaid for their health care needs as well as the health care system throughout the state. The House and Senate budget committees held joint meetings to address the rising cost of Medicaid. During the last week of session, the Senate failed to pass the House version of the BP oil settlement – a version that would have allocated \$70 million for Medicaid funding from the \$1 billion BP Oil Settlement. There has been discussion from the Governor's office on a special session – stay tuned.

Another opportunity left on the table was addressing Alabama's predatory lending practices. We live in a state



**From left to right:**

Jada Shaffer, Campaign Manager, VOICES for Alabama's Children  
Beverly Harton-Moore, Volunteer, American Heart Association  
Paul W. Kennedy, President, Walker Area Community Foundation  
State Senate Majority Leader Greg Reed (R – Jasper)  
Melanie R. Bridgeforth, MSW, Executive Director, VOICES for Alabama's Children  
Jim Byard, Director, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs  
Mayor Drew Gilbert, City of Cordova

**2016 Highlight: SJR105-** Brings healthier foods closer to home by establishing the Healthy Food Financing Commission.

where 19 percent of Alabamians and nearly 28 percent of children live in poverty. Ending practices that prey on families struggling to make ends meet is a no-brainer policy solution to curb this social ill. Several bills were introduced this legislative session in an attempt to curb the prevalence of predatory lending practices and institute reforms. SB 91 and HB 342, sponsored by Sen. Orr (R-Decatur) and Rep. Todd (D-Birmingham) respectively, both attempted to drastically reform payday loans. Currently, payday lenders require payment in full in ten days, with interest rates equaling up to 456% on loans. Each bill addressed repayment terms and interest rates. However, The Alabama legislature convened without making any changes to the current payday lending law.

Additionally, Rep. Todd (D-Birmingham) introduced legislation geared towards reforming the title loan industry, HB 326, as did Rep. Scott (D—Fairfield) in HB 526. Both bills would require licensing for title loan lenders along with other provisions, including lower interest rates and the return of excess money to the borrower gained from resale of a car used to guarantee the loan.

Lastly, lawmakers missed a critical opportunity to ensure all child care programs are regulated and inspected. A child care bill, HB 548, was introduced by Rep. Todd (D-Birmingham). This bill would have required child care facilities that are part of a church or nonprofit religious school to become licensed

through DHR. The bill never made it to the House State Government Committee before being indefinitely postponed.

In other child care news, another bill on the topic proved to be quite controversial. HB 158—Rep. Wingo (R-Tuscaloosa), the Alabama Child Placing Agency Inclusion Act (which was substituted for SB 204, Alabama Child Care Inclusion Act), would allow faith-based child placing agencies to refuse services based on sincerely held religious beliefs without risk of losing their license from the state. Several of our member organizations and other agencies contacted VOICES fearing that the bill would have established potential grounds for discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs. Advocates opposed to the legislation spoke candidly about its potential far-reaching impact in a VOICES moderated teleconference. Speakers included voices from the faith-based community, social justice community and the child care provider community. The bill was indefinitely postponed.

**In addition to our policy priorities, VOICES tracked nearly 60 pieces of legislation that could impact the lives of Alabama's children and families. For a detailed account of those bills and their status see the Legislative Billboard on page 9.**



**Alabama Children's Cabinet-** Governor Bentley announced the creation of the Alabama Children's Cabinet created by Executive Order 17 on April 12, 2016. The Cabinet will serve as an advisory body in formulating policies, encouraging innovation, and discussing issues critical to the needs of Alabama's children.

# REVIEW OF THE 2016 BILLBOARD HIGHLIGHTS

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 2016 regular session.

## Health

### **HB 61— Representative Ball (R-Madison)— PASSED Act 2016-268**

Known as Leni's Law, legalizes the use of cannabidiol (CBD) with a THC level of no more than three percent relative to CBD for people diagnosed with chronic or debilitating disease or medical condition including one that produces seizures for which a person is under treatment. This bill is not intended as a generalized authorization of medical marijuana.

### **SB 109— Senator Whatley (R-Auburn)— FAILED**

The Kyle Grady Act, allows K-12 grade students to have in their possession and self-administer auto-injectable epinephrine which is used to treat life-threatening allergic reactions.

### **SB 226— Senator Orr (R-Decatur)— PASSED Act 2016-279**

Categorizes a new dietary supplement containing kratom as a controlled substance and adds it to the Schedule I list of drugs which include heroine and LSD. Kratom, which is a plant based supplement in the coffee family, has been available in convenience stores and could easily be bought over the counter by youth.

### **SB 372— Senator Chambliss (R-Prattville)— PASSED Act 2016-399**

Provides protection for a mother from violation of the Alabama Child Abuse Act, including the chemical endangerment of a child, when taking a controlled substance as prescribed by a medical professional during her pregnancy.

## Education

### **HB 41— Representative Chesteen (R-Geneva)— PASSED**

Relating to the Alabama Ahead Act, would make Alabama the first state to provide all public schools with broadband infrastructure and wireless technology. Allows rural school students the opportunity to catch up with their city counterparts in school technology.

### **HB 84— Representative K. Johnson (R-Moulton)— FAILED**

Allows the parents of children with special needs, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, the opportunity to remove their children from the public school

setting while using public school funding to enroll the child in a more specialized program.

### **HB 125— Representative Collins (R-Decatur)— FAILED**

Implements the Alabama Longitudinal Data System (ALDS), a database that would aggregate data to streamline existing student information on students from Pre-K to the workforce as a more accurate way to measure employment outcomes.

### **SB 60— Senator Glover (R-Semmes)— FAILED**

Repeals the Alabama College- and Career-Ready Standards (ACCRS) standards, commonly known as Common Core, and reverts back to standards prior to adoption in 2010. This bill would further protect state and local control of education by restricting the State Board of Education from adopting other national standards.

## Safety

### **HB 112— Representative Fridy (R-Birmingham)— FAILED**

Provides that every parent has a fundamental right to direct the upbringing, education, care, and custody of his or her children. Currently, Alabama does not have a state statute that explicitly defines and protects parental rights as fundamental rights. However, Alabama courts have repeatedly recognized the rights of parents to oversee the care of their children as a fundamental right.

### **HB158— Representative Wingo (R-Tuscaloosa)— FAILED**

HB158 substituted for SB204 which was the Alabama Child Care Inclusion Act. HB158 removes all references to child care providers and establishes the Alabama Child Placing Agency Inclusion Act. This act would allow faith-based child placing agencies to refuse services based on sincerely held religious beliefs without risk of losing their license from the state.

# CONTINUED BILLBOARD HIGHLIGHTS

## **HB 238— Representative Collins (R-Decatur)— PASSED Act 2016-354**

Known as “Erin’s Law”, was amended in 2016 to include the following: creates the crime of a school employee transmitting obscene material to a student; provides for the crimes of sexual contact or soliciting a sex act with a student; provides for the admissibility of certain out-of-court statements by children under the age of 12 years in certain child abuse and neglect criminal proceedings; references a specific definition of child abuse and neglect in mandatory child abuse and neglect reporting provisions; revises the definition of day care center; authorizes an individual under 19 years of age with certain credentials to work in a day care center and to count in the staff-child ratio; provides specific criminal penalties for sexual offenses by foster parents against foster children; and specifies that a conviction of a sex offense by a foster parent would subject a defendant to sex offender registration.

## **HB 256— Representative Poole (R-Tuscaloosa)— FAILED**

Lowers the age of majority from age 19 years to age 18 years and provides the same legal rights and abilities as persons over 21 years of age in certain limited situations. The bill maintains the age of 19 or 21 for certain exemptions, including in the sale of tobacco.

## **HB 323— Representative J. Hill (R-Moody)— PASSED Act 2016-360**

Provides additional sentencing options when dealing with juvenile offenders who were under 18 years of age when the offense was committed.

## **HB 333— Representative Jones (R-Andalusia)— FAILED**

Requires a parenting plan to be formulated and established in child custody cases to ensure that children are able to spend an equal amount of time with both their mother and father.

## **HB 334— Representative Jones (R-Andalusia)— PASSED Act 2016-362**

Establishes procedures by which certain grandparents may petition for visitation with their grandchildren.

## **HB 335— Representative J.D. Williams (R-Birmingham) — PASSED Act 2016-363**

Provides interpreters in certain criminal and juvenile proceedings; expands the types of proceedings for which an interpreter may be requested and clarifies the persons who may request an interpreter.

## **HB 353— Representative Nordgren (R-Gadsden)— FAILED**

Requires all public and charter schools to visibly post the local county child abuse hotline number.

## **HB 377— Representative Beckman (R-Prattville)— FAILED**

Establishes the Office of an Ombudsman for Child Welfare and outlines the

duties of said office to investigate complaints and helps monitor the delivery of child welfare services.

## **HB 433— Representative Jack Williams (R-Birmingham) — PASSED Act 2016-282**

Creates the Human Trafficking and Safe Harbor Act. Amends Alabama law by providing greater protections to child victims of human trafficking or sexual exploitation, including protection from conviction for prostitution.

## **HB 548— Representative Todd (D-Birmingham)— FAILED**

Requires child care facilities that are part of a church or nonprofit religious school to become licensed by the Alabama Department of Human Resources.

## **SB 2— Senator Bussman (R-Cullman)— FAILED**

Limits the amount of time a family member has to apply for custody of a child in the Department of Human Resources care to six months following termination of parental rights, unless a judge finds probable cause for a custody trial to be pursued.

## **SB 22— Senator Whatley (R-Auburn)— PASSED Act 2016-29**

Adds “aggravated child abuse” to the murder code making it a Class A Felony. This bill will help close the gap in the law when child abuse contributes to or results in the death of a child. Prosecutors will be required to prove intent to abuse the child that resulted in the death/murder of the child.

## **SB 23— Senator Chambliss (R-Prattville)— PASSED Act 2016-43**

Known as “Winston’s Law”, provides for the crime of aggravated child abuse of a child less than six years of age and changes it to a Class A felony which carries a prison sentence of no less than 10 years.

## **SB 95— Senator Brewbaker (R-Montgomery)— PASSED Act 2016-129**

Known as Normalcy/Prudent Parent Legislation, allows foster parents to make decisions concerning every day activities of their foster child and lowers the age that the courts might consider independent living (ILP) to age 14 years. Allows children in the custody of the Department of Human Resources to be placed in the long term care of relatives instead of foster care, and allows relatives to receive state payments foster families receive.

## **SB173— Senator Chambliss (R-Prattville)— FAILED**

Strengthens the Graduated Drivers Licensing Law by revising the penalties for a violation of the restrictions on a Stage II license. Included is revocation of the license and reversion to a Stage I license for a period of six months, assess a fine of \$250, plus court costs, and would provide for the assessment of two points. This bill would also provide that a parent, legal guardian, or other adult who knowingly allows a driver with a Stage I or Stage II license to drive a motor vehicle in violation of applicable restrictions is subject to a fine of \$500, plus court costs.

### SB 324— Senator Figures (D-Mobile)— FAILED

Repeals the current provision and allows for the transfer of a child 14 years of age or more from the juvenile court to the circuit court if the child is alleged to have committed a capital offense, other specified felonies, and certain lesser included offenses. Additionally, specifies that the transfer of a case from juvenile court to circuit court does not prohibit a circuit court judge from granting an individual youthful offender status.

Also provides that a child 14 years of age or older whose case was transferred from the juvenile court to the circuit court may be detained or confined in secure custody and would prohibit a person under the age of 18 from being detained or confined with adult inmates except for a period of up to six hours during the processing of the child's case.

### SB 361— Senator Holtzclaw (R-Madison)— FAILED

Addresses child abuse cases involving military families by increasing administrative obligations of the Department of Human Resources, which includes determining military status of accused parent and notifying family advocacy program at military installation.

## Economic Security

### HB 326— Representative Todd (D-Birmingham)— FAILED

Establishes the Alabama Title Loan Act to provide additional regulations for the title loan industry and controlling terms and interest rates.

### HB 342— Representative Todd (D-Birmingham)— FAILED

Reforms payday loans by offering protections to the borrower by addressing terms and caps on interest rates.

### HB 526— Representative Scott (D-Fairfield)— FAILED

Creates the Alabama Motor Vehicle Title Loan Act and makes reforms to the title loan industry, including lowering of interest rates and directing the lender to return any excess money gained from resale to the borrower.

### SB 91— Senator Orr (R-Decatur)— FAILED

Reforms payday lending by extending the terms of repayment to six months and limit interest rates on loans to 180%.

### SB 136— Senator Figures (D-Mobile)— FAILED

Proposes a constitutional amendment that allows Alabamians to vote for an increase on property taxes by \$5 million to generate new revenue for Medicaid.

### SB 285— Senator Orr (R-Decatur)— FAILED

Establishes the Personal Responsibility Act. Allows limits to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Medicaid while establishing penalties for fraud.

### SJR105— Senator Singleton (D-Greensboro)— PASSED Act 2016-255

Establishes the Healthy Food Financing Initiative Study Commission who shall conduct a scan of federal, state, and local healthy food financing programs around the country to determine best practices. Additionally, the commission shall consult with retailers, wholesalers, and other experts in order to identify potential projects and develop a Healthy Food Financing Retail Project Pipeline.



## Budgets

### HB 117— Representative Poole (R-Tuscaloosa)— PASSED Act 2016-117

The Education Trust Fund Budget, includes a 4% pay raise for teachers and a \$16 million expansion of Alabama's First Class Pre-K program. This increase in funding for Pre-K will help open approximately 155 additional classrooms and enroll roughly 2,800 more four-year-olds than the current school year.

### SB 15— Senator Ward (R-Alabaster)— FAILED

Unearmarking bill that proposes cuts to certain children and family serving agencies, including the Department of Human Resources, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Alabama Department of Mental Health.

### SB 124— Senator Pittman (R-Daphne)— PASSED Act 2016-108

Makes an appropriation to the Children First Trust Fund of \$37,430,811 for fiscal year ending September 30, 2017.

### SB 125— Senator Pittman (R-Daphne)— PASSED Act 2016-116

Provides \$1.8 billion for the General Fund Budget with a budget for Medicaid set at \$700 million and most other agencies level funded.



Photo: Mickey Welsh / Montgomery Advertiser

Representative Bill Poole, Chairman of Ways and Means Education, (D-Tuscaloosa) speaks at the VOICES rally.

# ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Thank you advocates! Your hard work and advocacy efforts paid off during the 2016 legislative session. VOICES advocates rallied on the state house steps to encourage lawmakers to make children a priority...

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Child Advocacy Day

**Sponsored by:** Alabama Power | **Co-sponsored by:** American Academy of Pediatrics, Alabama Chapter and Children's of Alabama

On Tuesday, March 22<sup>nd</sup> over 180 child advocates joined VOICES for Alabama's Children during our Annual Child Advocacy Day and Rally. Advocates in attendance used their VOICES to speak directly with lawmakers, showing their gratitude for **Pre-K funding** and calling on them to prioritize **Medicaid funding**.



Photo: Longleaf Strategies



VOICES interns, Danielle Turner and Jasmyne Nelson along with VOICES Campaign Manager, Jada Shaffer delivered handprints to lawmakers during the Week of the Young Child, sponsored by Alabama Partnership for Children.



Photo: Mickey Welsh / Montgomery Advertiser

Senator Arthur Orr, Chairman of Finance and Taxation (R-Decatur) speaks at the VOICES rally.



Photo: American Academy of Pediatrics, Alabama Chapter

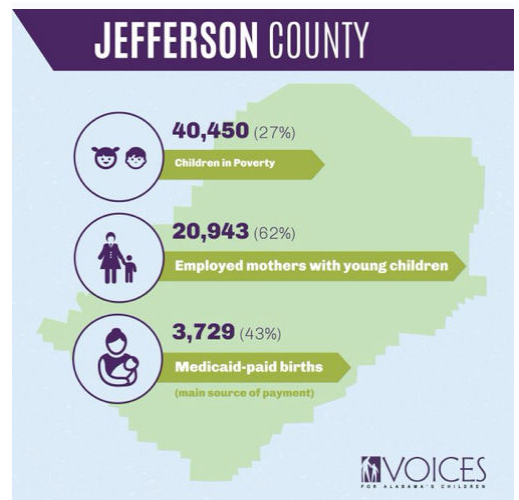
# MAKING THE CASE FOR MEDICAID

Nola Ernest, M.D., FAAP, PhD., Legislative Affairs Chair, Alabama Chapter-American Academy of Pediatrics

## Medicaid Takes Center Stage in 2016 Session

This year the Medicaid crisis was front and center during the legislative session. Early on, the Alabama Legislature adopted a budget that severely underfunds Medicaid — falling short by approximately \$85 million, which will have a disastrous impact on Alabama residents and the state’s entire health care system. Cuts to the state’s Medicaid program directly impact the more than 570,000 Alabama children aged 0-18 who rely on this critical service to meet a diverse slate of health care needs. Additionally, Medicaid cuts also hurt the nearly 126,000 pregnant mothers, 290,000 elderly and disabled Alabamians, and 60,000 working parents earning less than \$42 per week who depend on the program.

To bring awareness to the Medicaid crisis, VOICES advocates joined forces with nearly 50 other organizations through social media campaigns and participated in raising awareness about Medicaid.



VOICES participated in educating lawmakers on how Medicaid impacts their constituents by tweeting county data from the *Alabama KIDS Count Databook*.



### VOICES volunteer, Jill Summers shares her story of why she stands up for Medicaid.

“I have legal custody of an amazing 3 year old boy; however, as a legal guardian my Blue Cross/Blue Shield will not cover him. Medicaid is our only option. I don’t know what I would do without it!”

— Jill Fishwick Summers

# 2016 POLICY PRIORITIES FOR ALABAMA'S CHILDREN

## Increase Healthy Food Access for Children & Families

Nearly half a million children in Alabama live in areas with limited access to fresh, healthy food placing them at increased risk for diet-related illness such as obesity and Type II diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Healthy Food Financing is an effective, viable and economically sustainable policy solution to the problem. 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 of state and local advocates 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. The passage of the enabling legislation puts Alabama one step closer to addressing the growing issue of food access by incentivizing farmers markets, grocery stores and other fresh food retailers to locate in underserved communities across the state. In 2016, we advocate for public and private seed dollars to support full implementation and operationalization of Alabama's Healthy Food Financing program to bring healthy food retailers to communities where they are needed most.

## Institute Uniform Regulation and Inspection of Child Care

By age 5, over 90 percent of a child's brain is developed, making these years of life the most critical and underscoring the need for safe, quality early care and education experiences for young children.<sup>2</sup> It is critical that child care services rendered are safe and inspected. 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.<sup>3</sup> In some cases providers operating unregulated child care still receive public funding. In FY 2015, the estimated amount of public funding paid to unregulated providers was \$37,870,337 which represents nearly half of all subsidy dollars spent by the state.<sup>4</sup> In November 2014, Congress reauthorized the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) aimed to ensure the health and safety of children in child care settings, improve the quality of care and make it easier for families to get and keep child care assistance.<sup>5</sup> In 2016, we advocate full implementation of CCDBG requirements by the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) and adequate state and federal funding to do so. In 2016, we advocate uniform regulation and inspection by DHR of all child care programs caring for young children in the state of Alabama.

## Promote Healthy Early Care & Education (ECE) Settings

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly one in ten U.S. children ages 2-to 5-years-old are obese.<sup>6</sup> In Alabama, 14.1 percent of children ages 2-to 4-years-old from low-income families are at unhealthy weights.<sup>7</sup> Combine those two statistics and the fact that over 60 percent of young children in Alabama have parents in the workforce, and it underscores the importance of early care and education programs, such as Head Start, Pre-K and child care, as ideal settings 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 regarding physical activity, nutrition, and screen time may vary among child care settings by type. In 2016, we advocate improved and standardized nutrition, physical activity, and screen time standards for early childcare programs in Alabama to promote improved health outcomes of children.

## Expand Funding for 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. Research consistently shows that high-quality, evidence-based early education benefits children, families and communities. In fact, studies have shown a seven to ten dollar return on investment for every dollar spent on high-quality pre-kindergarten because of reductions in remedial education, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy, and an increase in workforce readiness.<sup>8</sup> Despite well-documented evidence, nationally 29 percent of four-year-olds are enrolled in publicly funded preschool programs with even fewer enrolled in a high-quality programs and the U.S. continues to lag behind other countries in enrollment. Alabama's First Class Pre-K program is ranked No. 1 in the nation for quality, yet only one out of five (20 percent) of Alabama four-year-olds have access to the top-rated program.<sup>9,10</sup> In 2016, we advocate increased funding to Alabama's First Class Pre-K program by \$20 million with the intent of fully funding high-quality pre-k by the 2022-2023 school year or before based on recommendations from Alabama's Pre-K Task Force.

## Protecting Adequate State Funding for Child-Serving Programs & Services

Fiscal policy is a children's issue and is a mainstay on our policy agenda. We advocate protection of state appropriations to child-serving programs, services and state agencies impacting 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.

## 2016 EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES

### Protection of Child Trafficking Victims

An estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked through the U.S. annually. The average victim is 12 years of age. Under federal law, any minor under the age of 18 years induced into commercial sex is a victim of human sex trafficking—regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion are used.<sup>11</sup> Safe harbor laws are developed by states to address inconsistent treatment of children who are victims of human trafficking to protect them from criminal charges. In 2016, we support enhancements to Alabama's human trafficking statute to give safe harbor protections to children forced into human sex trafficking. These children are victims and should be treated as such.

## Eliminate Predatory Lending Practices

In Alabama, nearly 19 percent of adults and 27 percent of children live in poverty.<sup>12</sup> 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 percent.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, we support the Predatory Lending Project in urging the Alabama Legislature to cap the APR at 36 percent on both payday and title loans mirroring trends in other states and the rate passed by the U.S. Congress for all active duty military personnel and their dependents.

## Medicaid Expansion

Alabama's Medicaid program is a critical economic driver and backbone of the state's health care infrastructure. Alabama Medicaid has been successful in providing coverage to seniors living in nursing homes, people with disabilities for children and children.<sup>14</sup> In fact, over half of all births in the state of Alabama are covered by Medicaid.<sup>12</sup> In 2016, we support Alabama's Best in advocating for expansion of Medicaid which equals a healthier Alabama.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>14</sup> Alabama Medicaid Agency, [http://www.medicaid.alabama.gov/CONTENT/3.0\\_apply/3.1\\_General\\_Information.aspx](http://www.medicaid.alabama.gov/CONTENT/3.0_apply/3.1_General_Information.aspx)

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