



Assessment of the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative

**Case Study for:
Arise Citizens' Policy Project
Montgomery, AL**



Prepared for the
Ford Foundation
by the OMG Center
for Collaborative Learning

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Arise Citizens' Policy Project Montgomery, Alabama

case study

*This case study of Arise Citizens' Policy Project in Alabama is one of ten individual case descriptions prepared as part of an assessment of the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI), conducted by the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning with support from the Ford Foundation. SFAI is a national collaborative effort that began in 1991 to strengthen capacity among state-level non-governmental organizations to undertake credible, timely, and understandable analysis of critical tax and budget questions. The Initiative is funded by several national foundations and receives staffing and technical support from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that has been conducting national policy research since 1981 and that expanded its role to include analysis of state fiscal policies also in 1992. The entire assessment report, **A Cross-Site Synthesis of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**, is available from the Ford Foundation or the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning.¹*

This and the other case studies prepared as part of the assessment describe a broad array of activities undertaken by the state-level fiscal policy organizations with support received not only from the Ford Foundation and other SFAI funders, but also from other local and national sources. From the Initiative's inception, the Ford Foundation has required that its funding provided through SFAI be used entirely for the support of research education, organizing, and other non-legislative activities. Although the report covers the full range of strategies employed by SFAI groups to enable a full picture of their work and impact to emerge, the activities detailed here are not a direct by-product of Ford funding.

This case provides an overview of how one "veteran" state-level policy organization evolved over a period of several years within its own unique state policy setting. The cases provide much of the empirical basis for the larger assessment report, by bringing to light the different circumstances and approaches that shaped the accomplishments of individual grantees and by documenting the different types of impacts that the SFAI grantees have

had within varied local fiscal policy environments.²

Much of the case study fieldwork was conducted during the last half of 2002, although further telephone follow-up occurred throughout 2003 and into 2004. The fieldwork approach was primarily qualitative and relied mainly on site visits to each of the grantee sites. Site visits were generally made by two or more members of the assessment team and included meetings with representatives of the grantee organizations and a variety of other local actors with knowledge of the grantee organizations and the state-level policy setting in which they operate. Phone and email communications provided an opportunity for rounding out the details of each case. The draft profiles were shared with the grantee organizations two or more times as they were being developed, and each site was given an opportunity to review final versions of their profile before they were finalized. Most of the factual information about the grantee organizations is for the year 2002, although in a few instances fiscal or budget changes and other policy accomplishments that occurred in 2003 are noted if they were the result of efforts in prior years.

The case study starts with an account of how the organization began and then offers an account of Alabama's social and political context. Next it introduces the particular focus and approach that the SFAI grantee organization has taken to improve knowledge locally about tax and budget issues and contribute to the quality of local fiscal policy debates. Woven into the case are overviews of the grantee organization's size, staff structure and funding base; examples of typical products and activities; and descriptions of its major accomplishments.

The SFAI assessment was directed by Tom Burns. The following current and former staff of the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning also participated in the assessment – Bonita Stowell, Kennard Wing, Sheetal Matani, Lee Alford, Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, and Margaret Berkey.

¹ At OMG, contact Robin Lafty at robin@omgcenter.org or 215-732-2200. Or contact the Ford Foundation at www.fordfound.org.

² The ten veteran states selected for the case studies include: Alabama, Arizona, California, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, North Carolina and Texas.

Arise Citizens' Policy Project Montgomery, AL

EVERY YEAR STAFF FROM ARISE CITIZENS' POLICY PROJECT (ACPP) hold listening sessions with members of Alabama Arise, a coalition of 140 faith-based, community and civic organizations. The purpose of these sessions is to find out what issues are most on the minds of families living in low-income communities around the state. In 2001, poor access to public transportation was a big concern of Arise members. "Public transportation in Alabama is neither accessible, nor affordable nor accountable to poor families," explains Jocelyn Cash, chairperson of the Montgomery Transportation Coalition. "There aren't enough bus routes, or buses for that matter, serving poor and rural communities. And the buses that do run, aren't coordinated well so you could be waiting a long time before you even see a bus much less transfer from one to another. This is a big problem here, but the state's transportation improvement efforts seem to be more focused on increasing tourism than meeting the needs of these communities," says Cash.

When staff from ACPP began to look at the issue, people at the national level cautioned that transportation was a very thorny fight to take on. There weren't many clear or promising strategies at the state level. ACPP's Executive Director Kimble Forrister recalls, "We went back to our membership to explain that it was probably best to set the issue aside. Well, the membership wouldn't have it. At Alabama Arise's annual meeting that year, the members made it clear that they were not going to let the staff leave that meeting without a commitment that they were going to put together a transportation caucus and that this caucus was going to come up with a policy proposal." Soon after, such a caucus was formed. ACPP policy analysis staff worked with the caucus to research policy options and possible courses of action. Their research turned up an interesting opportunity. They learned that the state constitution prohibits using gas tax revenue on public transportation. Changing this provision became their focus. But ahead lay one big problem. Efforts to change the provision would encounter resistance from a very powerful opponent, the Alabama Road Builders Association. In Alabama, all gas taxes are used to build roads and highways and the Road and Bridge Builders would not want to see such a key source of revenue used for other purposes.

ACPP staff drafted a proposal arguing the merits of a change in the provision, which began to stir up debate within and outside the legislature. Momentum for the issue began to build in the press and the supporters of the policy change believed they were making progress toward compromise. "We thought we had a viable proposal, but we underestimated the power of the road and bridge builders," explains Forrister. In 2002, there were signs of incremental and promising steps in two counties, Shelby and Jefferson. "Senator Shelby came up with an \$87 million dollar federal appropriation for public transportation. The catch was that these two counties would have to provide a local match. If they didn't come up with a match, they would lose these funds," explains Forrister. ACPP lent its support to a

Arise Citizens' Policy Project at a Glance

Year started: 1994

Current budget: \$524,911 (2002)

Main sources of support: Ford Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Alabama Arise membership fees and pledges, The Unitarian-Universalist Veatch Program, the Needmor Fund, Mercy Mission Fund, individual donations

Total staff: 8 (2002)

Main areas of focus: Tax and budget policy, housing, transportation, health and welfare policy, childcare, poverty, predatory lending practices, and constitutional reform.

Recent products: Welfare Reform: An Unfinished Agenda; Payday Loans: Alabama Must Not Legalize Loan Sharks; Alabama's Budget: A Poverty Issue; Soaking the Poor; Alabama Transportation Planning Needs New Course

proposal to allow the use of gas tax revenue for public transportation in just these two counties. On the day of the vote, not only could the committee not assemble a quorum, but even the Jefferson County legislators stayed away.

This story is a good, if not extreme, example of how ACPP undertakes analysis of difficult issues, the results of which can pit them against very powerful groups, with often frustrating results. "We've been able to see small wins, but we still await the big victory," says Forrister. The transportation issue has been a particularly difficult one that ACPP continues to work on. But the organization has also worked toward policy change in areas around welfare reform, education, tax reform, and constitutional reform—all of which are major issues in a state where change tends to happen at a snail's pace.

The Social and Political Context

It is hard to describe Alabama's social context without mentioning the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat and the resulting bus boycott in Montgomery, Governor Wallace blocking the schoolhouse door, and the violence against marchers in Birmingham and Selma helped define both the movement and the state in national consciousness. Today, race continues to play an important role in policy throughout the state. Alabama's racial and ethnic composition consists mainly of white (71%) and African American (26%) residents. One observer explained, "Race is still a big factor here. How can it not be given the state's history? The haves and have nots still fall along race lines and in election years politicians still use race to polarize groups."

Politically, Alabama is a very conservative state. And this characterization holds true for both Democrats and Republicans. Republican Forrest "Fob" James was Alabama's governor when SFAI began. James was considered by many to be a "hard right" conservative, gaining national notoriety with his assertion that the federal Bill of Rights does not apply to the states, his threat to call in the National Guard to keep the Ten Commandments on a courtroom wall and his support of corporal punishment in schools. Democrat Don Siegelman unseated Gov. James in 1998. He was expected to be Alabama's most progressive governor, and he was in some ways. He focused on education issues, children's services, and anticrime initiatives

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Executive Director
Arise Citizens' Policy Project

including drunk driving and domestic violence prevention. However, he failed to step out in favor of tax reform during his administration. In 2002, Republican Bob Riley defeated Siegelman in a close election.

Alabama's legislature has remained heavily Democratic. Democrats hold 25 of the Senate's 35 seats and 63 of the House's 105 seats. Legislators have very little staff and only serve part-time, meeting for no more than 30 legislative days out of a 105-day calendar period each year. Their political influence is both expanded and impeded by Alabama's outdated, 1901 constitution, which places very tight restrictions on the power of local and state government. “The constitution requires state and local officials to get a constitutional amendment to carry out even the most mundane matters of government, like regulating billboards,” explains Forrister. As a result of these constraints, state legislators have a strong local focus. The lack of legislative staff, emphasis on matters of local interest, and the short legislative session have meant that legislators have little time to address issues of statewide importance with the exception of the budget.

There aren't many other groups in Alabama that conduct non-partisan research and policy analysis. Greater Birmingham Ministries, some state universities, and the Business Council of Alabama (BCA), a nonprofit trade association representing the interests of nearly 5,000 businesses throughout the state, each took on some policy analysis work. However, before Alabama Arise, there were no taxpayer groups in Alabama focusing on the impacts of fiscal policies on poor families. “There was room for Arise to fill a need in tax policy analysis. In fact, there was a vacuum,” explains Carol Gundlach, Arise co-founder and now Executive Director of the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Consumer advocacy groups were also few in number and today still not very strong. The same can't be said for groups representing business and other powerful interests in the state. In its efforts to promote tax fairness and improved social services, Alabama Arise finds itself in an arena dominated by powerful special interests like the Road and Bridge Builders or Alabama Power, the state's largest electrical utility. The paper and steel companies, banks, utility companies, and the teachers union are other players with considerable weight in the policy process.

Within this complex environment, ACPP chose to take on some very specific and very big issues at the start of its SFAI initiative.

Reforming Alabama's regressive tax structure. Historically, Alabama's citizens have generally favored a small role for government, expressed in part by a preference for low taxes. Although Alabama is generally considered a low-tax state, the state's tax burden on poor families is currently the highest in the country. Poor families pay about 11% of their income to state and local taxes, while wealthy families are required to pay only about 4% of their income to taxes. One observer explained, “Alabama collects the lowest state and local tax per capita in the country. For many in the state, this is a point of pride. Changing that attitude will be a hard fight to win.” Adding to the inequitable tax system was the State's exceptionally low property tax requirements. Alabama could double its property tax and still maintain the lowest property tax rate in the nation.

Limited resources for social programs. The bulk of Alabama's revenues come from sales and income taxes. The majority of these funds are earmarked for educational purposes. The rest of the state's revenues come from miscellaneous sources, such as interest income, excise taxes, and insurance premium taxes. These are used to fund the rest of state government programs, including social services, public health, mental health, Medicaid, corrections, and other programs that affect low-income people. Over the years, these miscellaneous revenue sources have grown very slowly. This factor, along with Alabama's strong anti-tax sentiment, has left the state with low levels of revenue – effectively limiting the resources policymakers can draw from for social programs.

Discouraging the use of tax abatements to attract large corporations as an economic development strategy. In the early 1990s, Alabama started to put a great deal of effort into stimulating its economy by trying to attract large corporations with tax abatement packages more generous than any in the country. This was not an entirely new strategy. Over the past 30 years, Alabama sought to attract and keep corporations in the state by providing similar incentive packages. Historically this strategy, despite the state's persistence, has not created the jobs or wage levels hoped for. Nonetheless, its economy has shown some improvement as a result of the nation's economic boom in the late 90s. The economy's reliance on agriculture, steel, timber and mining industries gave way to more service and public sector jobs, particularly in health care and technology. This change, although promising, did not change the fact that Alabama's low-income families were not reaping the benefits (in the form of jobs and higher wages) that the tax abatement strategies promised. For example, ACPP's analysis showed that the new Mercedes plant would provide fewer jobs than promised, and that after 25 years, Mercedes would not have paid enough in taxes to repay the state subsidy package.

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- Confidential observer

Addressing the inequities in the school funding system.

Alabama faced significant challenges related to education funding in the 90s. It was the only southern state that had failed to enact any significant education reform since the 1930s. Consequently, it suffered (and continues to suffer) from dramatically high illiteracy rates. ACPP's research shows that although most states use state-level funding to balance inequities in local school funding, this had not been the case in Alabama. Arise found that the state instead has chosen to direct much of its funding to the wealthiest school systems, leaving poorer districts with insufficient funds to secure even the most basic educational tools. Severe inequities in education prompted a court order finding the state's school funding system to be unconstitutional. Despite this, legislators have passed only piecemeal education reform. An ACPP study showed that after the 1995 reforms, the per-pupil funding gap between the best- and poorest-funded schools was reduced by only 20%.

Influencing the welfare reform debate. In 1995, welfare reform dominated the fiscal climate, and therefore, much of ACPP's policy work. The organization was primarily concerned with dispelling myths about welfare dependency, illustrating how new welfare reform policies would hurt Alabama, developing its own solutions for welfare reform, and engaging in research and education on behalf of the critical issues associated with implementation of new welfare reform measures, such as transportation, child care, job creation, and health care.

The issues that challenged ACPP's work at the start of SFAI are the same as those the state struggles with now. Welfare reform related issues such as child care and transportation continue to press upon low-income communities. Poor families still shoulder a heavy tax burden and the state has failed to overhaul its school funding system. ACPP has worked to address issues like these by giving low-income communities a platform from which to voice their issues and implementing the agenda that these communities identify. "We're here to give voice to the issues and concerns of poor families. Their agenda is our agenda," explains Kimble Forrister, Executive Director of ACPP. The process Arise uses to engage these voices is a distinctive one that provides the foundation for its policy research, analysis, and public education work.

ACPP's Approach

Alabama Arise, the parent organization of the Arise Citizens Policy Project, was founded in 1988 as a non-profit coalition that brings together a broad array of religious, community and civic groups committed to effecting policy changes that would benefit low-income Alabamians. "The idea of Alabama Arise

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Executive Director
Arise Citizens' Policy Project*

ACPP's Mission and Focus

Arise is a coalition of 140 religious, community, and civic groups that work on poverty issues by promoting state policies to improve the lives of low-income people. Through research, publications, media campaigns and advocacy, Alabama Arise acts as a strong and independent voice for poor families in Alabama.

was to bring together within a single broad coalition organizations that were both faith- and community-based. These groups would together commit their financial and human resources to an advocacy effort. They would agree on some basic analyses of the role of public policy and citizens, and they would agree on some policies themselves," describes Forrister. However, Arise was doing only minimal policy analysis before SFAI came along. "We had already been doing community organizing work well before joining SFAI. But the missing piece was the capacity to perform research to test our analyses and document how tax and budget decisions affect low-income households. SFAI gave us the resources to take this step," explains Carol Gundlach.

When Arise began to plan how it would implement SFAI in Alabama, it was important to the coalition that it accurately represent the concerns and positions of low-income communities around the state. Alabama Arise established ACPP as a separate 501(c)(3) entity that would focus on providing credible, timely and accessible policy analyses on the issues these communities feel are important. In order to ensure that it heard from those communities that are most affected by unfair fiscal policies, Arise has paid close attention to how it involves residents from low-income African American and rural communities in its membership and community organizing work. Several specific themes are evident in Arise's overall approach.

Giving low-income communities a voice in the debate. A few years prior to the start of the initiative, ACPP had experimented with "issue caucuses." It set out to resurrect these caucuses by incorporating them into the newly developed policy analysis structure in order to preserve the exchange between those who make and propose policy and those who witness and experience the effects of policy first-hand. "We didn't want to be a policy analysis group that just talked to other policy analysts. We wanted to be a policy group that talked to and for a constituency," says Gundlach. To this end, issue caucuses were organized to consist of technical experts, allies and members, including low-income people. The caucuses are meant to work together to do the work of identifying and studying a specific issue, considering policy solutions and proposing strategies to the policy staff and membership. ACPP's policy staff meet with the caucuses to hear grassroots policy recommendations, identify needed research, cultivate ownership of policy proposals, and share results of research efforts. Unfortunately there are few policy wonks in Alabama's general population and fewer still among the low-income community. So establishing and maintaining these issue caucuses has been difficult to do.

A critical part of Arise's work is its effort to mobilize a credible and informed movement around low-income issues throughout

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Arise Co-Founder

the state. “When we started with SFAI we needed to make sure our membership had strong representation of African American and rural communities in particular,” recounts Forrister. Forrister knew that getting this right would not only fortify Arise’s membership base, it would also ensure that they authentically represent grassroots perspectives on low-income issues. It would also enhance its credibility as an organization dedicated to diversity, education and issue outreach on all levels.

As ACPD developed its organizing strategy it also designed a process that would convene its members in regional cluster meetings. Arise hoped that these clusters would take ownership of the process, eventually selecting their own convener and developing their own work plan. Arise wanted to see each regional cluster initiate its own activities, such as training events for members, candidates’ forums, off-season meetings with legislators, recruitment of new Arise members and the study and development of poverty issues.

Engaging in credible, timely and accessible policy analysis.

SFAI has given Arise Citizens’ Policy Project the resources to pursue two main research goals. The first has been to conduct short-term tax and budget analysis that provides timely, reactive analysis on how policies being debated or considered by state legislators affect poor households in Alabama. This research has included annual analyses of the proposed state budget’s impact on poor households and on the state’s ability to provide needed human services. This research has also included comparative analyses of Alabama with Southeastern and national statistics. “This is the analysis that goes into our fact sheets, newsletters and position papers. It has to be timely, clear and to the point because it’s the analysis we use to have conversations with the state and educate the community and the media,” says Forrister. The second goal Arise has pursued has been to evaluate the longer-term impacts of proposed and existing state anti-poverty strategies on poor families in Alabama. These research efforts look more closely at the systemic and structural sources of poverty and lay out viable policy options designed to reduce it. This research has also looked at the effectiveness of the state’s existing anti-poverty strategies, and the promise and appropriateness of alternative strategies developed in other states.

Taking on the big issues. “You have to understand, many of Arise’s members are organizations committed to social justice. They expect to take on the big issues,” says Carol Gundlach. When ACPD joined SFAI it decided to take on Alabama’s school funding system and the impact of Alabama’s industrial development subsidies and tax abatements on poor households and communities. “No one has been able to show that giving subsidies or tax abatements to corporations has actually made the

difference, bringing in the jobs and wages that are promised,” explains Forrister. “This and other issues we’ve taken on, like constitutional reform or unfair lending practices, are what we most care about. They are what will make the most difference,” continues Forrister.

“Long-haul” strategy. Arise pushes hard for big changes in policy. “We take on big issues and call for major change in a state where change happens very slowly,” explains Forrister. “It can be frustrating but we know we’re here for the long haul.” In the meantime, Arise savors the smaller victories it has had along the way. “While Arise pushes for policy change, we also make sure that the needs of the poor don’t get lost in whatever legislation does get proposed for the rest of the state. Providing compelling evidence that can be used to oppose harmful legislation is a key component of what Arise does,” says Gundlach.

Alabama Arise and ACPD are known for taking on big issues. Its ambitious agenda requires that it employ a staff that can fuse its organizing activities with its research and policy analysis work. The following section offers some insight into Arise’s staffing, organizational structure, and funding strategy.

Organizational Structure, Staffing and Funding

Kimble Forrister took the position of State Coordinator at Alabama Arise in 1991, originally with the goal of doing public policy organizing work at the state level. He had come from Bread For The World, a job that helped him hone his organizing skills. “My work with Bread For The World was different from organizing as it had classically been understood – as a community thing where you get folks riled up to go and do a sit-in at the mayor’s office. This classical model was not going to work in the national context where our work took place. This idea that you could build relationships from Washington with a constituency, and that this was indeed organizing, was a new approach,” he says.

ACPD’s Action Agenda for 2003

Tax Reform: Advocacy to raise the threshold at which families start to pay income taxes and for increased funding for education

Housing: Pushing for enactment of laws defining the responsibilities of landlords and tenants.

Moratorium on Executions: Ending executions of death row inmates for 3 years while the fairness of the capital punishment system is reviewed.

Unfair Lending Practices: Opposition to legislation legalizing payday loans with an APR of 429%.

Public Transportation: Support for removal of Alabama’s constitutional prohibition on using gas tax revenue for public transportation.

Budget Priorities: Seeks to increase state child care funds, secure full funding for CHIP, and secure additional funding for Medicaid.

Constitutional Reform: Pushing for a rewrite of the state’s 1901 constitution. This would give the legislature flexibility to redistribute the tax burden.

When Forrister came on board he staffed a one-person office, handling the policy work, fundraising, organizing, and media communications. Not surprisingly, it became more and more difficult to play all of these roles by himself. “When SFAI came to us, we knew we didn’t want to become a think tank. So we needed to create a structure that would allow us to keep the grassroots dimension,” recalls Forrister. Arise Citizen’s Policy Project was established in 1994 as an independent, non-partisan entity. It shares some staff with Alabama Arise. ACCP currently has a staff of eight, consisting of three organizers, three policy analysts, a development director and a contract organizer. Arise’s staffing structure tries to balance the organizing and policy work of the organization by employing organizers and analysts with very specific and complementary responsibilities.

The field organizers are responsible for educating and organizing constituencies around the issues Arise cares about. They help members develop phone trees, train members in policy education techniques, and help members coordinate regional organizing work such as candidates’ forums and the recruitment of new members. “This work is vital to our effectiveness,” says Mary Weidler, ACPP senior analyst. Field organizers also provide issue training for members and other interested organizations. It is the field organizers who conduct the listening sessions in communities. They share the issues that come out of these sessions with policy analysts who are responsible for relaying and defining these issues to members at Arise’s annual meeting. After this debrief, Arise’s members vote on what the organization should ultimately take on that year.

Caucuses that form around these issues such as tax reform, housing, welfare reform, health care reform, jobs, rural poverty or education reform are staffed by an organizer and an analyst. Once a caucus is in place, the policy analyst responsible for that issue assists the caucus in studying policies and crafting solutions associated with the corresponding issue. Arise analysts also help develop strategies to increase diversity within each caucus, coordinate work between the caucus and research staff, arrange meetings, and identify opportunities for disseminating findings.

ACPP gets the largest portion of its funding from SFAI. Every year it does a funding drive with its members to raise the match required by its SFAI grant. It has plans to hire additional organizers, but funding this organizing has been harder than finding funds for the analysis work. But Arise’s members have showed impressive support, providing over \$80,000 in membership fees and donations during 2002. “When we formed Arise as a membership organization, we intended for it to be self-sustaining. That was the plan,” says Carol Gundlach. There is some concern that once member donations grow to \$100,000, funders will no longer feel they need to provide support.

ACPP’s Main Products and Activities

When you walk into Kimble Forrister’s office, you immediately notice the ringing phone, many piles of paper, the constant chime from his email notifying him of an incoming message,

ACPP’s Staff (Summer 2002)

Kimble Forrister, Executive Director. Came to Alabama in 1991 as the first State Coordinator for ACPP’s sister organization, Alabama Arise. Before that, he was Southeast Regional Organizer for nine years at Bread for the World in Washington, DC, where he helped Southern church folks understand how public policy affects people in poverty. Native of Nashville; graduate of David Lipscomb College and Princeton Theological Seminary; worked seven years in urban ministry in the Northeast.

Mary Weidler, Policy Analyst Team Leader. Currently leads ACPP’s policy analysis team. Responsible for analysis of health care, welfare, and child care budget priorities. First joined ACPP in 1997 after working as lobbyist for the League of Women Voters of Alabama and as Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama. Also taught basic education courses to women on welfare. Graduate of Wellesley College.

Karen Brown, Policy Analyst. Responsible for analysis on public transportation, housing and predatory lending. Prior to joining ACPP served as a Field Organizer for Alabama New South Coalition and served as Executive Producer/News Reporter of a call-in radio talk show and as contributing writer on the public affairs staff of Alabama State University. Graduate of Alabama State University.

Kwamena Blankson, Policy Analyst. Responsible for analysis on tax reform and education reform issues. Prior to joining ACPP worked with youth advocacy projects in Alabama and Massachusetts. In his capacity as a law clerk and legal intern for these youth organizations he was an advocate in mental health and foster care cases and contributed to public policy research projects relating to juvenile defense. Graduate of Harvard College and the University of Alabama School of Law.

and a worn but comfortable sofa. From day to day, life for Arise staff can be hectic—hence the need for a comfy couch. Here’s a glimpse into some of the day-to-day activities of Arise staff.

Policy research and analysis. Arise’s main objective when it joined SFAI was to establish itself as a strong policy research and analysis resource. Arise provides its members with all the facts so they can more persuasively debate poverty issues in the policy arena. Arise has also used policy research to analyze and publicize the effects of proposed policy changes, and to explore and propose its own solutions to poverty in Alabama.

Grassroots organizing. Every year, Arise holds multiple “listening sessions” around the state to ask people inside and outside of its coalition what policy issues they would like Arise to focus on for that year. “Although staff are encouraged to pursue promising policy alternatives, most issues Arise takes on come out of the listening session process,” explains Forrister. Arise’s grassroots organizers try in particular to engage low-income African American and rural community members in the listening sessions it holds.

Education workshops. ACPP also holds education workshops with Alabama Arise members and others in local communities. Using the popular education format has helped Arise to engage community members previously intimidated by policy issues. “It’s not surprising to hear folks say that the policy issues we want to discuss are too complex for them to understand. So it’s vital that the education workshops we give don’t reinforce this fear,” says Forrister. These workshops are an important part of

our strategy because they help us arm people with the knowledge they need so they can discuss issues with lawmakers and others,” explains Arise’s Mary Weidler. These education and organizing activities have been an important membership recruitment strategy for Alabama Arise as well.

Publications. Arise distributes its research via a variety of publications or written products, including newsletters, reports, fact sheets, and opinion editorials. These products are disseminated to media, staff of affected government agencies, the Arise membership, allied organizations, legislative bodies, business leaders and the public at large. Over the years, Arise’s products and activities have demonstrated the organization’s growing sophistication and ability to produce quality analysis.

Collaboration with other organizations and agencies. Arise has worked closely with other community organizations and agencies on a number of different issues. For example, on education reform, Arise has worked with A+, the Coalition for Better Education; CARE, the Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education; and the Civil Liberties Union of Alabama. “Combining our resources, expertise and experiences with other groups in the state and around the country helps broaden our base and just makes good sense. It also broadens the audience using our analysis,” explains Forrister.

E-mail alerts. Arise sends emails to members, legislators, and other allies alerting them to key developments on issues of interest. Hundreds of members have joined the Arise Listserv.

Arise’s website. Integral to its information distribution strategy is ACPP’s website at www.arisecitizens.org. The site makes available to anyone accessing it all fact sheets, op-ed pieces, and newsletters produced by the organization. Archives of these materials make accessing them just a download click away. The site also provides an outline of the issues currently on their action agenda and updates on the status of key legislation and policy issues. Links to national research and policy groups, online news sites, and advocacy organizations are also available on the website.

Media contacts. The main audiences for Arise’s research have been its members and policy makers. But Arise also seeks to disseminate its analysis to the general public via its op-ed

pieces, press conferences, press releases, and interviews with the press. “Arise has a great relationship with the media. They’ve helped Arise bring harmful policy proposals to light. They have also been a vital component to Arise’s strategy for sharing its work more broadly, in and outside of Alabama,” explains Carol Gundlach.

Acting as a resource to the legislature. The Legislative Fiscal Office has about eight people on staff, which everybody within the legislature must share. Inevitably, the legislature looks to outside groups for staff expertise. “That means that constituents and policy analysis groups like ACPP can have the ear of the legislature. We don’t have to go through a staff person,” explains Forrister. Arise has seized this opportunity to offer itself as a resource to legislators by testifying at legislative hearings, participating on task forces and commissions and providing technical assistance when requested by interested legislators.

Building and Preserving Key Relationships

ACPP has a strong working relationship with many relevant organizations. It greatly benefits from its connection to Alabama Arise, which is currently composed of 140 religious, community and civic groups. However, ACPP does not work in a vacuum. Arise recognizes the importance of developing strong relationships with other important resources and powerful players around the state.

Media. Arise has been particularly adept at building a strong relationship with the media. “The newspapers would like to have the independent voice on an issue like corporate tax incentives. The Business Council and Alabama Power Company speak with one voice on an issue like that. So when a reporter wants an alternative point of view, they come to us,” says Forrister. The exposure Arise has been able to get for the issues it’s concerned about would leave other groups green with envy. During its welfare reform campaign, Arise successfully held a large media briefing during which Arise staff educated reporters on issues associated with poverty, AFDC benefits and welfare reform in Alabama. The following year, an ACPP report on welfare reform received statewide news coverage, and was broadcast on a local NBC affiliate. The results of its research on tax abatements were shared with in and out-of-state media, including *Barron’s Magazine* and the *McNeil Lehrer News Hour*. A video segment on the issue was later shot for the *News Hour*.

Despite this success, Arise sees additional areas where it can grow its relationship with the media. “We deal mostly with the state press corps and the editors of the daily newspapers. We almost never send out press releases to the weekly papers, of which there are lots,” explains Forrister.

State universities. Before Arise came on the scene, state universities were virtually the only institutions in the state that did policy research. What was missing was research challenging policies and offering solutions concerning the issues of poor families. “Academics would point out that Alabama has the worst income tax threshold in the country. But it wasn’t their job to look at a policy and ask ‘What’s it going to do for poor

ACPP’s Publications and Products

Reports/Studies: Analysis of specific policies or issues concerning low-income populations in Alabama. Past reports, include a study of the Mercedes-Benz tax abatements, analysis of welfare reform options for Alabama and a yearly budget review.

Newsletters: Periodic publications providing updates to Arise members on the status of key legislation, tax and budget issues, and Arise activities.

Fact Sheets: Quick overviews and guides to Alabama’s vital budget and social policy matters.

Op-Ed Pieces: Editorial pieces on tax and social policy issues that articulate the perspective, concerns, needs and positions of lower-income families in Alabama.

"Most folks around the state perceive Arise to be pretty straight, not a tool of the 'big boys!'"

- Confidential observer

people?' That's the role we fill," says Forrister. Nonetheless, these institutions have been a great resource to ACPD and vice-versa. ACPD has partnered on several research efforts with different state universities and some universities have invited Arise staff to participate in forums to share their research and debate issues.

Other policy research organizations. Since research undergirds all of the issues Arise addresses, the organization formed a Research Advisory Committee in 1994 that included the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama and the Legislative Fiscal Office. It has also sought research assistance from national policy organizations including the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Center on Law and Social Policy, Consumer Federation of America, and Citizens for Tax Justice. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in particular has been an invaluable resource to Arise as it has undertaken this research agenda. It often works very closely with CBPP, adapting reports and analysis produced by CBPP and applying them to Alabama's issues and environment.

State government agencies. Arise has found that its relationships with state government agencies is an important piece of its work. "A lot of policies are made administratively and a lot of change can happen within agencies," says Carol Gundlach. "When we had a Democratic governor appointing agency heads, appointees were a little more concerned about low-income people who are the majority of the folks they're providing services to," says Mary Weidler. "Agency staff gave us a heads-up when new issues were coming down the pike." When the governorship changed back to the Republican Party, ACPD found itself having to build new relationships with agency staff.

Public officials. Public officials recognize Forrister and Arise as key sources of credible research and policy analysis. Arise is the best known research and policy analysis organization in the state that represents the concerns of low-income communities. "Every year Arise updates itself on the concerns of poor communities. Most legislators welcome that information and perspective, especially because they have few staff and little capacity to do their own research," says the Montgomery Transportation Coalition's Jocelyn Cash.

Arise has built some important relationships with groups within state government. The Legislative Black Caucus, whose members make up about a quarter of the state legislature, is Arise's most sympathetic ally within the State House. But Arise staff are aware that issues won't be decided simply on the basis of support from the Black Caucus and have tried to expand their relationships within the legislature. Arise also made the strategic move of involving the Legislative Fiscal Office on their research advisory committee. Building this relationship has

helped Arise to increase its credibility. During Arise's work on welfare reform, the Legislative Fiscal Office not only concurred with Arise's research findings, it made use of them in the legislation it moved forward.

Accomplishments

In spite of its reputation as a credible source of analysis, Arise recognizes that Alabama is a state with a strongly conservative tradition and that significant change happens slowly. So the victories Arise has been able to achieve are mostly incremental gains that move in the direction of the bigger changes it hopes to see. Looked at together, these smaller gains do add up to some notable accomplishments.

Defeating Harmful Legislation

ACPD has had success in preventing harmful legislation from being passed. Two recent successes are in landlord-tenant and payday loan issues.

Landlord tenant. Alabama is one of only two states without a law giving renters legal recourse against unfair practices of their landlords. Arise provided the factual basis for a successful opposition to legislation that would have made the situation for renters even worse. In taking up this issue Arise found itself combating the Realtors' Association, a powerful opponent.

Payday loans. ACPD's research on payday loan practices provided legislators with information that helped them to block bills legalizing these loans. Payday loans are cash advances of \$100 to \$500 on a personal check that is held for future deposit. In 2002, payday lenders proposed a payday loan bill that, if passed, would allow them to set interest rates on loans at an APR of 429%. Arise's efforts to educate the legislature and the public on the harmful consequences of these proposals continue to be successful.

Changing the Nature of the Debate

Even before SFAI, Alabama Arise established itself as the only tax and budget analysis group in Alabama that advocated on behalf of low-income families. Arise's presence has changed the nature of the policy debate in the state. Arise's perspective helps to balance the conversation, providing policy makers and media with an alternative analysis that can be weighed against that provided by proponents of more conservative fiscal policies.

Tax reform. Through efforts of its members in 1991, Arise won a seat on the governor's tax reform commission, an accomplishment that Forrister believes brought Arise to the attention of CBPP and SFAI. Forrister also feels that Arise's work on tax reform has helped to better educate the public about aspects of the issue. "When you ask people on the street why we need tax reform, they'll mention the fact that we tax infant formula but not formula for calves, or that our property taxes on timber land are under a dollar per year and in Georgia they're over four dollars a year for the same kind of land. We helped to make these facts part of the conversation," says Forrister.

“Arise is the moral conscience of the state. It chooses an issue based on what is fair and what would make this state a better place. Whether an issue is winnable doesn't seem to be as important.”

- Confidential observer

Education. On education reform, Arise was the champion of the idea of school-linked services (e.g., having nurses or counselors at the school). ACPP's analysis prompted the governor to include a \$40 million package for school-linked services in his legislative package. Although this package ultimately failed in the House (after passing the Senate), Arise takes credit for popularizing this notion.

Welfare reform. Arise's research on welfare reform in 1997 also helped to change that conversation within the state. The Governor at the time had framed the issue as being about welfare cheats, pregnant teens and runaway budgets. Arise refuted these claims, pointing out how welfare constituted less than 1% of the state budget. They were able to move the focus of the conversation to other issues such as the need for jobs, childcare and transportation. “We said, we know these are the issues because we asked poor people. We did 30 listening sessions around the state and these are what people told us were their barriers to employment. Before the legislative session was over, we had both Republicans and Democrats talking about jobs, childcare and transportation,” explains Forrister.

Challenges and Issues for the Future

Looking to the future, three particular challenges loom large for ACPP in its effort to improve the state's fiscal and budgetary decision-making.

Moral vs. “Winnable” Issues

One observer lamented that Arise often finds itself on the right side of a losing issue. This trend is frustrating for Arise staff and members who sometimes question whether they'll ever see progressive tax reform or adequate school finance. Progress on a few issues appears to be promising. “There is a growing base of support for tax reform in the state. Also, the prospects on the payday loan issue and a landlord tenant bill seem pretty promising,” says Mary Weidler.

One confidential observer reflected, “Arise is the moral conscience of the state. It chooses an issue based on what is fair and what would make this state a better place. Whether an issue is winnable doesn't seem to be as important.” “Often there's a tension between picking what's 'winnable' and what's moral,” explains Carol Gundlach. “Although we've been able to stop some pretty bad legislation from passing, I worry that this isn't sexy enough for Arise members.”

Forging Unlikely Alliances Without Compromising the Organization's Reputation

One observer commented that Arise is considered to be pretty straight, not a tool of the “big boys.” On one hand, this has strengthened its credibility, particularly with its constituency. On the other hand, Arise's reputation as the “moral conscience” of Alabama can restrict its options, making it even more difficult for the organization to seek alliances with groups that have previously opposed it. Landing the big victory may mean finding common ground and making difficult compromises with some of the more powerful groups in the state. Arise has made compromises in the past and may have little appetite for forging these unlikely alliances. But successfully battling the powerful forces that Arise comes up against isn't likely without finding ways of joining with other influential players.

Constitutional Constraints

Constitutional reform is an issue that affects just about every other issue in the state. Alabama's constitution handcuffs the power of state and local government to make even simple decisions. For example, an amendment is needed if a county wants to control urban sprawl or even change the sheriff's retirement plan. Keeping these decisions in Montgomery tends to ensure that they are open to the influence of powerful and well-organized interests. As far as the issues that Arise cares about are concerned, rewriting the constitution would give the legislature greater flexibility to redistribute the tax burden. Now, they would need to seek an amendment in order to change tax policy – whether tax rates or deduction levels – in the state. Although most in the state agree that the constitution is a problem, some fear that reform may mean higher taxes. In any case, resolving this issue will be key to Arise's efforts, particularly around tax reform.