

Monday, June 8, 2020

Working outside the home brings with it the very real risk that you will become infected. The primary concern of many workers is that they will become infected on the job and, in turn, infect their family.

To make work safe, we must fund testing and contact tracing, provide protective and sanitary equipment, and create new workspaces that minimize the possibility of transmission.

High-risk and essential workplaces, such as poultry plants, warehouses, grocery stores, child care centers, nursing homes and hospitals, require repeated and random testing for workers who do not appear ill, immediate testing of anyone who has symptoms of the novel coronavirus, and contact tracing for employees, their families, and the public who have come in contact with an employee who has tested positive.

Alabama should use a portion of the \$300 million earmarked for the support of citizens, businesses, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations directly impacted by the pandemic or providing assistance to those affected to provide:

- ! The tests necessary for business and government agencies that have reopened;
- ! Contact tracing of positive test results;
- ! Personal protective equipment for employees of those business and government agencies; and
- ! Increased sanitary stations within essential workplaces.

Alabama also needs to develop or adopt technical assistance on workplace safety detailing how employers test for COVID-19, use PPE, and create safer workspaces.

In exchange for providing these supplies and equipment, Alabama must require businesses to adopt paid sick leave requirements for all employees to protect other employees and the public from transmission of the virus and allow employees to get tested without fear of losing their jobs.

When allocating these funds, Alabama should **prioritize supporting minority-owned and woman-**

In addition, Alabama should follow Congress's example and provide a one-time tax rebate to low-income households to assist families who are unemployed and underemployed.

Families

One of the largest hurdles for families who are prepared to go to work is finding affordable and safe child care. Approximately one in four working adults has a child under age 18 and in two-thirds of two-parent families with children, both parents work. However, not every family can afford child care. Low-income families who pay for child care spend around 35% of their income on that care. To ensure parents are able to return to work, Alabama needs to provide child care for low-income families. This includes supporting low-income families by making child care affordable and supporting child care centers that are at risk of closing.

Stable families need stable homes. While Governor Ivey's April 3 proclamation alleviated the immediate threat of eviction and foreclosure, it does not solve the long-term problem for Alabamians unable to pay rent or mortgages now that the emergency order has expired. Many families will not be able to pay the back rent that has accumulated. About a third of low-income and nearly two-thirds of extremely low-income households in Alabama pay more than half of their income on rent and utilities every month. The total cost of rent support needed in Alabama for the duration of this crisis is estimated at a little over \$1 billion.²

These families and their landlords urgently need rent relief. To meet this significant need, Alabama must:

- ! Allocate and leverage Coronavirus Relief Fund money in coordination with other sources of federal and private housing assistance funds; and
- ! Provide emergency relief, through homeless and other nonprofit agencies, for families at risk of eviction, foreclosure or loss of utility service.

Other states have already taken this important step. Montana used \$50 million of the Coronavirus Relief Funds it received to provide tenant and homeowner relief. The Pennsylvania Legislature reserved \$150 million for emergency rental assistance from its federal funding. Likewise, Illinois allocated \$396 million of its funds for housing assistance. It reserved \$100 million specifically to

Letter to

Letter to
June 8, 2020
Page 5 of 9

Safely Reopening State and Local Services

Reopening Our Courts

The Alabama Supreme Court has authorized the presiding circuit judge in each circuit to

we recommend for all essential workers when they engage with the public, and collectively improve access to their services using mobile technology.

When an individual is going through a crisis or the entire state is in a pandemic, these disparate services need to be accessible in one place with minimal barriers to applying for benefits, receiving important correspondence about deadlines or reporting obligations, and communicating with case workers about the services. Applying and maintaining these services comes at a high opportunity cost to families. Currently, to apply for and communicate about each service takes hours, often at different agencies and with different case workers. That is time that people need to take care of their children, their elderly parents or neighbors, or to look for employment. Improving capacity and access now both responds to the current crisis and inoculates these agencies for future crises.

Voting

In addition to improving access to state services, Alabama must protect our citizens' health and fundamental right to vote. A portion of the \$300 million set aside for state services should be used to provide absentee ballot applications to every registered voter or, at a minimum, allow every registered voter to request and vote by absentee ballot during the pandemic. In addition, because many voters require or prefer in-person voting, the state must work to improve the safety and accessibility of in-person voting and permit curbside voting. To ensure voters know how to vote safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, Alabama will need to increase its spending to educate voters in coordination with local election officials.

Taking Responsibility for People in Our Custody

Alabama has both a legal and a moral responsibility for the safety and well-being of the people it incarcerates. There are tens of thousands of individuals housed in state prisons, local jails, and ICE detention facilities -- all places where it is impossible to practice social distancing. To date, less than 1% of those incarcerated in Alabama's prisons have been tested for COVID-19.

reentry into communities to prevent recidivism. A portion of the funds allocated for the Department of Corrections must go to increasing reentry services to ensure successful and safe transitions into the community. Particularly important to this transition are ensuring that people are tested for the coronavirus before reentering and that they are provided with the housing, employment, and medical services necessary once they are in the community. Some states have reduced their populations by nearly 20%. Alabama must do more.

In addition to expediting reentry and funding reentry services, Alabama needs to ensure that people are not set up to fail with onerous fines and fees used to fund the criminal justice system and reentry monitoring. Unemployment is already at record highs, and we know that the effects of racial bias in the hiring process increase the already negative effects of criminal records for people of color. Studies have shown that Black applicants with a criminal record had only a 5% chance of receiving a call back, less than one-third of white applicants with a criminal record. Reentering into this economy will be tough. Having paid for reentry with federal funds, Alabama should waive the fines and fees for people who are struggling to reintegrate into our communities, giving them a clean start and a better chance for success.

Even with fewer people in facilities, we will still need to dramatically increase testing of employees who work in prisons and jails and for the people who are incarcerated therein. Only four in every 100 residents in Alabama have been tested for COVID-19. Alabama has tested fewer than 1% of people incarcerated in its prisons. This is wholly inadequate to slow, let alone stop, the spread of COVID-19 within Alabama's facilities.

Securing our Children's Futures

The pandemic radically impacted education and threatens to worsen future education outcomes in Alabama for the many students who already did not have the benefit of an equitable opportunity to learn before it began. Alabama must focus its attention on addressing the inequities exacerbated by access to technology, space to learn, and caretakers to support their learning and those for whom specialized services are not available, including for students with disabilities. If it does not, the opportunity gap will widen with significant economic impacts for

counselors, to provide necessary education, social and emotional, and health and safety services and increase salaries to remain competitive for educators who now take greater risks to their own health and are required to master more technological skills to teach their kids.

We recognize that the \$300 million allocated by the Legislature will not be enough. Additional funding could also be taken from the \$250 million fund for local government expenditures directly related to the pandemic to provide these disproportionately affected school systems and their local communities with funding for after-school, summer school, and community programs for youth.

Finally, where there are competing priorities for funding, the Legislature has set aside an

Greater Birmingham Ministries
Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama
Holiday Transitional Center
Holy Rosary Catholic Church
Human Rights Campaign Alabama
Humanists of North Alabama
Immanuel Presbyterian Church PCUSA
(Montgomery)
Interfaith Montgomery
Jesuit Social Research Institute
Jobs to Move America
Just Faith, Prince of Peace Catholic Church
(Birmingham)
Just Faith, Our Lady of the Valley Catholic
Church (Birmingham)
League of Women Voters of Alabama
Low Income Housing Coalition of Alabama
Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church
(Daphne)
March of Dimes
Mary's House Catholic Worker
Medical Advocacy & Outreach
Mission Possible Community Services, Inc.
Monte Sano United Methodist Church
Montevallo Progressive Alliance
Montgomery Pride United
National Action Network- Birmingham
Chapter
National Lawyers Guild

National MS Society
Nightingale Clinic
North Alabama Conference United
Methodist Women
North Alabama Peace Network
Open Table United Church of Christ
Planned Parenthood Southeast
Progressive Women of Northeast Alabama
Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty
Restorative Strategies, LLC