



STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION

A GEORGIA BUDGET AND POLICY INSTITUTE SERIES

Strengthening the Foundation Series

GBPI's *Strengthening the Foundation* series assesses state policies and programs designed to help low-income working families succeed in the labor market and achieve economic security. The most recent report, *Strategies Georgia Can Use to Reduce Poverty*, examined TANF-funded state initiatives that increase family self-sufficiency with a focus on short-term solutions of work supports, child care and transportation and long-term solutions that raise adult education levels and increase household assets.

As part of that series, *Establishing an Economic Security Task Force in Georgia* encourages government, businesses, community leaders and residents to develop and implement comprehensive strategies for reducing poverty and increasing economic security among the new and entrenched poor. *Establishing an Economic Security Task Force in Georgia* examines models from neighboring states and regional efforts within Georgia.

Strengthening the Foundation series is part of the national Working Poor Families Project.



Establishing an Economic Security Task Force in Georgia

Building on Neighbor State Models and Local Efforts

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Summary

Georgia has grown and developed significantly in recent decades; yet today these strengths are being tested. The Great Recession hits all of us and impacts our economy in many ways. It has, for example, dramatically changed the face of poverty in Georgia, which now has the 12th highest poverty rate in the nation with one in five children living in poverty. More middle class families are falling into poverty, while the working poor do not have a pathway to the middle class. Both lack economic security.

Following the lead of its Southern neighbors and local Georgia efforts, the state of Georgia can establish a task force that seeks to increase economic security and reduce poverty. Whether by legislation or executive order, an effective state government task force needs:

- **Members who are champions for change**, committed to participate in both the planning and implementation of poverty reduction and economic security initiatives, including:
 - Key state legislators from both chambers who serve on economic development, human services, health, labor, education, appropriations, and ways & means committees;
 - State agency heads or designees (Human Services, Labor, Education, Community Health, Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability, Revenue, Economic Development, Workforce Development); and
 - Nongovernment leadership from business, labor, nonprofits and other community groups.
- **Community participation and input**
- A **target and timeline** for poverty reduction (e.g., reduce child poverty by 50 percent by 2021)
- An **implementation plan** with action steps to reach the target
- An **annual legislative agenda** to advance the plan
- An **annual report card** to track progress.

Why is Economic Security a Critical Issue in Georgia Right Now?

Poverty is not new to our state, but the Great Recession elevates poverty to a critical issue that demands new attention and action. Unemployment continues to hover close to 10 percent statewide, underemployed workers settle for part-time work but need full-time jobs, wages are not keeping pace with rising costs, and more families are slipping out of the middle class and into poverty. It's time for Georgia to look at the new face of rising poverty with fresh eyes, to see its realities, and focus on how to impact change.

The reality – A family cannot meet its basic needs at the federal poverty level.

Poverty is defined by the amount of household income. The federal poverty level for a family of three is \$18,310.¹ This measure frames the national and state discussions on poverty; however, a family cannot be self-sufficient earning income at the poverty level. For example, a family of three with one adult, one school-age child and one-preschool child must earn \$33,552 in Chatham county and \$47,857 in Gwinnett county in order to meet their basic needs—food, clothing, housing, child care, transportation and other expenses—without relying on public or private assistance.²

The reality – Workers are struggling to provide for their families.

The American Dream suggests that people who work hard will be rewarded with economic security over their lifetimes. Yet this dream is out of reach to hundreds of thousands of low-income working Georgia families who do not earn enough to meet their basic needs without assistance. Forty percent of Georgia children in poor families have at least one parent who is employed full-time year-round.³

In 2009, one in four working Americans was earning a wage below the poverty level.

- Economic Policy Institute

Even before the recession, one out of seven Georgia working families lived at or below the poverty level. The United Way Metro Atlanta estimates that in 2010 more than 600,000 families in the 13 county metro Atlanta area are not financially self-sufficient.⁴

The reality – Alarming numbers of Georgia children live in poverty.

The number of Georgians, especially children, living at or below the poverty level is increasing as more families fall out of the middle class into poverty. Georgia had the 12th highest poverty rate in the nation in 2009 of 16.5 percent.⁵ Georgia's children were hit the hardest with one in five children living in poverty, including 33 percent of African American children and 42 percent of Hispanic children.⁶

Table 1 **Georgians Living In Poverty**

Georgians	Less than 100% of Poverty in 2009	Percent of Population
Children	568,324	22.3%
Adults 18-64	890,654	14.8%
Adults 65+	115,671	11.9%
TOTAL	1,574,649	16.5%

Source: American Community Survey Data 2009, Table S1701

Children raised in poverty are more likely to have poor health, to drop out of school, to be in contact with the juvenile justice system, and to be unemployed or underemployed. For increasing numbers of children and families this means a daily life of hunger, lack of educational attainment, and violence.⁷

The reality – Public and private sector efforts can provide a pathway from poverty to the middle class. There are existing government policies and programs that encourage work, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This federal refundable tax credit decreases income taxes for low-income working families and provides a refund for any remaining amount of the credit. The refund acts as a wage supplement, offsetting other federal payroll taxes and bringing some working families' incomes above the poverty line.

In 2007, the Atlanta Prosperity Campaign, the United Way Metropolitan Atlanta (UWMA), and the IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites came together to increase access to the EITC. Referrals from UWMA 2-1-1 call center, equipment donations from IBM and Dell, VITA volunteers, and support from the Atlanta Prosperity Campaign increased participation in the program by 20 percent in 2007 and by another 20 percent in 2008.⁸ VITA volunteers now provide financial literacy, and financial institutions help many Georgians set up their first checking and savings accounts.

Georgia can explore other economic security initiatives, such as those that promote savings, affordable housing, and linking post-secondary education to employment with self-sufficiency wages. For example, 24 states offer a state EITC that piggyback's on the federal EITC.

The reality – Georgia pays a high price when future workers grow up in poverty.

There is an economic case for poverty reduction. National research prior to the Great Recession estimated the cost to the U.S. from childhood poverty was approximately \$500 billion per year, or the equivalent of nearly 4 percent of GDP.⁹ The cost to Georgia has not been estimated. A Georgia task force on economic security could examine the economic impact of poverty in Georgia, including the effects of the Great Recession.

The lack of economic security touches all Georgians – it costs taxpayers in the long run and impacts Georgia's ability to be a state with an educated work force and stable families.

What is a State Task Force?

In general, state task forces, councils or commissions have the authority to bring together diverse stakeholders from the public and private sectors to analyze a significant problem within the state, inventory existing resources, identify gaps, make recommendations and track progress. A state economic security task force takes this framework and puts the focus on increasing economic security and reducing poverty.

Georgia has created state task forces on critical issues, like taxes (Special Council on Tax Reform and Fairness¹⁰) created by legislation and limited natural resources (Water Contingency Planning Task Force¹¹) established by the governor. Both were charged with studying the issue and developing recommendations.

The state legislature can pass a bill with governor approval to create a task force, or a governor can call for a task force by executive order. Regardless of the mechanism, the key to an effective task force is the participation of its members and their ability to develop and implement recommendations that address the critical issue.

Members of task forces that increase economic security and reduce poverty generally include diverse stakeholders—key state legislators, state agency heads, nonprofit directors, business leaders, labor leaders, and other community leaders. Public participation is encouraged, especially by those currently living in poverty. Task forces are often required to present recommendations or action plans to state legislative committees and to track their progress.

An increasing number of state governments have established task forces or commissions to increase economic security and reduce poverty. Since 2003, twenty states have initiated comprehensive reviews and recommendations to reduce poverty, sixteen by legislation and four by executive order.¹² Eleven of these states have developed poverty reduction targets that set a specific goal, timeline and recommended actions.¹³ Georgia is not one of these states.

What Georgia Can Learn from Our Southern Neighbors

Alabama and Louisiana provide examples of states with mandated efforts to increase economic security and reduce poverty that are building the political and public will essential for policy change.

Alabama Commission on Poverty

In 2009, the Alabama legislature passed a law establishing the permanent Alabama Commission to Reduce Poverty.¹⁴

The law calls for the Commission members to include up to four legislators or their designees plus appointees of the Alabama Poverty Project, Alabama Arise, Alabama Community Action Agencies, the Low Income Housing Coalition, and VOICES for Alabama's Children. The Commission is also to include two people living in poverty and a representative of the faith community, appointed by the governor. Public input, especially from those living below the poverty line, is incorporated into the Commission's work.

The law compels the Commission to:

- Study and evaluate state policies and programs that serve or affect Alabamians living in poverty;
- Study the economic impact of poverty on the state; and
- Make recommendations and proposed legislation affecting individuals in poverty.

The law also requires the Commission to present an annual report to the state legislature at the beginning of each legislative session. This is an opportunity for the Commission to present their findings, recommendations, and proposed legislation for poverty reduction in Alabama.

Progress

The legislation establishing a permanent Alabama Commission on Poverty demonstrates the progress of the 2007 House Poverty Task Force that included bipartisan legislator participation along with state agency and nonprofit leaders. The Commission passed unanimously (100-0) in the House and with strong support in the Senate (18-7).

Four working committees of the task force, 1) human and social capital, 2) education and workforce development, 3) housing and community development, and 4) tax and regulatory policy developed recommendations for legislative members of the Commission to consider pursuing.¹⁵

Representative Todd, chair of the Commission, introduced a bill in 2010 based on the housing and community development committee recommendation. The bill sought “to establish the Alabama Affordable Housing Act, the Alabama Affordable Housing Trust Fund, and the Alabama Affordable Housing Trust Fund Committee for the purpose of making available housing opportunities to individuals and families with low to moderate incomes.”¹⁶ The bill passed the House but not the Senate. Representative Todd will pursue passage of this bill in the 2011 session.

According to Representative Todd, the goal for the Commission’s first few years is to bring the business community to the table and to analyze and measure the impact of state agency programs for the poor beyond numbers served. The Commission will meet prior to the 2011 session to review pending legislation. The public can follow the Commission on Facebook and a website launch is planned by year end.¹⁷

In an effort to inform the Commission, Kristina Scott, who serves as vice chair of the Commission and is executive director for the Alabama Poverty Project, is starting a public mobilization campaign. The campaign, implemented by the Alabama Poverty Project, will consist of listening sessions across the state to identify barriers to economic opportunity and to build public will and civic engagement. The campaign is not funded by the state.¹⁸

Louisiana Child Poverty Prevention Council

The Child Poverty Prevention Council for Louisiana and the Child Poverty Prevention Fund were mandated by legislation in the 2008 Louisiana Regular Session.¹⁹ The bill creating the Council passed by large margins due to the leadership of veteran Senator Nevers, the support of Department of Social Services Assistant Secretary Adren Wilson, 33 co-sponsors in the Senate and 52 co-sponsors in the House.

The Council set a target of reducing child poverty in the state by 50 percent over the next 10 years. Created within the Louisiana Department of Social Services, the Council includes members from the state legislature (House and Senate chairs of human services committees), state executive agencies (social services, labor, education, health, revenue, economic development, and workforce development), business and labor groups, higher education institutions, and nonprofit advocacy groups.

“We encourage child advocates throughout the nation to establish a comprehensive plan to reduce child poverty”

Charmaine Caccioppi,
Louisiana Child Poverty
Prevention Council

The Child Poverty Prevention Fund was created as a special fund in the state treasury with monies from annual legislative appropriations (including federal funds) or from individuals, corporations, and nonprofits. The fund exists for the Council to make grants for projects that reduce child poverty in the state, subject to an annual appropriation by the legislature.

Using member input, state and national expertise, and “best practice” literature, the Council developed an Implementation Plan, including four priorities with corresponding recommendations as shown in Table 2.²⁰

Table 2 Louisiana Child Poverty Prevention Council Implementation Plan

Priority	Sample Recommendation
Improve Birth Outcomes	As part of Louisiana’s proposed health care reform initiative (Louisiana Health First), include health coverage for high-risk women before their pregnancy.
Be a National Model for Comprehensive, Evidence-Based, Early Childhood Education Initiatives	Expand the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) from 15 percent to 50 percent of eligible women by 2014-15. This program serves eligible women, first-time mothers who are below 200 percent of poverty, beginning in pregnancy and continuing until the baby reaches two years of age.
Strengthen Disadvantaged Youth Connections to School and Work	Successfully pilot then implement a statewide build out of Louisiana’s new EMPLoY (Educational Mission to Prepare Louisiana’s Youth) Program.
Raise the State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)	Raise the State EITC from 3.5 percent to 7 percent of the federal EITC amount. The EITC is a major benefit to low-income working families, praised for helping to move these families out of poverty.

Source: Child Poverty Prevention Council Implementation Plan, February 2009

Progress

The Implementation Plan received unanimous approval in fall of 2009 from the Louisiana Joint Health and Welfare Committee. According to Charmaine Caccioppi, council member from Louisiana Association of United Ways, the plan is a road map to reduce poverty—not a report collecting dust on a shelf.²¹

For example, in the 2010 legislative session the Nurse-Family Program (NFP) was spared budget cuts in response to the work of the Council. In fact, private funders, such as the Pew Charitable Trust, United Way Women’s Leadership Council, and Baptist Community Ministry stepped forward with funding to move the NFP toward the Council’s goals.²²

The Council’s key next steps include preparing action plans to guide execution of its recommendations, designing a “report card” that can be used to measure Louisiana’s progress in lowering the incidence of child poverty, and seeking funds for the Child Poverty Prevention Fund.²³

In Georgia – Local Efforts Lead the Way

There are regional anti-poverty efforts across Georgia that demonstrate a growing momentum to tackle the issue of economic security and poverty reduction comprehensively and set the stage for a statewide effort.

Step Up Savannah

Step Up Savannah (Step Up), a collaborative of more than 100 organizations, started as a task force in 2003 when the city convened community leaders (city, local business and education institutions, social service providers, neighborhood leaders, and nonprofits) to look at decades of high poverty (more than one in five Savannah residents) with fresh eyes.²⁴ Based upon research provided by the University of Georgia and city staff, the Savannah poverty reduction task force identified key barriers to self-sufficiency and prepared an action plan in 2005.²⁵ The plan includes strategic goals with actions steps to reduce persistent poverty, by:

- Developing an educated workforce,
- Improving access to quality jobs,
- Supporting working families,
- Helping families build assets, and
- Building quality neighborhoods.

To move the action plan forward, Step Up engages the community by targeting efforts in workforce development, building wealth, and work supports that include education, dependent care, healthcare, transportation and affordable housing.

Progress

Step Up's *Report Card for 2009* demonstrates the progress of a regional task force focused on economic opportunity and poverty reduction. A few highlights are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 **Step Up Savannah Progress**

	Task Force Action Plan	2009 Report Card Highlights
Workforce Development	Mobilize resources for job training programs, including the Construction Apprentice Program (CAP), supported by Chatham County	Trained 68 students in CAP Placed 23 in jobs
Building Wealth	Promote financial education classes and banking, through Bank On Savannah Campaign Participate in VITA Coalition, promote federal Earned Income Tax Credit	2,934 completed classes 1,024 bank accounts opened Completed 3,450 tax returns with \$2.2 million claimed
Work Supports	Inform and link low wage workers to public benefits at work sites of selected companies (e.g., food stamps, PeachCare) to supplement family budget Institute a free transfer in county bus fare Encourage adults learners to complete their GED	1,250 workers screened Free transfer instituted 128 enrolled in GED classes 42 GED modules passed 18 students obtained GED

Source: Step Up Savannah 2009 Report Card

What started as an “unfunded mandate” is now a thriving effort. In 2009, Step Up also secured \$357,100 in grants for poverty reduction.

Step Up’s efforts to eliminate the transfer fee for the Chatham Area Transit (CAT) bus system demonstrate how a task force can influence policies and practices that benefit low wage workers. Step Up found that many Savannah low wage workers were riding the bus to work and paying for each transfer, which was very costly to the workers. Step Up worked with the local transit authority over two years to institute a free transfer.²⁶

The organization also advocated for additional investment of public dollars for the local Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) coalition. Step Up invited city officials from San Antonio, Texas to Savannah to discuss how that city supports its VITA sites. As a result, Savannah’s city manager agreed to invest \$100,000 per year in 2008, 2009 and 2010 to cover stipends for some tax preparers, marketing of the sites, and training. The funds are managed through the City’s Economic Development Department.²⁷

Step Up’s current policy agenda includes:

- Pursuing an affordable housing trust fund, the first such fund in Georgia. This is a mechanism to receive public and private funds to be disbursed under specific guidelines to develop and/or rehabilitate housing for low-income residents.
- Working with Georgia Department of Family and Children Services and the Savannah Technical College to explore using federal FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET) funds for employment, education, training, and support services for food stamp recipients.
- Enacting policy or legislation to stop predatory lending.

OneAthens

In 2006, six conveners (including the 1) Mayor of Athens-Clarke, 2) President of the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, 3) Clarke County Superintendent of Education, 4) Director of the Family Connection Partnership, 5) Director of Community Relations for the University of Georgia, and 6) Representative of the 6th Community Co-Convener), and the community came together to address poverty in Athens-Clarke County.²⁸ Each convener appointed three members to the steering committee and adjustments were made to ensure community representation.

The steering committee and conveners worked with the community through Partners For A Prosperous Athens (PPA) to develop comprehensive strategies to address poverty. From 155 community recommendations, the PPA established 10 initiatives (later evolved into 11 initiatives) that were presented to 1,300 Athenians at a March 2007 community meeting.

The PPA established a successor organization, OneAthens, to provide leadership to the community to implement the initiatives and remaining PPA recommendations. Hundreds of Athenians committed to the implementation of the initiatives are organized into teams – one for each initiative.

“OneAthens envisions helping those in poverty find pathways to self-sufficiency and entry into the middle class.”

Mayor Heidi Davison

Progress

From March 2008 to March 2010, OneAthens made progress in all of its initiatives.²⁹ Key gains are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 **OneAthens Key Progress**

	Initiatives	Key Progress
1. Workforce Development	Create Career Academy-Technical High School, a workforce development school for youth and adults that addresses regional workforce demands	Approved by School Board, governing board in place, director hired, and secured \$3 million grant from the state. School to open by Fall 2011.
2. Education	Develop a charter school	Established JJ Harris charter elementary school in Fall 2010.
3. Health	Create a community health foundation to coordinate funding and basic health services for those in or near poverty	Hired OneAthens Health Profession to support provider collaboration to meet the needs of Athens' uninsured population.
4. Teen Pregnancy Prevention	By 2012 reduce race/ethnicity specific teen birth rates in Clarke County to at least the state average by providing comprehensive prevention programs	New comprehensive sex education curriculum in all school levels by winter 2010. Doubled teens accessing Teen Matters Clinic since 2007.
5. OneAthens Community Foundation	Create OneAthens Community Foundation by January 2008 to implement the OneAthens vision	Athens Area Community Foundation has 501c3 status, 8 Donor Advised Funds, and has awarded more than \$100,000 in grants to local nonprofits.
6. Early Learning	Provide access to quality child care to all Clarke County children birth to age 5 by August 2010	Nearly 2,000 children now have access to quality early care and learning programs (a 43 percent increase in two years, 2008-2010).
7. Family Engagement	Pilot a comprehensive family resource center, where families can access education, healthcare, social services, and job training services	Center completion expected by fall 2011.
8. Affordable Housing	Every resident living in adequate, safe, and affordable housing by 2015	Athens-Clarke County set aside Affordable Housing Authority's payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs) to create a dedicated fund for affordable housing.
9. Public Transportation	Increase Athens Transit Coverage and develop a regional system by 2009	Expanded bus hours on selected routes.
10. Regional Economy	Create a regional economic development organization under the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce.	Pending results from the recently announced Oconee/Clarke partnership.
11. Human and Economic Development	Strengthen the County Department of Human and Economic Development	Strategy team has made recommendations.

Source: OneAthens Implementation Successes as of March 2010

Albany

The City Commission of Albany has recently made poverty reduction a top priority. In 2009, Albany lost more than 1,200 jobs when Cooper Tire and Rubber Company closed. That same year, Forbes business magazine listed Albany Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as the fourth poorest metro area in the nation.³⁰

The City Commission in Albany responded by funding a study to understand the causes of poverty and current resources and to identify further solutions to address poverty reduction.

In June 2010, the City Commission in Albany released *A Poverty Analysis for Albany, Georgia June 2010 Preliminary Report*.³¹ Key recommendations from the report include:

- Designate a staff person or office from the city to address poverty reduction in the implementation of the All Together Albany Strategic Plan,³² focused on economic development.
- Develop a poverty reduction strategic plan, using All Together Albany Strategic Plan as a model, in partnership with the Albany Area Chamber of Commerce's Strive2Thrive Initiative.
- Develop funding priorities for nonprofit agencies who address poverty based on short-term and long-term needs.

Metropolitan Atlanta

The United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta recently estimated that more than 600,000 families in the 13 county metro Atlanta area are not financially self-sufficient.³³ That's more families than in comparable cities such as New York, Boston and Charlotte. Even though many of these families work they do not earn enough to meet their basic needs (e.g., food, housing, child care, transportation) without public or private assistance.

Recognizing the link between self-sufficient families and thriving communities, United Way Metro Atlanta established the Metro Atlanta Financial Stability Partnership, a collaborative network with a leadership council comprised of state and local government, business, labor, and nonprofits.

The partnership's work is focused on four key areas—workforce development, income supports, building savings and assets, and affordable housing. For 2010, the Partnership has committed to:

- Establish a strong infrastructure,
- Complete a community scan,
- Develop measureable targets related to the goal,
- Develop an action plan to advance the goal and include community partners, and
- Pilot a collaborative way of investing with a range of funders including United Way.

As of the writing of this report, the Partnership has built its infrastructure and set a five-year goal of increasing the number of families that are self-sufficient in metro Atlanta by 6 percent (approximately 95,000 families) by 2014.

Mechanisms Georgia Can Build On

Georgia currently has a statute that establishes a Council for Welfare Administration.³⁴ The purpose of the council is to promote improvements in public welfare and social service programs of the Division of Family and Children Services within the Department of Human Services, to provide a forum for the exchange of information, and to promote with non-profit organizations, a more efficient welfare delivery system. The council has not been activated even though the law passed the Georgia House and Senate in 1996 unanimously and was signed into law by the governor. It was re-enacted during the 2009 session as part of the DHS reorganization.³⁵

During the 2010 session, Representative Roger Bruce proposed a bill to create the Georgia Commission on Reducing Poverty and Increasing Economic Security. The bill was passed out of the Human Relations and Aging Committee but failed to crossover to the Senate by the 30th legislative day.³⁶

Recommendations – Blueprint for a Georgia Economic Security Task Force

Georgia has the 12th highest poverty rate in the nation with one in five children living in poverty. Now is the time to build on this momentum and use all that we have learned from neighboring states and metropolitan areas across Georgia on how we can comprehensively address poverty reduction and economic security at the state level. Georgia should establish a task force that seeks to increase economic security and reduce poverty. Whether by legislation or executive order, an effective state government task force needs:

- **Members who are champions for change** – committed to participate in both the planning and implementation of poverty reduction and economic security initiatives:
 - Key legislators from both chambers who serve on committees that cover economic development, human services, health, labor, education, appropriations, and ways & means;
 - State agency heads or designees (Human Services, Labor, Education, Community Health, Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability, Revenue, Economic Development, Workforce Development);
 - Nongovernment leadership from business, labor, nonprofits and other community groups.
- **Community participation and input**
- A **target and timeline** for poverty reduction (e.g., reduce child poverty by 50 percent by 2021)
- An **implementation plan** that includes action steps to reach the target
- An **annual legislative agenda** to advance the plan
- An **annual report card** to track progress.

In order to keep the task force revenue neutral, community partners could help the task force move forward by:

- Compiling an inventory of existing state and federal policies and programs that move people out of poverty
- Conducting a gap analysis of needs versus programs and services
- Providing information on “best practices”
- Projecting the poverty reduction impact of the implementation plan recommendations.

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