



## **A marathon Alabama must win**

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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Alabama's optimists will be quick to find the silver linings in the latest Kids Count survey, the annual report that highlights how well America takes care of its children.

Here, that is an admirable stance — especially since Alabama bucked a portion of its usual low-scoring trends and posted gains in critical areas such as high school dropout rates, teen birth rates and child death rates.

We commend people like Linda Tilley, executive director of the advocacy group VOICES for Alabama Children, whose tireless efforts on behalf of the state's youngest are worthy of widespread recognition. Her hopefulness can be contagious.

Alabama, which dropped one spot to No. 48 in the Kids Count rankings, "actually (is) getting better," Tilley told The Associated Press. "It's just that while we're getting better, other states are getting better as well. It's just that we were so behind to start with."

Unfortunately, it is impossible to either sugarcoat or ignore the main headline from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count report that was released earlier this week. By and large, the well-being of a quarter of Alabama children is dominated by poverty. It's a constant story that's worsening. And until that changes, the state is unlikely to rise from among the nation's lowest-ranked states for child welfare.

There is scant solace in the fact that the number of Alabama children who live in poverty rose at virtually the same rate (19 percent) as that of the United States (18 percent), or that those dismal statistics are caused, in part, by the early months of the Great Recession.

Children don't care about statistics or excuses. As children in the richest, most developed nation on the planet, they deserve a better outlook than that. That has to be our goal.

Poverty is a virus that infects everything it touches. It affects health, it reduces educational opportunities and, in turn, plays a role in long-term earning potential and crime rates. We'd like to believe that the fact that 1 out of 4 Alabama children are living in poverty will shake this state's powerful into some sort of action.

Sadly, though, Alabama does not instill that confidence. What's needed is a Legislature that makes child poverty an emphasis on par with ethics reform, which lawmakers obsessed about in 2010 and then hurriedly strengthened the state's ethics laws.

Tilley, the child advocate, calls Alabama's struggle to improve children's lives "a marathon," and urges us not to be discouraged. "We have the right things in place to improve," she said.

The thousands of Alabama children who live on the fringes of economic survival shouldn't have to wait for generational change. If ever we faced a priority worth addressing, this is it.

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