

## **Stepping Up for Alabama's Children**

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I don't know where you'll be on Thursday, October 8<sup>th</sup> but I'll be on the steps of the state Capitol stepping up for kids. Across the nation people who understand the need to ensure the well-being of all children, not just their own, will participate in Step Up for Kids Week October 5 -9. It's time that more people in Alabama get serious about the well-being of all of our state's children, do our part, and ask our elected leaders to make them a priority.

VOICES for Alabama's Children and more than 70 co-sponsors will gather on the Capitol steps this week for the second annual Step Up for Kids rally in an effort to highlight critical issues facing children throughout Alabama. We will also recognize programs and policies which can positively impact these issues. For every problem there is a solution –if we choose to embrace it. Our elected leaders and those running for office must join parents and child advocates in making the well-being of children a top priority.

All children deserve the right to equal opportunity for health, safety and education. Yet many children in Alabama are exposed to factors which hinder their opportunity to build a strong foundation for success later in life.

Many Alabama children miss the opportunity to participate in early learning activities, a critical foundation for later success in school and life, because access to high-quality pre-k and safe affordable child care is limited in our state. We need to ask leaders to develop policies to extend the reach of services to a broader group of children.

Many Alabama children face lifelong health issues due to obesity. Alabama is sixth in the nation in childhood obesity with 36 percent of our youth overweight or obese. Obese children and adolescents are more likely to have risk factors of cardiovascular disease such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and Type 2 diabetes than are normal weight children and adolescents. The average obese child does not "grow out of it". We need to ask that school leaders join with health care professionals in addressing this problem.

Too many Alabama children fail to obtain a critical foundation for later success in life - a high school diploma. We must continue to develop local and state policies and programs to see that all do. Such programs not only require vision and funding, but many could use volunteers. Our young people depend on us now; we will depend on them in the future.

Too many Alabama children live in poverty, facing conditions that deprive them of many of assets that help their more affluent peers succeed. We need to fix our state's upside down tax system that contributes to keeping many families in poverty and provide programs to fill the gaps for poor children.

To help Alabama's children become successful we must truly make them a priority. We have made economic development a priority in Alabama in the last decade. Surely we can do the same for our children.

Throughout this year and next, as we call attention to the issues our children face, we have a tremendous opportunity to step up for the children of Alabama. We can challenge every candidate for public office at any level, whether incumbent or challenger, to share their plans to make programs and policies that improves child well-being a priority. As adults, we have the responsibility to speak for our children. Their voices are not heard in elections and they have no vote, but what happens in their lives will ultimately affect us all.

October 8<sup>th</sup> and every other day I will step up for kids. Will you?

*(Linda Tilly is executive director of VOICES for Alabama's Children, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization working to ensure the well-being of Alabama's children through research, public awareness and advocacy.)*