

THEIR VOICES. THEIR RECOVERY.



Two years into the pandemic, Southern families' struggle with housing weighs heavy as lawmakers begin ARP spending plans.



[The Southern Economic Advancement Project \(SEAP\) releases the first phase of results from its American Rescue Plan \(ARP\) Community Needs survey.](#)

The ARP was signed into law in 2021 to assist communities in recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Direct community feedback is the crux of ARP funds guidance from the U.S. Department of Treasury, encouraging local leaders to place equity and public engagement at the forefront of spending plans.

Launched in November 2021, the SEAP surveyed more than 3,500 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana, through the Propel application. SEAP's findings revealed challenges for both individual residents and whole communities. Our team also gathered feedback on how respondents would like their local leaders to prioritize ARP funds in their communities.

In conjunction with the publication of this report, SEAP also releases two new dashboards to help with the transparency of ARP spending. Our Tracking Demographics, Economic Indicators, and the American Rescue Plan dashboard show where the public wants and needs money to be spent, based on our Community Needs survey data. Our [ARP Local Funds Spending Tracker](#), on the other hand, keeps tabs on where local leaders are actually allocating funds.

To ensure local leaders and government officials received direct ideas and feedback on where their communities would like funds spent, we asked survey participants a round of questions concerning priority spending areas.

Affordable housing topped the list —both for the single most important issue, and again when we asked participants about three other issue areas. Other top issue areas included affordable utilities, food accessibility, and job creation.

Asked to expand on why funds should be spent in those areas, respondents said:



WHY WOULD YOU WANT MONEY TO BE INVESTED IN THOSE AREAS?

“We don’t currently have access to affordable, quality homes (to rent and buy) in my small community. Most of the housing stock is deteriorating or located in new subdivisions that are cheaply built, expensive to rent/buy, are outside the town center away from stores, and don’t match the character of the surrounding community.

Our school facilities could use some

material improvement, but mostly we need incentives and policies that will protect our kids’ health at school during the pandemic.

Local residents need good paying jobs at businesses anchored in and that care about the local community, engage in sustainable environmental practices, and have the resources to do those things.” -AL.

WHY WOULD YOU WANT MONEY TO BE INVESTED IN THOSE AREAS?

“We need more job training for employee positions to be effective. We also need ways to afford housing and electricity if we have no source of income.” - MS

“Just because the economy is growing and it needs younger people to thrive in finding businesses and profits to keep everything going” - GA

“I’m a single mother of 6 kids and within my community I see the daily struggles of so many being uneducated, not being able to see a doctor or dentist because they can’t afford insurance, I say better housing opportunities for moms that are trying to give their kids a better life, there is really no community support within my community right now” - AL



“These are the areas that are seemingly forgotten the most by the government when it comes to this area.” - MS

“There’s jobs if you have training, there are no houses in my area that I can afford alone unless it’s a dump, and mental health is needed all across the country.” - AL

“It’s not enough money being invested in those areas. We could definitely use the investment especially for the environment and kids” - GA

“Because people in my area are really struggling, just to put food on the table.” - AL

WHY WOULD YOU WANT MONEY TO BE INVESTED IN THOSE AREAS?

"This is where people suffer the most." - AL

"We need it the most" - GA

"Because we deserve it , it's time for a change" - AL

"It would be able to help everyone" - MS

"Because those are the most important things" - AL

“HEALTH *insurance to ensure the health of not only ourselves but our loved ones as well.*

FOOD *for childrens to maintain a healthy lifestyle as they need.*

HOUSING *for safety of everyone for many various reasons, it's a necessary need." - AL*

"So that the community won't have to struggle." - AL

"To make a better living environment" - MS

"For the well-being of our future" - GA

"That's where we need the support badly." - MS

"Those are the ones mostly hurting" - GA

"These areas are overlooked most of the time" - GA

“Everyone is struggling financially. Food and utilities are continuously increasing in price as well as demand. There is just not enough money on payday to take care of basic needs. Internet is important because of rapid change with the pandemic. There is a dramatic shift toward electronic and online.” - AL



"I am not sure at this point what built back better even means" - GA

"It's fine now. But my community does not recognize people like me; people who live in a town house but can't pay their power bill. Everything looks okay from the outside right?" - AL

"I have no hope that it could be better. The leaders in Alabama does not care about its children or the most vulnerable. They only care about image and not substance. This state is pathetic and depraved." - AL

"What it was looking like pre-covid." - GA

"We would still struggle..." - AL

"I think it will look the same." - GA

"Still be less than other states" - AL

"Nothing is wrong with my community" - MS

"Promising" - AL

"I honestly don't know, I just hope for the best." - MS

"It would be an incredible place for sourcing more job opportunities." - AL

"A new, better, happier, healthier unity." - AL

"Thriving, successful, and generous." - GA

"The community would flourish. Economic growth and development with environmental sustainability" - MS

"I hope it would have homes for everyone, thriving businesses both small and corporate, parks, streets, and sidewalks well-maintained, as well as clean and safe areas for children to play." - AL

**WHAT DO YOU THINK
YOUR COMMUNITY
WOULD LOOK LIKE IF
IT BUILT BACK BETTER
FROM COVID-19?**

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR COMMUNITY WOULD LOOK LIKE IF IT BUILT BACK BETTER FROM COVID-19?

“HEALTHY SUFFICIENT, STRONG”

“Like the town I grew up in, where we had beautiful antebellum homes that people toured. I would like to see that brought back for the tourism boost! It would help local industry. We also have important connection with the civil rights movement and I think that should be promoted along with the antebellum history. I would also love to see both races in my community work side by side together to build a safe community, where the children can play outside without fear.” - AL

“I think it would look like people being able to get help with getting their homes repaired and having a safe neighborhood. Also, safe roads to travel on.” - MS

“Everyone would have shelter,

the streets would empty at night. People, children, would have a full stomach everyday. Also there would be running water and electricity in each household.” - AL

“My small town would look more alive and we would have better opportunities for the youth.” - MS

“It would be pulsing with growth, new businesses, new vendors in the community, a happier community” - GA

“The sky is the limit...Our area is growing fast already and there’s no telling where it will be in the future if it is taken care of and things are done the right way... for everyone.”

“United.” - AL

“A clean environment that breeds happiness and true opportunities.” - AL

“I have no idea because there is no telling what the leaders would do. Instead of helping the people they just want to dress the community up just to make themselves look like better leaders. They don’t care what we, the people, need. Even tho that’s why we elected them. They just want the status name to make them look better. Year after year once they are elected they forget all about the people that put them there. I think once they win the election that they should be made to put into action everything that they promised or they should be made to resign from their position..” - MS

“Positive influence would set a better mode for our community. Understanding the community as a whole is very important. Hostile authority does not go well with the ups and downs that life has you all facing. Their mode has to be set. Each individual should be handled with respect no matter of your finances..” - MS

*“Make things more simple”
- AL*

“They need to take in consideration that our younger children are suffering from this and being put out on the streets.” - GA

“We need help and resources that actually help us not lead us in circles. Some of us want better we just need a little help getting on track and knowledge to get this businesses and dreams we have going successfully. Without resources we have nothing.” - AL

“There are so many scams out there. It’s hard to know what’s real and what’s not.” - GA

“Some people aren’t eligible for help due to felony convictions. Can we change that?” - GA

“That we need more jobs opportunities and to raise minimum wage” - MS

*“Do something to help everyone, not just a select few.”
- AL*

“We need help now not later” - AL

*“Try to spread evenly”
- GA*

“It’s time to give back to the community” - AL

“We need these funds badly especially for us who don’t have much support with our childrens! Who can’t work because no one want to babysit due to covid so it’s hard trying to come up with money to pay bills” - MS

“It should be easily accessible with supporting documentation” - GA

“Put the people first” - GA

“The citizens of our community are struggling. The families that live at poverty level and below have not recovered yet. The stimulus money did not make it far with bills. It runs out eventually. We need a plan to keep permanent stability in our community.” - AL

WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE ELECTED OFFICIALS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS OR FUNDING REQUESTS?

*“Give the money to people and businesses that are really struggling vs helping multimillion dollar companies”
- AL*

“Be considerate when making decisions” - AL

“There are many people who are living below the poverty line because there aren’t enough jobs or they don’t have access to transportation. Kids are often drawn to the streets because their aren’t many things to do or places to play in the community.” - MS

WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE ELECTED OFFICIALS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS OR FUNDING REQUESTS?

“There needs to be better choices for poor elderly and single members of our communities. I’ve watched my 94 year old neighbor go out and look for a job so he could be able to pay for his light bill because the funding isn’t there for him to live and have electricity as well. As well, young members of our community who are just starting out are having to give up their places because they haven’t earned enough to cover the cost of rent, food, insurance and utilities because the cost of electricity, water, and heat as increased substantially over the past 2+ years.” - AL

“We really need to invest in small business and our school system. These teachers have the world in their hands and make so little and are overlooked. We have to realize these teachers are teaching our future. We have to make sure the teachers are good so they can make sure our children are good.” - MS

“They need more research, thought, and community input as to how our money is spent. In my opinion, money and community resources have been wasted to “provide more tax income” to the county. Money should be spent instead on making this community more beneficial to the residents. For example, selling the land on the west side of the Darien bridge. That space would have been a wonderful place to build a park with pavilions for family gatherings, a great playground, and fishing pier.” - GA

“I hope you will actually listen to these concerns and not just throw them to the side like most officials do. We are in desperate need of help here.” - AL