

2024

ANNUAL REPORT

SOUTHERN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT PROJECT



Together, Progress is Possible.

A Letter from SEAP's Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Last year, your support helped Southern Economic Advancement Project build connections across the South, connections that are a foundation for the work that will transform our region into one that is more prosperous and equitable than before.

In the pages that follow, you'll meet the inaugural Policy Entrepreneurs Program cohort, a group of Southern policy professionals who came together to build their policymaking skills. You'll see that Our Dollars, Our Dreams—our newest program initiative—is about connecting Southern communities to the federal funds available to bring their projects to life and expanding voice within local budgets at home. And, you'll see that SEAP is using data, research, and outreach to connect people to the tools available to help them shape policy in their communities.

My hope is that through your support of SEAP's work, you feel connected to the South that is and the South that could be. Thank you for being part of the work to create the region we all deserve.



Sarah Beth Gehl

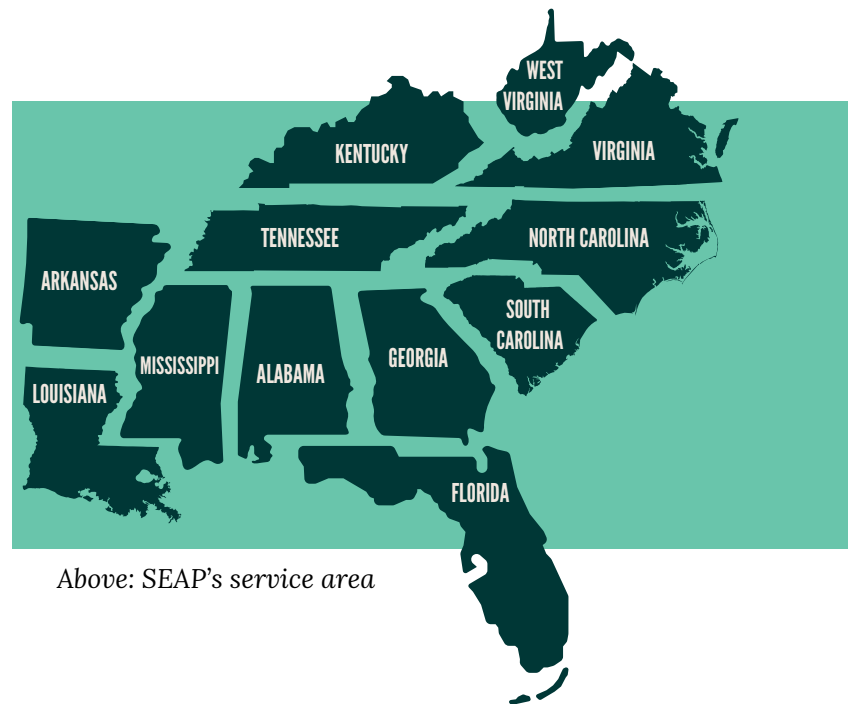


Above: SEAP Executive Director,
Sarah Beth Gehl

About SEAP

Our Mission

We amplify the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work towards broadening economic power and building a more equitable future. Broadening economic power brings attention to how race, class and gender intersect social and economic policy in the South. We explore policy ideas designed to directly address these connections.



Above: SEAP's service area

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Fenika Miller
Economic Recovery Corps Fellow

SEAP is a fiscally sponsored project of Tides Center, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

Our Dollars, Our Dreams

Our Dollars, Our Dreams is a SEAP initiative created to assist Southern communities working to access federal funds and expand voice within local budgets at home. We respond to our partners' unique needs by providing research, network building to share best practices, and no cost technical assistance services. Our Dollars, Our Dreams is one of the ways we work to disrupt the cycle of disinvestment in Southern communities.

Grant Assistance by the Numbers

- 13 federal grant applications completed
- 12 organizations received additional technical assistance
- \$120 million applied for
- 100% of Community Change Grant partners located in Justice40 communities
- 75% of Community Change Grant partners are spearheaded by Black elected officials, Black-led organizations, or Black public administrators

Partner Highlight: Arkansas Black Mayors Association

SEAP supported the ABMA on a proposal to the Arkansas Department for Agriculture's Forestry Division for an Inflation Reduction Act-funded grant program. The Arkansas Delta Community Forestry Grant awarded almost \$250,000 to the Association, which will plant 1,200 trees in five counties in the Arkansas Delta region with high rates of extreme heat days.

"This grant will allow us to invest in the wellbeing of Arkansas Delta communities while also engaging with residents in a meaningful way. We are pleased to have had a partner in SEAP that believed in our vision for this project and worked closely with us to secure the funding to make it a reality." - Frank Bateman, Arkansas Black Mayors' Association

"Less than two months before the late September deadline, SEAP agreed to take us on and provided us with hours of invaluable service, advice, and grant writing services that would have cost us well over \$10,000. We could not have completed this application without SEAP and their incredible wisdom, work ethic, and effort."

- Wesley Brown, CEO Wesbro Communications; Carla Daniels, Executive Director, Arkansas Employment Career Center



Above: Genny Castillo; Mayor Rainey of Wrightsville Arkansas; Liza Crichton

Building Shared Power

Program Highlight: Faith Leaders and the Clean Energy Movement

Economic Recovery Corp Fellow Fenika Miller is working to position Southern Black churches as leaders in the clean energy movement. Fenika's work to educate faith leaders on the Inflation Reduction Act's Direct Pay program, which allows tax-exempt organizations to claim clean energy tax credits, has taken her across the region to increase awareness and adoption of the program.

- 1,500+ individuals engaged
- 1,700 congregations represented in responses
- 66% unaware of Direct Pay prior to meeting Fenika



Above: SEAP produced a learnings report with insights

New Orleans' Building Equity Collaborative

SEAP supported the Building Equity Collaborative in New Orleans for more than a year

as they convened partners, engaged with city departments, and galvanized support for an equity rubric to guide city funding decisions. SEAP researched equity practices, power-mapped, drafted the Collaborative's equity framework, and produced a learnings report to spread lessons throughout the field. The Collaborative now has 30 nonprofits working on the adoption of a city ordinance to cement equity principles into decision-making processes.

"During our initial outreach efforts, many churches showed limited interest in implementing clean energy projects - primarily due to capacity and up-front capital. However, Hurricane Helene's devastating impact has reignited conversations about the critical importance of resiliency, preparedness, and clean energy initiatives in Southern communities. I'm happy to be a bridge to the federal resources available." - Fenika Miller, Economic Recovery Corps Fellow

Local Budget Advocates Convening

SEAP co-created a convening with the Mobility Alliance and the New School's Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy to provide networking and skill-building to local budget advocates.

"This work being deeply process-oriented, wonky, and complicated makes it really hard to explain to communities, funders, and other actors who could help make our work successful. As a result, it's pretty thankless and often overlooked. Creating this group not only had a tremendous impact on how we can do the work, but also showed in so many ways how much you value the work we're doing. It left me feeling seen, validated and immensely grateful. Thank you!" - Convening Participant

Growing Shared Knowledge

Pathways to Prosperity: Building Climate Resilience, published by Fair Count, National Conference on Citizenship, and SEAP, details both the impacts of climate change and the potential for federal investments to target the inequities these impacts create and compound. This report focuses on people living in Southern states, a group particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

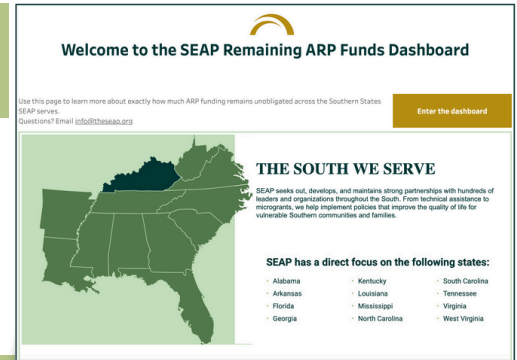
IRA Participatory Climate Action Planning in the US South: A Playbook for Civic Engagement was published by National Conference on Citizenship and SEAP. The report highlights the hard work of hundreds of state, county, municipal, and tribal governments who have engaged their communities as partners in planning for a more equitable and sustainable future. The participatory climate action planning work featured in this report was catalyzed by the Inflation Reduction Act's Climate Pollution Reduction Act. The report highlights excellence in participatory climate planning taking place in three Southern states, four Southern cities, and two Southern Tribal communities.

Maximizing ARP in the South

SEAP works to remove the barriers between federal dollars and Southern communities, ensuring that it's possible for Washington, DC to make meaningful and equitable investments in our region. This year, we worked to connect local governments with the tools and data they needed to take advantage of the federal funds available to them through the American Rescue Plan's State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (SLFRF).

Visualizing Opportunity: The Remaining Funds Dashboard

SEAP developed a dashboard that visualizes unobligated ARP SLFRF funds as a percentage of state or local available funds. This dashboard helped local leaders and community advocates see what funds were still available and advocate for their communities to claim them. *Right: A screenshot of the Remaining ARP Funds Dashboard interface*



A Tool For Collaboration: Interagency MOU Template

In the final month before the ARP funds obligation deadline, the US Treasury contacted SEAP with an urgent request: could we provide a tool that would encourage interagency collaboration in obligating the final remaining dollars? The answer was yes, and the Interagency MOU template helped small governments retain access to millions of federal dollars.

Bridging the Divide Between Washington and the South

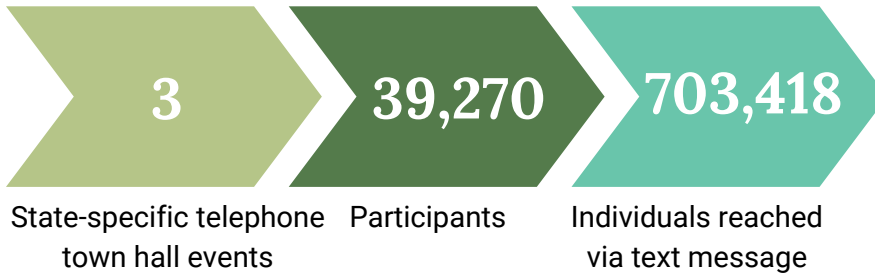


In 2024, SEAP engaged with the US Office of Management and Budget, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Delta Regional Authority, White House National Economic Council, US Treasury, Department of Energy, Department of Transportation, and Federal Emergency Management Agency on behalf of the South.

Medicaid Unwinding Outreach

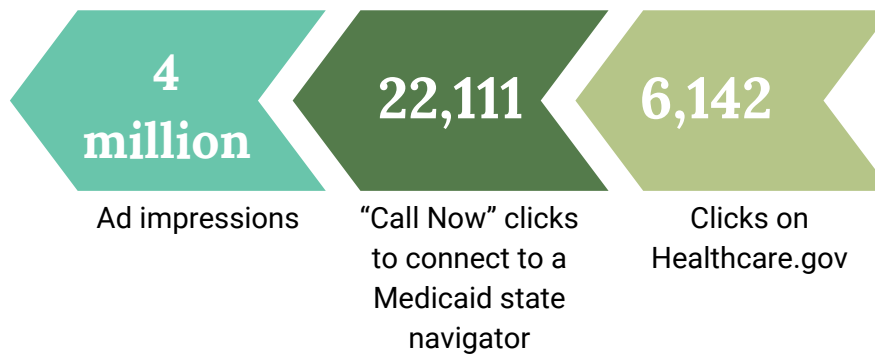
Outreach by the Numbers

Spanish-Language Telephone Town Halls



Propel Providers App Ads

Propel's app is a financial management tool for households utilizing SNAP benefits, and SEAP's partnership with them allows us to reach low-income households across the region.



Community-Led Outreach

SEAP partnered with 35 community-based organizations in FL, GA, and NC to focus on reaching Black, Latino, and rural residents at risk of Medicaid disenrollment. SEAP provided state-specific literature kits and \$5,000 microgrants to facilitate the outreach.



"Our 3 Medicaid Town Halls, plus other community events, impacted our rural communities in two profound ways: First, we were able to hear the very powerful ways resident's lives have been (and are being) negatively impacted by their loss of Medicaid... Second, we and our community partners were able to meet, network, and develop deeper relationships. We had VERY meaningful, honest dialogue about how to better reach into the community with valuable information."
- Microgrant Recipient



Above: SEAP produced a learnings report with insights and results from our Medicaid Unwinding Project

Food Security and Housing

In 2023, SEAP's surveys of SNAP households identified access to food and housing as the top concerns, so we focused our attention there in 2024.

Food Security

In 2024, SEAP's food security work was a convergence of practical resources to connect to federal funds, data gathering and analysis, and coalition building—all in an effort to feed more Southern children during the summer months.

Summer EBT Resource for States

SEAP partnered with Food Research & Action Center to create a resource to help hesitant states choose to adopt the Summer EBT Program, a program in which qualifying families receive \$40 per child in SNAP benefits during summer months. *Right: Cover page of the Summer EBT resource.*



Summer Feeding Survey with Propel

SEAP partnered with Propel to survey Mississippi SNAP users about summer feeding program limitations and the impacts of Summer EBT. This survey helped to inform the messaging and coalition building efforts of a group of food advocates in the state.

Survey Results:

"No more pushing bills back to buy food."

"I will be able to purchase essential items such as canned goods and fresh fruits, ensuring we no longer face food shortages."

1,500 +

Respondents completed the survey

87%

Said it is difficult to provide enough food for their families when children are out of school

52%

Of respondents who accessed a summer feeding site said it did not fully meet their families' needs

Coalition Building: More Meals for Mississippi Kids



Above: Food advocates hold a press conference in Jackson at the Mississippi State Capitol building.

In the Spring of 2024, SEAP partnered with local food advocates in Mississippi, as well as national partner Food Research & Action Center, to gauge interest and energy in the state to build a coalition around Summer EBT, or SUN Bucks. From June - December of 2024, SEAP virtually convened Mississippi food advocates to discuss policy and advocacy opportunities, as well as communication strategies.

Mississippi has not opted in to providing the SUN Bucks benefits to qualifying families in 2024 or 2025. In January 2025, after six months of virtual meetings, food advocates gathered at the Mississippi State Capitol to inform policymakers about how SUN Bucks and other food security programs can promote economic mobility for children and their families across the state.

Housing

In 2024, SEAP spoke with a broad range of housing advocates, including national policy analysts, statewide and local housing coalitions, housing attorneys, policy experts, and direct service providers, to understand the gaps in support and infrastructure among housing advocates.

Information Gathering

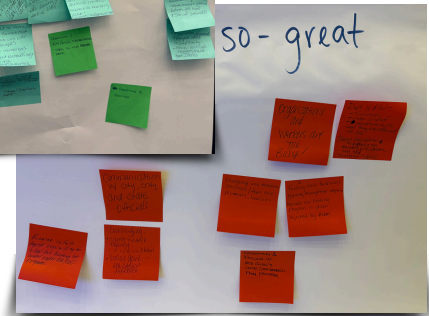
The following themes emerged from 35 interviews and conversations with housing partners:

- Desire for networking and learning opportunities with peers in states outside of their own,
- Need for “step-by-step” guides of how the housing advocates involved in progressive policy change achieved success, and
- Bridging gaps related to understanding national updates, trends, and policies that may impact state and local policymaking and implementation.

These results are informing a Southern housing advocates convening SEAP will host in May 2025 as well as a learnings report on the infrastructure gaps housing advocates face.



Left; Below: Results from a focus group cohosted by SEAP and Low Income Housing Coalition of Alabama (LIHCA) at LIHCA's Southern Convening on Housing and Homelessness



Information Sharing: Webinar on Housing and Homelessness in the Wake of Natural Disasters

In response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Helene to much of the Southeast, SEAP partnered with national, regional, and local housing policy analysts and advocates to offer a timely webinar about the ways natural disasters impact housing and homelessness.



Left: Social media flyer advertising the webinar hosted by National Homelessness Law Center, National Low Income Housing Coalition, and SEAP.

“We need as many opportunities as possible to shift negative narratives about, and break down silos around, affordable housing. We must create as safe a place as possible for discourse that cultivates respect and convinces folks to care [about the issue].”
- Housing Advocate Interviewee

SouthStrong Policy Entrepreneur Program

The SouthStrong Policy Entrepreneur Program (PEP) is a training initiative aimed at empowering participants in policy and advocacy. This comprehensive program is designed to cover essential topics, such as policy agenda setting, effective mobilization and advocacy techniques, and foster an environment where emerging leaders can share best practices and grow their networks.



Above: The Inaugural SouthStrong PEP cohort.

“The power mapping exercise pushed me to consider the ways in which we are connected to leaders who make and shape policy. This also pushed me to explore the ways in which I can help grow those connections. This is key to building power as advocates and community organizers.”

The Inaugural PEP Cohort

21 Cohort
members matriculated
through the program

9 out of 12
Southern states
were represented

Professionals in:

Food security, LGBTQ+ advocacy, immigrants' rights, guaranteed income, disability rights, pretrial justice, community development and more

A Need to Convene

PEP began as a virtual-only cohort, but it quickly became clear that the cohort wanted a way to deepen their connections and gather in person. SEAP heard this feedback and created an in-person convening that took place in December. The convening offered the group a chance to learn from lobbyists, communications experts, and elected officials while also connecting with each other—work that felt critical in the month following the 2024 election.

“I am grateful for the opportunity to add to my toolkit and explore ways to build on the lessons learned to work alongside leaders and create the sustainable changes needed to alleviate rural persistent poverty.”

SEAP's Partner Network in 2024

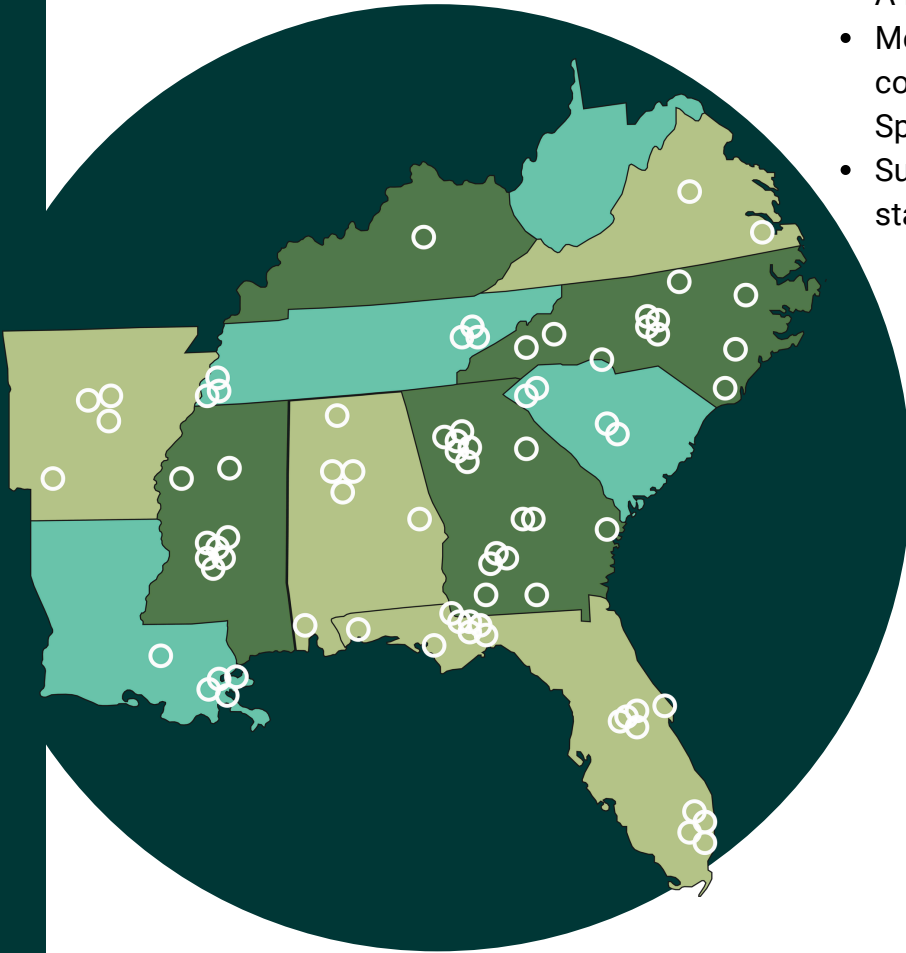
In 2024, SEAP partnered with one hundred grassroots organizations across the South.

Growing Grassroots Capacity

Now more than ever, it's critical for grassroots organizations to have access to the resources they need to sustain their community-building, community-changing work. SEAP is proud to have the opportunity to partner with progressive policy thinkers and doers at the grassroots and local levels. We supported Southern grassroots organizations and initiatives through:

- A Local Budget Equity convening
- Medicaid Unwinding microgrants, community engagement resources, and Spanish-language teletown halls
- Supporting Mississippi food advocates to stand up a food security coalition advocating for SUN Bucks
 - Our Dollars, Our Dreams technical assistance
 - South Strong Policy Entrepreneur Program

Left: A map of grassroots organizations SEAP supported in 2024.





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