

March 2024



Alabama  
Commission on  
the Evaluation of  
Services

Helping Families Initiative

Program Evaluation

# ALABAMA COMMISSION ON THE EVALUATION OF SERVICES



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March 7, 2024

## Members of the Commission,

I am pleased to transmit the report, A Program Evaluation of the Helping Families Initiative, to the Commission. The evaluation examined the program's operations to determine how the program is being delivered throughout the state, the effectiveness of the program, and the efficiency in which the program operates.

The evaluation concluded on February 28, 2024, with the Helping Families Initiative's Executive Director participating in a stakeholder meeting to discuss the findings and offer recommendations.

I believe this report accurately reflects how the program is being delivered and offers recommendations to improve the program's ability to impact the outcomes of interest as well as improve the accountability and efficiency of state funds.

We very much appreciate the cooperation and assistance of the Helping Families Initiative Support Team and Local Units, Volunteers of America Southeast, and the Alabama District Attorney's Association. I respectfully request that they be given an opportunity to respond during the public presentation of the report.

Sincerely,

**Marcus Morgan**  
Director





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Alabama Commission on the Evaluation of Services would like to express our sincere gratitude to the researchers, practitioners, and professionals that assisted in this evaluation. In particular we would like to acknowledge the efforts of the following organizations that contributed significantly to this report.

### Organizations

Helping Families Initiative State Support Team

Volunteers of America Southeast

Alabama District Attorney’s Association

### Helping Families Initiative Local Units

Circuit 1	Circuit 13	Circuit 27
Circuit 4	Circuit 15	Circuit 32
Circuit 7	Circuit 19	Circuit 35
Circuit 8	Circuit 24	Circuit 37
Circuit 10 (Bessemer Division)	Circuit 25	Circuit 40
Circuit 10 (Birmingham Division)	Circuit 26	Circuit 41

### Local Education Agencies

Auburn City Schools	Cullman County Schools	Russell County Schools
Autauga County Schools	Franklin County Schools	Satsuma City Schools
Cleburne County Schools	Lamar County Schools	Tallasse City Schools
Clarke County Schools	Lee County Schools	
Clay County Schools	Mobile County Schools	

### Non-Participating District Attorneys

Circuit 6	Circuit 27	Circuit 30
Circuit 11	Circuit 28	Circuit 33
Circuit 12	Circuit 29	Circuit 38
Circuit 14		



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**CONCLUSION:** The lack of accountability within the program limits fidelity, possible effectiveness, and the efficient use of state funds. The Helping Families Initiative (HFI) is designed to impact chronic absenteeism and behavior among students. The program is not currently operating as designed across circuits; therefore, the program’s effectiveness on intended outcomes cannot be measured. HFI has been heavily focused on expansion efforts without ensuring efficient and effective use of state funds.

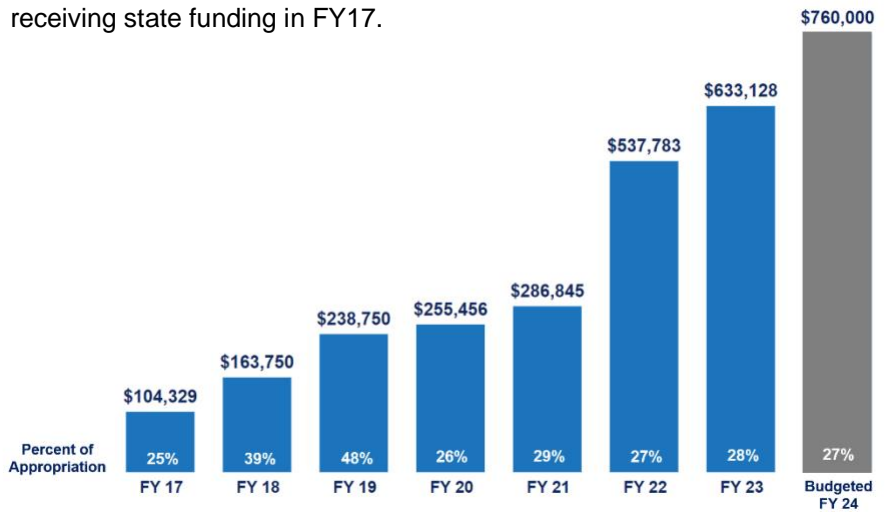
### Recommendations

- **Establish** performance metrics that align with intended outcomes.
- **Implement** rigorous tracking, monitoring, and compliance within HFI’s case management system.
- **Ensure** consistent operations by establishing uniform standard operating procedures.
- **Work** with school systems to adopt a universal Code of Conduct.
- **Create** a more equitable, efficient, and accountable funding model.
- **Set** a startup funding amount that is contingent on operations.
- **Require** monthly itemized invoicing that includes all HFI related expenditures.
- **Cap** HFI administrative expenses at 15% and accumulated surplus of state funds to 10% of annual appropriations.
- **Conduct** an impact evaluation to study HFI’s impact on intended outcomes.
- **Discontinue** expansion efforts to new circuits until an impact evaluation is conducted.

### Key Findings

- There is a fundamental lack of accountability within the program that impacts fidelity, effectiveness, and efficiency.
- HFI’s program is not implemented as designed. In each of the six steps, there are serious inconsistencies of operations. No locality operates with **full** fidelity to the model.
- Outcome data is not collected. Output data that is collected are self-reported, unverified, and inaccurate.
- HFI’s current funding model is not diverse, adaptable, or equitable. It does not consider the status or operations, number of students served, or availability of local resources.
- Half of the current localities have amassed a surplus of \$830,000 in state funds.
- HFI’s administrative costs have averaged 29% since receiving state funding.
- The State Support Team has retained a surplus of \$625,121.
- The budgeted use of these funds is conditioned on increased funding from the state. This further illustrates the inefficient operations of the program.

**FIGURE |** HFI’s administrative expenses has averaged 29% a year since receiving state funding in FY17.





## HELPING FAMILIES INITIATIVE

Chronic absenteeism<sup>1</sup> rates have been on the rise nationwide predating the pandemic but have risen at an even more exponential rate due to the impacts of COVID-19 on school attendance. In the 2021-2022 school year, Alabama was among the best states (20<sup>th</sup> percentile nationally) in terms of chronic absenteeism rates. With campaigns such as Attendance Works,<sup>i</sup> chronic absenteeism has been a growing topic of interest in the state of Alabama<sup>ii</sup> as well as the nation. Attendance is cited to have a significant impact on student performance and graduation rates, among other things.<sup>iii</sup>

The Helping Families Initiative (HFI) was created in 2003 by Mobile County’s District Attorney who saw a need for early intervention among students who exhibit behavioral issues. Over time, chronic absenteeism became another focus of the program’s intervention. The program’s current design is to connect three existing tiers of support: district attorneys, school systems, and community resources, to create an individualized approach to achieve the following outcomes:

- Improved attendance in school.
- Improved behavior in school.
- Improved grades.
- Improved safety and security of students, families, and communities.
- Improved delivery of comprehensive, cooperative, and coordinated services.
- Improved values of existing tax and charitable dollars.

HFI cites these as outcomes of interest, but many of these outcomes are reliant on improving attendance and behavior in school. The remaining outcomes are difficult to measure or correlate with HFI’s program.

To distinguish the different terms that are associated with the HFI program, the following are defined as:

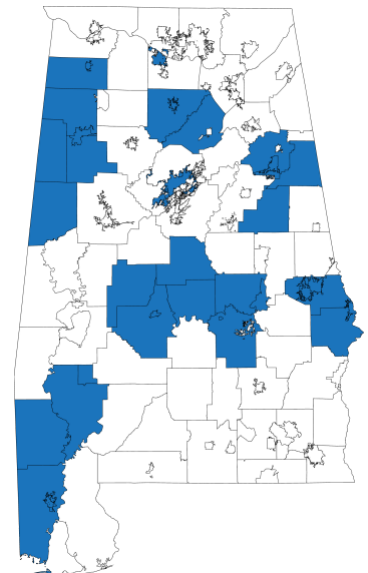
- **Circuit** – refers to judicial circuits that operate under a district attorney.
- **HFI** – refers to the program as a whole. This all-encompassing term reflects the program, statewide operations, the State Support Team, Local Units, and Volunteers of America Southeast when used.
- **Local Unit** – refers to the local HFI offices which are housed in the district attorney’s office and operate the program in a specific circuit.
- **State Support Team** – refers to the seven-member team that provides training and operational support to all Local Units.
- **Volunteers of America Southeast** – refers to the non-profit organization of which Helping Families Initiative is a program.



Map of HFI circuits according to the HFI website.

SOURCE | [HFI IN ALABAMA \(HFIALABAMA.COM\)](http://HFIINALABAMA.COM)

The 17 **Local Units** currently serve 44 **school systems** throughout the state.



<sup>1</sup> Absent 10% or more of the school year (18 days).



## PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

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HFI receives funding from the state through Education Trust Fund appropriations to administer the program with the intent to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve student behavior across the state. The purpose of this evaluation is to analyze the following:

1. [Are Local Units operating with fidelity to the model?](#)
2. [Is the program effective at achieving intended outcomes?](#)
3. [Is the program efficiently using state resources?](#)

Through the fieldwork phase of this evaluation, it was revealed that a lack of accountability is a serious issue with this program. Therefore, each section within this report will highlight issues with accountability through subsections aligning accountability with fidelity, effectiveness, and efficiency.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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### *The Governor and the legislature should consider:*

- Conducting an impact evaluation to study the impact of HFI on intended outcomes.
- Discontinuing expansion efforts to new circuits until an impact evaluation is completed.
- Capping administrative expenses for both Volunteers of America Southeast and the State Support Team at 15% collectively.
- Capping Volunteers of America Southeast and the State Support Team's total accumulated surplus of state funds at 10% of the annual appropriation.
- Creating a universal code of conduct for attendance and behavior in PreK-12 schools.

### *The Helping Families Initiative should:*

- Work with school systems to adopt a universal code of conduct.
- Upgrade the case management system to include tracking and monitoring of program components.
- Develop standard operating procedures for the case management system and require Local Units to use the system in accordance with the standard operating procedures.
- Create a structure of trainings and retraining for noncompliant Local Units to enforce compliance.
- Discontinue funding for repeated non-compliance.
- Establish performance metrics that align with intended outcomes.
- Create rigorous participant tracking, monitoring, and compliance within the case management system.
- Establish quality control procedures for case management use.
- Cap circuit funding at the base amount until a targeted funding model is created.



**RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED:**

- Create a targeted funding model that considers:
  1. Historical case load.
  2. Students enrolled in participating school systems.
  3. Number of Local Unit employees (FTEs).
  4. Capacity and availability for local investment.
- Require monthly itemized invoicing that includes all HFI related expenditures, regardless of revenue source.
- Set a startup funding amount where additional funding is not provided until Local Units have invoiced HFI for the full startup amount.

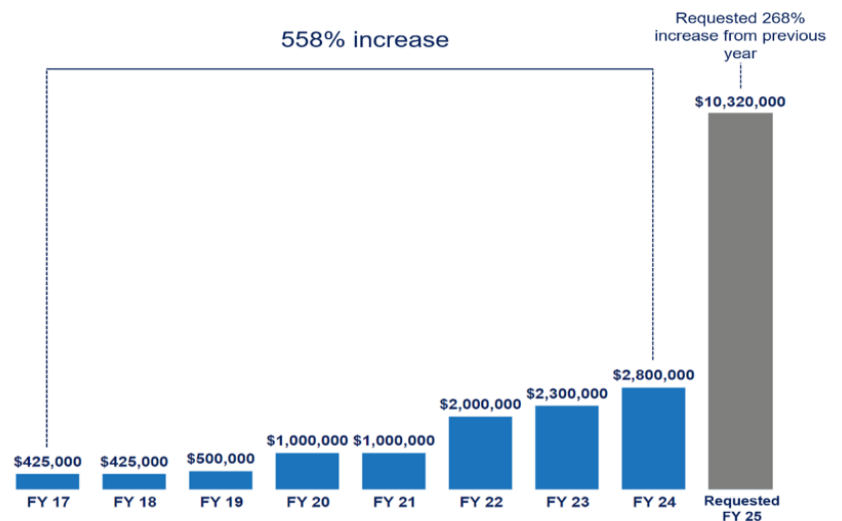
**OVERVIEW OF THE HELPING FAMILIES INITIATIVE**

Although the program began in 2003, it did not start receiving funding from the state until FY17. Predating state funding, there were only two Local Units in operation. There has since been a 558% increase in funding that has coincided with HFI’s expansion efforts. A total of 17 Local Units were in operation in FY23. Two more Local Units received funding but were not in operation. HFI also has agreements to expand to two additional Local Units (21 total). During the 2024 legislative session, HFI requested funding of \$10,320,000 for FY25.

**See Figure 1.**

HFI is currently operating under Volunteers of America Southeast. The program has a State Support Team that oversees the program’s operations and trainings. Under the advisement of the State Support Team, each Local Unit is created through a partnership with HFI, district attorney’s office, local school systems, and community partners. The Local Units are employees of the district attorney’s office<sup>2</sup> and receive allocations from HFI’s state funding.

**FIGURE 1 |** Since 2017, HFI has received a **558% increase in state funding** with only a 183% increase in the number of local units in operation.



<sup>2</sup> There is one exception where a Local Unit’s staff are employees of a non-profit organization which contracts with the district attorney. These employees work out of the district attorney’s office.



## DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### FIDELITY | ARE LOCAL UNITS OPERATING WITH FIDELITY TO THE MODEL?

#### *Fidelity*

“The degree of which programs are implemented as intended by the program developers. It is only by making an appropriate evaluation of fidelity, with which an intervention has been implemented that a viable assessment can be made of its contribution to outcomes. i.e., its effect on performance.” (Carol et.al, 2007, p. 1)

Programs that are implemented to fidelity typically demonstrate more effectiveness. Without ensuring fidelity, it is impossible to determine if any perceived effectiveness is due to the elements of the program rather than the variance in operations.<sup>iv</sup>

The HFI model is **designed** to go through a multi-step process which includes:

- A Triggering Event.
- Engagement.
- Assign Case Officer and Conduct Family Assessment.
- Interagency Team: Individualized Intervention Plan.
- Referrals.
- Follow-up Family Assessment.

The HFI structured process is based in research regarding efforts to lower chronic absenteeism; however, there is a lack of fidelity among Local Units.<sup>v</sup>

**In each of the six steps of the structured process, there are serious inconsistencies in operations.** As the HFI program has expanded, Local Units have adapted the program to meet their individual needs, largely foregoing the structured HFI process. Though some level of adaptation is reasonable, the program should still follow the model in place to realize expected results. Additionally, the State Support Team has not demonstrated reasonable efforts to ensure fidelity.<sup>3</sup>

Below, the process is outlined, and the inconsistencies are described in detail.

#### *A Triggering Event*

HFI defines this triggering event as a certain number of unexcused absences or a certain behavior violation. However, HFI does not define what number of absences or violations constitute a need for early intervention. The triggering event is defined differently through each school system’s published code of conduct. Triggering events for truancy range from three unexcused absences to ten unexcused absences. Because the triggering event is set by each school system, the trigger may differ even within the same judicial circuit. For example, one Local Unit is currently serving five different school systems. Two of those school systems use five unexcused absences, while the other three use seven unexcused absences as the triggering event. **Because there is not a uniform triggering event, Local Units cannot stage**

<sup>3</sup> The State Support Team has been working on a new business plan since October 1, 2023. As of the close of this evaluation, there were no components definitively in place for ACES to evaluate the potential improvements to accountability or operations.



**early intervention with families at the same point within the same circuit, much less statewide.**

### *Engagement*

The timeline at which HFI becomes involved is dependent on each school system's code of conduct, causing disparities in the timeline of engagement. The inconsistencies in the timeline are further exasperated by other intervention efforts made before students are referred to HFI. Other intervention efforts include school system interventions and preexisting, early warning truancy programs. Some school systems use HFI as the first intervention effort, while others use HFI as the last effort before filing a petition against the student or guardians. It should be noted that many cases are resolved after a letter is sent from the district attorney's office. **Varied times of engagement across the state create inconsistencies which limit fidelity.**

### *Assign Case Officer and Conduct Family Assessment*

Completing a full family assessment, when necessary, was cited as an essential component to the HFI model, but this rarely occurs. Case officers are trained to use the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale to assess and help identify possible intervention efforts. Case officers' use of the assessment varies drastically. In some cases, the case officers do not fully utilize the tool, while others do not use the tool at all. **Incomplete or partial use of the family assessment limits the usefulness of the tool therefore impacting both the fidelity and effectiveness of the program.**

### *Interagency Team: Individualized Intervention Plan*

The interagency team is cited as a key part of the structured HFI process, designed to bring in community partners as an essential stakeholder. Interagency teams are meant to work in conjunction with the team lead and case officer to create an individualized intervention plan. Utilizing a family assessment and the interagency team, the individualized intervention plan addresses key areas of intervention for students and families. There are currently Local Units who have been operating for multiple years who have not formed or do not utilize an interagency team to help inform the individualized intervention plan. Over half of current Local Units' interagency teams do not operate as intended or at all. **Although a critical component of the program, the proper use of the interagency team has been foregone.**

### *Referrals*

Without proper use of the family assessment tool and utilization of the interagency team, referrals can become subjective. Referrals are the component of the HFI program specifically designed to address the individual needs of participants and are used by almost every Local Unit. Local Units refer individuals and families to services and follow-up

### **Non-participating District Attorneys**

ACES interviewed district attorneys who are not currently participating in HFI. One of the top reasons for non-participation was existing interventions already in place, meaning the program would become duplicative in their circuit.



with those referrals to ensure they are utilized. However, it is important to note that they do not provide services beyond case management. ***The non-adherence to the other program components creates potential discrepancies in the selection and effectiveness of referrals.***

#### *Follow-up Family Assessment*

Case officers and team leads should complete the family assessment by performing a follow-up assessment. The purpose of the follow-up assessment is to evaluate the change in a family's scores since their initial assessment and if there is an additional need for services. ACES found only one Local Unit reported making significant efforts to complete the full family assessment, which prescribes a pretest and posttest. ***Without the full completion of the family assessment, it cannot be determined if the program is reducing the associated risk factors for participants.***

**Local Units are not accountable to the State Support Team.** The Local Units can deviate from the model without consequences from the State Support Team. Under HFI's design, team leads and case officers are employed by and responsible to the district attorney within their respective circuit. However, district attorneys are not typically involved in the training of case officers and team leads or the day-to-day operations. ***Because the district attorneys and the State Support Team are not involved in the local operations, discrepancies in program fidelity may not be discovered or corrected.***

**There are structural flaws with expansion of the program.** Local Units are housed within a judicial circuit's district attorney's office. The stated reasoning for this organizational structure is two-fold:

1. The program model is built on the premise of connecting district attorneys with schools and community resources to address the issues.
2. Under Alabama law, "[t]he district attorney shall vigorously enforce [the written policy on school behavior adopted by the local board of education] to ensure proper conduct and required attendance by any child enrolled in public school."<sup>vi</sup>

This means the HFI program is operated from within the division responsible for *enforcement* instead of the division responsible for *operating*, i.e., the school system.

This structure traces its roots back to the program's origins, where members of the current State Support Team were able to develop a program with support from the local school system which was reportedly successful.<sup>vii</sup> However, this

#### **Letter from the District Attorney's Office**

Although there are structural flaws with where the program is located, school systems noted that letters and engagements from the District Attorney's offices held more weight with families and students.



structure creates a design flaw in the expansion and deployment of the program to new localities as a model. As previously discussed, interviews with participating school systems revealed wholesale inconsistencies with the triggering event and beginning of engagement with Local Units. Further evidence of the structural flaw can be seen in the number of non-participating school systems within HFI circuits. **See [Where HFI Operates](#)**. Because individual school systems set their own policies, ***recruiting district attorneys to create and operate a policy leads to inconsistent delivery across the state.***

### *Accountability through the Lens of Fidelity*

Neither the Local Units nor the State Support Team are accountable for fidelity. As previously reported, the current process does not follow the prescribed model in each phase of the structured process. There are currently no measures in place to check fidelity. Few, if any, efforts have been made to align the Local Units activities to the model, further demonstrating the lack of accountability within the program.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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To create accountability and fidelity within the program, *align programmatic standard operating procedures to the model across jurisdictions*. The Helping Families Initiative should:

- Work with school systems to adopt a universal code of conduct.
- Upgrade the case management system to include tracking and monitoring of program components.
- Develop standard operating procedures for the case management system and require Local Units to use the system in accordance with the standard operating procedures.
- Create a structure of trainings and retraining for noncompliant Local Units to enforce compliance.
- Discontinue funding for repeated non-compliance.

## EFFECTIVENESS | IS THE PROGRAM EFFECTIVE AT ACHIEVING INTENDED OUTCOMES?

While ACES made extensive efforts to determine the program's effectiveness, the lack of fidelity to the program across the state means effectiveness, or lack thereof, cannot be attributable to the HFI program. Effectiveness should be tied to measurable outcomes. While HFI does have stated outcomes, they cannot be measured with currently collected data.

### ***Non-participating School Systems***

HFI reports they are in 18 judicial circuits, but the program only has operating partnerships with 44 school systems out of the 70 school systems in those participating circuits.



### Data Collection

HFI has a case-management software that is not regularly used by Local Units. Since they do not use the software, there is no central repository for the State Support Team to monitor.

During Local Unit interviews, team leads and case officers cited name recognition as their primary identifier for tracking students who have previously been part of the program.

**Individual participants’ outcomes are not tracked.** Although Local Units collect some data, they do not collect or retain individual student data in a meaningful way. There is no absence or behavior data collected on students as they matriculate through the program. There is limited, if any, data collected on students after they have completed the program. **Local Units do not have measures in place to test the success of the program achieving its intended outcomes.**

**Data collection by both the State Support Team and the Local Units are self-reported, inaccurate, and unverified.** The State Support Team requires each Local Unit to send monthly data which includes metrics such as the number of:

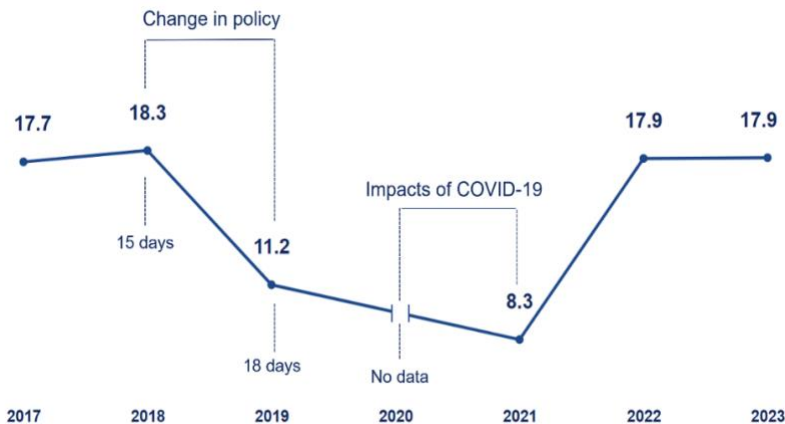
- Letters sent.
- Active cases.
- Fulfilled individualized intervention plans.
- Interagency team meetings.
- Community referrals by type.

While these outputs are important to collect, the State Support Team acknowledged the reports are unreliable due to Local Units not fully or accurately completing the documents. Currently, this data is collected through self-reporting, which leads to differences in the reporting of required information. Throughout interviews some Local Units cited not having an interagency team; however, these units reported holding multiple interagency team meetings in their monthly reports.

Analysis revealed metrics contained in the State Support Team’s annual reports – which is compiled from the Local Units’ monthly reports – do not align with the reported metrics from Local Units. During a routine quality assurance check, ACES found that 73% of values in the State Support Team’s annual reports did not match the values contained in an individual Local Unit’s report,

further adding to the unreliability of HFI’s data. The State Support Team acknowledged not doing a great job at keeping good, clean data that is easily accessible.

**FIGURE 2 |** Changes in policy, combined with the impacts of data collection during the pandemic, make analyzing statewide absenteeism data unreliable.



Further adding to the issues of measuring effectiveness, changes in policy and impacts of COVID-19 render state chronic absenteeism data unreliable for analysis. In the 2018-2019 school year, the state of Alabama changed the definition of chronic absenteeism from missing 15 days of school to missing 18 days of school.<sup>viii</sup> This change in definition objectively lowered chronic absenteeism rates across the state. **See Figure 2.**



Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted chronic absenteeism data collection entirely for the 2019-2020 school year. The unusual conditions of the pandemic caused attendance data to be difficult to track the following school year as well, impacting chronic absenteeism rates for the 2020-2021 school year. Because of these variables, chronic absenteeism rates may appear inflated or deflated at various points making analysis of this data unreliable. ***The current use of chronic absenteeism and self-reported, inaccurate, and unverified monthly reporting is misleading.***<sup>4</sup>

### *Accountability through the Lens of Effectiveness*

Throughout HFI's attempts to measure performance through monthly reporting, there is a severe lack of accountability both for the Local Units and for the State Support Team. Local Units are not obligated to fill out monthly reports accurately or in their entirety. Compounding the issue, the State Support Team's annual reports lack quality assurance. There are not currently systems in place to address either issue with the data. Any use of chronic absenteeism rates and HFI monthly reporting is misleading due to this fundamental lack of accountability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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To evaluate future effectiveness, *collect meaningful and outcome-driven data points*. The Helping Families Initiative should:

- Establish performance metrics that align with intended outcomes.
- Create rigorous participant tracking, monitoring, and compliance within the case management system.
- Establish a quality control process for case management use.

### EFFICIENCY | IS THE PROGRAM EFFICIENTLY USING STATE RESOURCES?

Although Local Units receive support from sources other than the state, a nonadaptive funding model, the lack of oversight and accountability, and rising administrative costs are contributing factors to the inefficiencies of the program.

**HFI generates significant local investment in the program.** The current HFI funding formula allocates \$85,000<sup>5</sup> to a Local Unit for the purpose of funding one full-time case officer, regardless of the number of FTEs recommended to fully staff the unit. Local Units wanting to expand the program beyond the single case officer are seeking funding from the community by way of county

<sup>4</sup> ACES developed a series of difference-in-difference tests to attempt to determine if the funding of a Local Unit resulted in a statistically significant change in chronic absenteeism for participating school systems. While this analysis did not reveal statistically significant results, it was ultimately excluded from the findings of this evaluation due to the numerous issues with available statewide data.

<sup>5</sup> This amount is budgeted to increase to \$90,000 in FY25.



commissions, local boards of education, federal Title IV funding, and non-profit organizations. ***Half of the Local Units funded in FY23 received substantial investments from sources outside of HFI state funding.***

### *HFI Funding Model*

**HFI's current funding model is neither diverse nor adaptable.** Since being funded by the state, HFI has allocated a base amount per Local Unit, with very few exceptions. See [HFI Funding by Circuit](#). The base-funding amount is designed to cover costs associated with one case officer and does not consider operational status or the financial, personnel, or resource needs of a Local Unit. One example of this discrepancy can be found in Circuit 10 (Birmingham Division). While this Local Unit could potentially operate in school systems with an enrollment exceeding 90,000 students, they currently only serve 22.5% of that population (21,234 students). This circuit has also recruited significant local investment and has an average annual surplus of over \$97,000. Despite these factors, Circuit 10 (Birmingham Division) is one of only two Local Units to receive or budgeted to receive more than the HFI base-funding amount in FY23 and FY24.

In contrast, Circuit 19 currently serves all 29,000 possible students enrolled and has reported the need for additional funds to maintain current staffing. Circuit 19 has never received additional HFI funding beyond the base amount. The flat-rate funding is attributable, in part, to the efforts of HFI that are focused on providing startup funds<sup>6</sup> related to expansion and less on implementation and development of new and existing Local Units. ***The current funding model is not diverse or adaptive to the state of operations as well as the number of school systems participating in the program.***

**The proposed funding formula is not based on needs or operational status.** The HFI recommended funding model is based on jurisdictional student population with additional consideration for circuits covering multiple counties. The model recommends:<sup>ix</sup>

- One case officer per 6,000 students enrolled in the jurisdiction.
- One case officer per county regardless of the number of students enrolled in the jurisdiction.
- Supervisory personnel for the Local Units that have more than six case officers (1:6).

The proposed funding formula used to request \$10,320,000 in FY25 maintains this same approach for allocating funds. Rather than accounting for actual operations, actual students served, or the needs and risks of each locality, it relies on a flat distribution based on the total number of students enrolled in a participating circuit.

<sup>6</sup> Startup and base funding are typically the same amount.



**Continuous funding for Local Units is not contingent on operations.** Upon signing an MOU with Volunteers of America Southeast, a Local Unit can receive startup funding. The time between receiving startup funding and fully operating the program varies. Some units did not operate for multiple years after receiving startup funds. Despite not being in operation, these units continued to receive full base-funding in subsequent years.

Of the Local Units funded in FY23:

- Three received funding of \$150,000 over two years while still not hiring a case officer until late in FY23.
- One received \$118,750 of funding over two years without ever hiring a case officer.
- One received the full \$75,000 startup funding without ever hiring a case officer.

These five Local Units (28% of all Local Units) are budgeted to receive the full \$85,000 funding in FY24. Collectively, these Local Units have funding surpluses totaling over \$538,000 through FY23 with an additional \$745,000 requested for FY25.

Compounding the issue, HFI continues to provide the full base-funding for Local Units operating with part-time staff. At least one Local Unit has been operating with one part-time case officer since its program began in 2020. Based on provided financials, this Local Unit accumulated over \$144,000 in unexpended state funds. Moreover, HFI has requested an additional \$185,000 for this Local Unit in FY25. Another Local Unit splits the team lead and case officer time between other official responsibilities in the district attorney’s office and the HFI program.

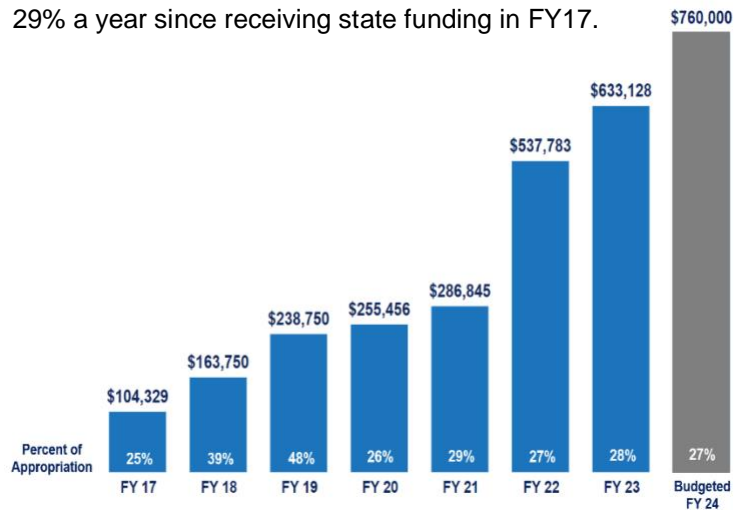
In total, there are nine Local Units (50%) receiving at least 95% of their funding from HFI state funds. Despite being nearly fully funded by state funds, their financials show a combined surplus in excess of \$830,000. Each of these Local Units is budgeted to receive the full base-funding in FY24. ***This routine and nonadaptive funding practice results in the inefficient use of state funds.***

**HFI’s administrative costs exceed 25%.** HFI has routinely reported having small and controlled administrative cost even as low as 10.5%.<sup>x</sup> The reported percentage is representative of only the Volunteers of America Southeast portion of administrative costs and exclusive of the State Support Team’s costs which average 18.5%. Since receiving state funds, the total administrative costs associated with HFI range from 26% to 48% with an average annual cost of 29%. ***See Figure 3.***

***Non-Operational Local Units***

In at least two instances, the Local Unit received the full base-funding without hiring a case officer in the first year. Moreover, full funding continued in the second year without a full-time case officer on staff for the entire year or at all.

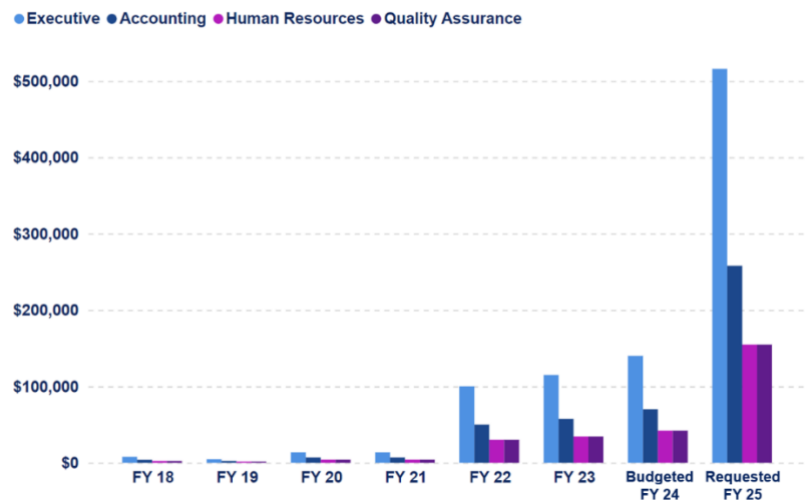
**FIGURE 3 |** HFI’s administrative expenses has averaged 29% a year since receiving state funding in FY17.



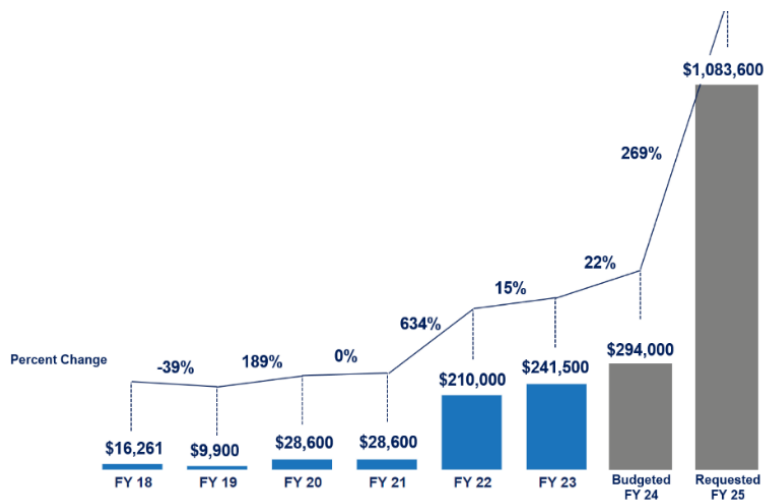


The program operating under the Volunteers of America Southeast umbrella is a significant driver of administrative costs. Starting in 2022, Volunteers of America Southeast received an increased share of the total state appropriation which coincided with a significant increase in funding. The current share is a fixed rate (10.5%), regardless of increases in funding from the state. Based on the fixed rate and the FY25 funding request, administrative costs of Volunteers of America Southeast would increase exponentially to over \$1,000,000. **See Figures 4 and 5.**

**FIGURE 4 |** The fixed rate for administrative costs of Volunteers of America Southeast would cause executive expenses alone *to exceed \$500,000 from just state funds* if the full request is funded despite not expanding to any additional circuits in FY25.



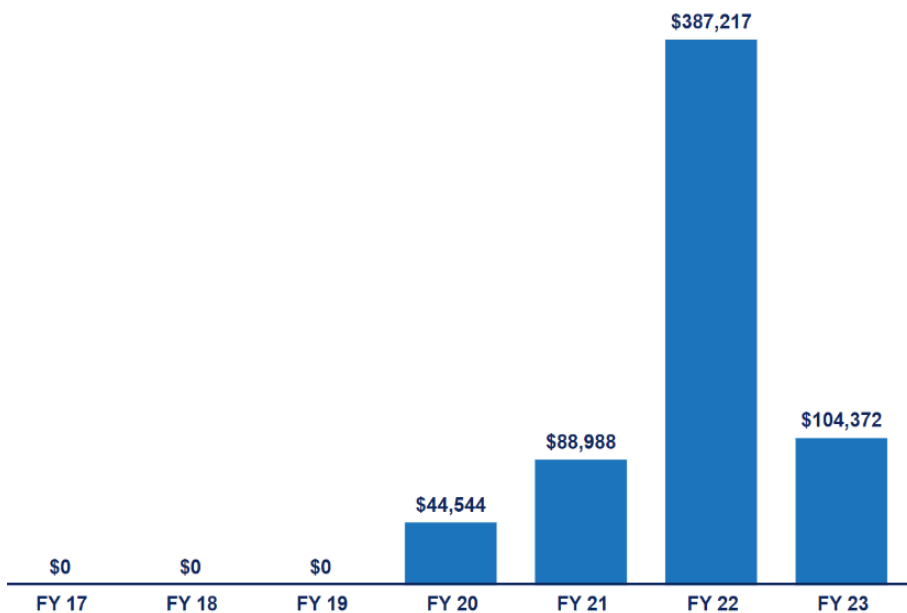
**FIGURE 5 |** Volunteers of America Southeast **administrative costs would balloon to over \$1,000,000** if the full funding request for FY25 is received.



**Rising administrative costs do not correspond with support or training for Local Units.** Fewer Local Units are relying on the State Support Team and instead are looking to other Local Units for guidance and support. In multiple interviews, team leads and case officers referenced Circuit 19, in addition to other well-established circuits, as the primary source of training and support. Local Units are turning to each other for support, while the State Support Team is retaining state funds.

Prior to 2020, HFI distributed or expended the total funds from the state. This practice changed in 2020 with the HFI program retaining as much as \$387,217 in FY22. Since 2020, the program has retained a total of \$625,121. **See Figure 6.**

**FIGURE 6 | HFI retained 38.7% of its \$1,000,000 increase in state funding in FY22**, even with an 87% increase in administrative expenses that year.



The State Support Team indicates that the majority of these surplus funds (68%) are budgeted to hire and train new case officers in the event HFI receives its full FY25 funding request.<sup>xi</sup> ***Not using these funds to provide training and resources to existing Local Units in need demonstrates an overall lack of efficiency.***

### *Accountability through the Lens of Efficiency*

The State Support Team has never requested Local Units' financial information prior to this evaluation. Even during this evaluation, the State Support Team was unable to get complete financial information from two units for various reasons. This lack of oversight contributes to an overall poor understanding of local needs. ***Without this understanding, the state's resources are not being used efficiently.***



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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To ensure state resources are being used efficiently, *create a more equitable, efficient, and accountable distribution of funds*. The Helping Families Initiative should:

- Cap circuit funding at the base amount until a targeted funding model is created.
- Create a targeted funding model that considers:
  1. Historical case load.
  2. Students enrolled in participating school systems.
  3. Number of Local Unit employees (FTEs).
  4. Capacity and availability for local investment.
- Require monthly itemized invoicing that includes all HFI related expenditures, regardless of revenue source.
- Set a startup funding amount where additional funding is not provided until Local Units have invoiced HFI for the full startup amount.

## CONCLUSION

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The Helping Families Initiative was designed by linking common practices rooted in research that are intended to address chronic absenteeism and behavior in school. The State Support Team's efforts have been focused on expanding to new circuits rather than building efficient and effective programs that meet the HFI design within existing circuits. The lack of accountability and control over existing operations prevents HFI's ability to determine impact on intended outcomes. Efforts should be made to correct these deficiencies prior to further expansion and to develop a plan to evaluate the program's effect on these stated outcomes.

## DATA & METHODOLOGIES

### INTERVIEWS

ACES staff conducted interviews with the State Support Team to understand the program's structure and conceptualize next steps for gathering data and information. Fidelity of the program was measured through a series of surveys and virtual interviews with each of the 17 operating Local Units.

ACES also conducted virtual interviews with participating school systems to understand their role in HFI. A representative sample of 16 participating school systems was created by separating school systems into quintiles based on student enrollment, chronic absenteeism, poverty, academic achievement, and demographics. Though all participating school systems were contacted, only 13 interviews were conducted due to scheduling limitations.

Additionally, ACES contacted judicial circuits not currently participating in HFI. The school system quintiles were aggregated into circuits to create a representative sample of ten non-participating circuits. Ten district attorneys participated in the evaluation. These ten district attorneys did not reflect circuits with the first or fifth quintiles.

### FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

ACES conducted analysis of annual revenues and expenditures of the State Support Team and of Local Units. Financial documentation was incomplete or not provided as requested for two Local Units. Throughout the financial reviews, there were numerous discrepancies between the reported receipts from HFI by Local Units and the reported allocations of state funds by the State Support Team.

### DETERMINING HFI PARTICIPATION

ACES requested a list of participating schools within each operating judicial circuit. The HFI provided list contained 43 school systems. At the conclusion of fieldwork, it was determined there were inaccuracies in the provided list. Instead, there are 44 school systems participating in HFI. There were three systems missing from the HFI list that were discovered during interviews and data collection. The list also included two systems who are not currently participating in the program.

## WHERE HFI OPERATES

Circuit - Counties	Total No. of Systems Within Circuit	No. of Non-participating Systems	Percent of Systems <u>Not</u> Participating
1 - Choctaw, Clark & Washington	4	1	25%
4 - Dallas, Wilcox, Hale, Perry & Bibb	7	4	57%
7 - Calhoun, Cleburne	6	2	33%
8 - Morgan	3	2	67%
10 - Jefferson – Bessemer Division	4	0	-
10 - Jefferson – Birmingham Division	13	11	85%
13 - Mobile	5	0	-
15 - Montgomery	4	2	50%
19 - Elmore, Autauga & Chilton	4	0	-
24 - Pickens, Lamar, Fayette	3	0	-
25 - Winston, Marion	4	2	50%
26 - Russell	2	0	-
32 - Cullman	2	0	-
34 - Franklin	2	0	-
37 - Lee	3	0	-
40 - Clay, Coosa	2	1	50%
41 - Blount	2	1	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>37%</b>

## HFI FUNDING BY CIRCUIT

Circuit - Counties	Funding Year								
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 (Budgeted)	Total
1 - Choctaw, Clark & Washington	-	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$62,500	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$362,500</b>
2* - Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw	-	-	-	-	-	\$43,750	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$203,750</b>
4 - Dallas, Wilcox, Hale, Perry & Bibb	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$235,000</b>
5* - Macon, Tallapoosa, Chambers, Randolph	-	-	-	\$70,000	-	-	-	\$85,000	<b>\$155,000</b>
7 - Calhoun, Cleburne	\$56,250	\$56,250	\$56,250	\$70,000	\$64,167	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$537,917</b>
8 - Morgan	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$160,000</b>
10 - Jefferson – Bessemer Division	-	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$375,000</b>
10 - Jefferson – Birmingham Division	\$104,421	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$150,000	\$170,000	<b>\$789,421</b>
13 - Mobile	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$150,000	\$170,000	<b>\$320,000</b>
15 - Montgomery	\$30,000	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$405,000</b>
16* - Etowah	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$85,000	<b>\$85,000</b>
19 - Elmore, Autauga & Chilton	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$465,000</b>
20** - Henry, Houston	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$85,000	<b>\$85,000</b>
24 - Pickens, Lamar, Fayette	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$235,000</b>
25 - Winston, Marion	-	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$375,000</b>
26 - Russell	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$525,000</b>
32 - Cullman	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$525,000</b>
34 - Franklin	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$235,000</b>
35* - Monroe, Conecuh	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$160,000</b>
37 - Lee	-	-	-	-	-	\$68,750	\$62,500	\$85,000	<b>\$216,250</b>
40 - Clay, Coosa	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$160,000</b>
41 - Blount	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	<b>\$235,000</b>
	<b>\$320,671</b>	<b>\$261,250</b>	<b>\$261,250</b>	<b>\$700,000</b>	<b>\$624,167</b>	<b>\$1,075,000</b>	<b>\$1,562,500</b>	<b>\$2,040,000</b>	<b>\$6,844,838</b>
* Local Unit not operating as of this evaluation.									
**Circuit 20 was allocated \$85,000 in 2024 but has since withdrawn from the program.									

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# RESPONSE FROM VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA SOUTHEAST



## **HELPING FAMILIES INITIATIVE**

Better Futures for Students, Families, and Communities

*Volunteers of America Southeast's Response to the  
Alabama Commission on the Evaluation of Services (ACES) Report  
on the Helping Families Initiative*

March 15, 2024

John M. Tyson, Jr.  
Director, State Support Team  
Helping Families Initiative  
[jtyson@hfialabama.com](mailto:jtyson@hfialabama.com)  
251.533.1621

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***Volunteers of America Southeast, Inc.'s Response to the  
Alabama Commission on the Evaluation of Services (ACES) Report  
on the Helping Families Initiative Evaluation***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The work of the Helping Families Initiative is authorized by Alabama law. It is both a crime fighting tool and a means to help improve education. HFI is not a cookie-cutter approach where one size fits all. Thus, all references to *inconsistencies* and *lack of fidelity* asserted in the ACES report should be discarded in that the program is designed to give local district attorneys and school system administrators the flexibility they need to comport with local policies, local resources, and local needs.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this document is to provide clarification and context to the ACES report on the Helping Families Initiative (HFI).

The Mandatory School Attendance Act of Alabama, Title 16-28-1 et seq., is the foundational legislation requiring the enrollment, attendance, and good behavior of Alabama's children in their schools. First enacted in 1927, this Act has been amended through the years to both lower and increase the age of the students that must comply. Other provisions in this statute require attendance and good behavior if a student is enrolled in school no matter the student's age. This statute imposes juvenile sanctions upon students, and criminal sanctions on parents or guardians, principals, and superintendents for certain failures to comply with the statute.

The Mandatory School Attendance Act of Alabama instructs district attorneys to "vigorously enforce the Act." This Act is the only statute in Alabama that contains this mandate. This Act is the legal authority for Alabama's district attorneys to implement the Helping Families Initiative.

The Helping Families Initiative is a crime prevention program offered by Volunteers of America Southeast. HFI has been in continuous operation since in Alabama since it began in 2003. This program brought together law enforcement, social services, and school system administrators to design, pilot, and implement the program.

The theoretical foundations of HFI are:

- Early Identification and Intervention, Developmental Pathways
- Problem Identification and Intervention Based on Family Systems Theory
- Wraparound Services/Case Management
- The Authority of the District Attorney

HFI then identified the best practices found in the literature for each of the theoretical foundations of the program.

HFI has been endorsed nationally by members of the Carnegie Foundation, the John Hopkins University — Everyone Graduates Center, and Safe & Civil Schools. In addition, HFI has presented its program to the Carnegie Foundation, US Department of Education, The Hamilton Fish Institute, the National Association of School Nurses, and the National Association of District Attorneys.

HFI has proven to be effective in all parts of Alabama. Currently, twenty-one of Alabama's forty-two district attorneys are either implementing the program or are about to begin. Seventeen of these twenty-one district attorneys have the program established in their circuits. Four of these 21 district attorneys have signed enabling MOUs and are expected to begin operations during Fiscal Year 2024. There are no plans to expand into additional district attorney offices as was explained during the evaluation. However, the District Attorney of the 27<sup>th</sup> Circuit (Marshall County) contacted HFI on March 14, 2024, about going forward with the program.

While HFI appreciates the work of the ACES Commission and agrees with many of its recommendations, it is necessary to correct fundamental misunderstandings about the program and to offer additional explanations and context to present a more accurate and comprehensive picture. For example, none of the 21 district attorneys who either currently implement HFI or have signed MOUs are listed in the Acknowledgments. While HFI is aware of two district attorneys who may have been interviewed, these two program sites (Circuits 35 and 13) have programs that have not yet been fully implemented. Further, ACES did not speak to the district attorneys who ARE engaged in the program. One result of this approach is that ACES findings are skewed to preconceived conclusions.

ACES interviewed and collected data from district attorneys who do not participate in the program and thus are unfamiliar with the operational processes and other program details. ACES interview questions and responses from the non-participating district attorneys have not been shared with HFI.

## **What the ACES Report Does Not Contain**

At the end of each school year, the State Support Team reviews program performance and develops a plan to address the identified challenges during the coming school year. Based on the result of this process, in October 2023 the State Support Team began an ambitious year-long program to address several areas of concern in our process. Included in this plan are goals and objectives related to:

- Data accessibility and case management
- Process consistency and documentation
- Evaluation of available data to develop better quantitative measures
- Implement, compile, and monitor the data and the procedure for qualitative evaluation (North Carolina Family Assessment Scale Intake/Closure comparison)
- A structured case officer supervision program

The plan to address these areas of concern is already in development and has been since June 2023 – many months prior to our contact with the ACES Team. Implementation began with the

Fall Training Conference in November 2023 and will continue at the Spring training conference in April 2024 with emphasis on data management and accessibility, documentation, and process consistency. The remaining topics will be addressed throughout the year as additions to the regularly scheduled semi-monthly staff meetings plus special virtual training programs and in person conferences. The schedule for these subsequent sessions is currently in development.

These areas of concern and internal goals and objectives were communicated to the ACES team during the evaluation but are not acknowledged or even mentioned in the ACES report

## HFI RESPONSES

ACES Page 1 Helping Families Initiative

Over time, chronic absenteeism became another focus of the program's intervention.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***The language on page 1 of the ACES report is misleading. The focus of HFI's work is not chronic absenteeism per se, rather our work is (1) improved attendance in school and (2) improved behavior. While HFI recognizes the ancillary benefits of improved grades, safety and security, and other related benefits, HFI also recognizes the multi-variate issues at play. HFI has not stated that these additional benefits are manifest within the HFI program. See footnote 1 below.***

***HFI agrees that these desirable benefits are likely outcomes and are reasons to go forward with HFI. While it is difficult to measure these additional outcomes one empirical HFI study found significant correlation among grades, unexcused absences, suspensions, and school infractions<sup>1</sup>***

***Specific examples of HFI's work to increase attendance and improve student behavior are found throughout the HFI publications provided to ACES.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that HFI has played a part in overall school improvement and, in some cases, school culture.***

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<sup>1</sup> HFI previously documented this fact on page 220 in *Helping Families Initiative: Intervening with High-Risk students through a Community, School, and District Attorney Partnership*. Turner, Lisa A., Powell, Ashley, E., Langhinrichsen-Rohling Jennifer, and Carson, Jayne. *Child Adolsec Soc Work J* (2009) 26:209-223 DOI 10.1007/s10560-009-0167-z.

<sup>2</sup> Helping Alabama's Education Laws Benefit Everyone. December 5, 2023

## ACES Page 2 Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

HFI receives funding from the state through Education Trust Fund appropriations to administer the program with the intent to reduce chronic absenteeism....

### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***The language on page 2 — to reduce chronic absenteeism — is too far reaching. HFI’s objective is, in part, to reduce student absences. The phrase “chronic absenteeism” did not become popular until a dozen or more years after HFI began in 2003.***

***HFI agrees that another objective is to reduce the frequency of inappropriate student behavior.***

Through the fieldwork phase of this evaluation, it was revealed that a lack of accountability is a serious issue with this program. [There are] ...issues with accountability through subsections aligning accountability with fidelity, effectiveness, and efficiency.

### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI disagrees that there is a serious lack of accountability. HFI operates within the context of “local control”, that is accountability through elected local officials and community agencies. Accountability and fidelity as defined in the ACES report are confused with the notion of customization of program functions within each circuit. For example, all HFI field staff are employees of the district attorney and are accountable to that elected official. While there are local variations, all HFI programs are based on a core model or design.***

***HFI must work within local school board policies and regulations. While HFI does make recommendations and is a resource to the community, HFI do not presume to instruct local communities on the manner of implementation for all aspects of its program.***

***One of HFI’s great strengths is that HFI honors the history of Alabama’s local control as established by the Alabama Constitution and Alabama laws. The most recent evidence of the importance of local control can be found in the current legislation regarding school choice wherein parents are given the resources necessary to help fund their choice of where their children will be educated.***



## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

*The Governor and the legislature should consider:*

- Conducting an impact evaluation to study the impact of HFI on intended outcomes.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***As previously stated, the focus of HFI's intervention is improved attendance in school and improved behavior in school. Evaluation metrics and other rubrics to be used in any future study to determine program impact should involve HFI staff in the design of the study to ensure proper data collection mechanisms and valid and reliable conclusions.***

- Discontinuing expansion efforts to new circuits until an impact evaluation is completed.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***The state support team has previously informed the ACES staff of our intent to limit the adding of new judicial circuits. Rather, it is HFI's intent to consolidate the work in the circuits where the program is already established. This includes the four circuits where enabling MOUs to have been signed, but the program has not yet been implemented. HFI will not actively recruit new district attorneys. However, HFI will respond to inquiries from district attorneys who wish to go forward with the program.***

- Capping administrative expenses for both Volunteers of America Southeast and the State Support Team at 15% collectively.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***If implemented, this recommendation will cripple the HFI program.***

***The recommendation and discussion of administrative costs appears throughout the report. To lump together Indirect Costs and State Support Team costs is at best a fundamental misunderstanding. While the State Support Team may have some administrative duties, those duties are separate and apart from Indirect Costs as explained and repeated in HFI's responses.***

***HFI States: "Indirect costs represent the expenses of doing business that are not readily identified with a particular grant, contract, project function or activity, but are necessary for the general operation of the organization and the conduct of activities it performs."<sup>3</sup>***

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<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Education. Office of the Chief Financial Officer.  
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocfo/intro.html#:~:text=Indirect%20costs%20represent%20the%20expenses,conduct%20of%20activities%20it%20performs.>

*It is important to note the budgeted difference between indirect administrative expenses (VOASE @ 10.5%) and direct program costs (State Support Team @ 14.5%).<sup>4</sup>*

*It is important to note that Charity Watch, billed as America's most independent, assertive charity watchdog, reserves its "Highly Efficient Rating" for organizations that spend less than 25% of their budget on overhead (Indirect Costs).<sup>5</sup>*

*Indirect Costs (sometimes known as Management and General (M&G) expenses include:*

- *Executive Leadership*
- *Accounting (accounts payable, accounts receivable, invoicing, preparation of financials and reporting)*
- *Human Resources and Personnel Management (e.g., recruitment, on-boarding, benefit administration payroll management, performance evaluation/training, etc.)*
- *Legal Services*
- *Liability Insurance*
- *Office Management*
- *Auditing*
- *Board Governance and Communications*
- *Facilities*

*Funds allocated to Volunteers of America Southeast are indirect costs (IC), also known as facilities and administrative costs. These expenditures are defined as those costs that are incurred for common or joint objectives and therefore cannot be identified readily and specifically with a particular sponsored project, an instructional activity, or any other institutional activity.*

*Funds allocated to the State Support Team are directly related to providing program services to Case Officers and District Attorneys. These services include, for example, direct training for HFI tools such as the North Carolina Family Assessment, Case Management training, Motivational Interviewing Skills for Case Officers, and Strategies for working with local school districts.*

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<sup>4</sup> See January 19, 2024, letter to Savana Griffin that details the analysis of VOASE Indirect Costs. On file in the ACES Office and the Office of the HFI Director.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.charitywatch.org/our-charity-rating-process>

- Capping Volunteers of America Southeast and the State Support Team’s total accumulated surplus of state funds at 10% of the annual appropriation.

*HFI has been very conservative in its use of state funds. While state funds have been allocated to Circuits and State Support Team funds held for program development (e.g., statewide electronic exchange of data with the Alabama State Department of Education and statewide case management system), no funds have been expended beyond the proper scope of the program.*

*HFI has definite plans for the use of the holdover funds. The actual specifics of how much HFI spends in distributions of these funds to circuits as direct costs cannot be made final until the Legislature and the Governor make decisions on the budget for Fiscal Year 2025. HFI must be very careful not to overcommit Case Officer Units and continue our practice of treating every circuit the same.*

***ALLOCATION DISRIBUTION TO CIRCUITS AND DIRECT COSTS***

*HFI’s current itemized plan provides:*

<i>1. 20 new Case Officers hired and trained during last Quarter of FY 2024</i>	<i>\$450,000</i>
<i>2. New Case Management system</i>	<i>75,000</i>
<i>3. New Business Plan for HFI</i>	<i>50,000</i>
<i>4. New State Support Team Members</i>	<i><u>75,000</u></i>
<b><i>TOTAL</i></b>	<b><i>\$650,000</i></b>

*Further, HFI believes that if this recommendation is made for a single agency, it should be for all state agencies that carry forward funds, if at all. There is no justifiable reason to single out HFI.*

- Creating a universal code of conduct for attendance and behavior in PreK-12 schools.

*While HFI agrees with this recommendation, it is important to note that this recommendation must be authorized by statute and implemented by the Alabama State Board of Education, State*

*Department of Education, and local school districts. This recommendation is beyond the scope and authority of the Helping Families Initiative.*

*The Helping Families Initiative should:*

- Work with school systems to adopt a universal code of conduct.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*While HFI agrees with this recommendation, it is important to note that this recommendation must be implemented by the Alabama State Board of Education, the Alabama State Department of Education, and local school districts. This recommendation is beyond the scope and authority of the Helping Families Initiative.*

- Upgrade the case management system to include tracking and monitoring of program components.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*This recommendation has been in progress for over three years. Our initial meeting on this topic and the development of an electronic data exchange was in September 2020. It is interesting to note that the Alabama Department of Education provided to HFI the documentation for effecting the electronic exchange of data on March 6, 2024, after ACES concluded its work. HFI is evaluating the documentation for the exchange of data now.*

- Develop standard operating procedures for the case management system and require Local Units to use the system in accordance with the standard operating procedures.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*The case management system under development with the Alabama State Department of Education is based on state parameters and is designed to work with all Alabama school districts and district attorney offices.*

- Create a structure of trainings and retraining for noncompliant Local Units to enforce compliance.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*For all Local Units, HFI already has in place an already established schedule of training that includes onboarding, professional development, and mentoring targeted toward Team Leaders, Case Officers, and State Support Team members. In addition, HFI conducts monthly Zoom meetings wherein each Local Unit reports on its progress and activities. HFI also conducts on site-visits to*

*assess firsthand HFI operations. HFI also has access to the Justice Clearinghouse.<sup>6</sup> This online resource helps justice professionals stay on top of the trends, best practices, and success stories in their industry through articles, webinars, and training.*

*Further, HFI conducts two statewide training conferences each year. These trainings focus on HFI processes, updates on contemporary research, and emerging state needs (e.g., pandemic and remote instruction).*

*Retraining for noncompliant Local Units is conducted on an ad hoc basis with those personnel whose behaviors self-identify areas of need. Retraining topics have included, for example, the timely submission of monthly reports and use of the case management system.*

*In extreme cases where noncompliant units have failed to meet HFI standards, HFI has recommended termination of employees and termination of the program entirely in the Circuit.*

*HFI recognizes the continuing need for professional staff development for all personnel.*

*In addition, HFI believes that the implementation of the new case management database will help Local Units become even more compliant.*

- Discontinue funding for repeated non-compliance.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*HFI agrees with this recommendation and, in fact, HFI terminated operations in a Circuit where the program standards were not met. HFI has also recommended termination of Case Officers who have repeatedly failed to meet HFI standards.*

- Establish performance metrics that align with intended outcomes.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*As stated previously, the focus of HFI's intervention is improved attendance in school and improved behavior. HFI will employ evaluation metrics and other rubrics to be used in any future study to ensure proper data collection mechanisms and valid and reliable conclusions.*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.justiceclearinghouse.com>

*It is the intent of HFI to have the ability to document individual student attendance and behavior with the implementation of the new case management system currently under development with the Alabama Department of Education.*

*It should be noted that the Alabama Department of Education recently released a Request for Proposals to possibly replace the existing statewide learning management system (Powerschool). Further efforts in this area may be affected pending the outcome of this process.*

- Create rigorous participant tracking, monitoring, and compliance within the case management system.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*This recommendation has been in progress for over three years. Moreover, for the past year HFI has been developing a comprehensive plan of action to review and revise all aspects of HFI activities.*

*It is the intent of HFI to have the ability to document individual student attendance and behavior with the implementation of the new case management system currently under development with the Alabama Department of Education.*

*It should be noted that the Alabama Department of Education recently released a Request for Proposals to possibly replace the existing statewide learning management system (Powerschool). Further efforts in this area may be affected pending the outcome of this process.*

- Establish quality control procedures for case management use.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*This recommendation has been in progress for over three years. Our initial meeting on this topic and the development of an electronic data exchange was in September 2020. It is interesting to note that the Alabama Department of Education provided to HFI the documentation for effecting the electronic exchange of data only recently (March 6, 2024).*

*HFI is in the process of evaluating the electronic data exchange, creating the required programming, procedures within the HFI case management system, and assessing its overall performance. When these steps have been completed quality control procedures will be implemented.*

- Cap circuit funding at the base amount until a targeted funding model is created.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI already has a funding model that recognizes a practical ratio for case officers needed to student enrollment. This ratio of one case officer for every 6,000 students has proven to be a workable solution when coupled with additional cases officers based on geographic areas to be served. That is, more urban circuits with fewer counties in their jurisdictions may rely more heavily on the 6,000 students to one case office model. However, more sparsely populated circuits that service multiple counties will require additional case officers because of the additional geography to be traversed. Circuit with six or more case officers may also be allocated a Supervisor unit.***

***Capping Circuit funding is not recommended for either State or local funders.***

- Require monthly itemized invoicing that includes all HFI related expenditures, regardless of revenue source.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***A better practice is for HFI make quarterly payments to Circuits as funds are received from the State. HFI will require that participating district attorneys provide monthly detailed statements of accounts that include all HFI expenditures and income from all sources once each quarter.***

Set a startup funding amount where additional funding is not provided until Local Units have invoiced HFI for the full startup amount.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***A better practice is for HFI make quarterly payments to Circuits as funds are received from the State. HFI will require that participating district attorneys provide detailed statements of accounts that include all HFI expenditures and income from all sources.***

***This recommendation is moot given that HFI has indicated it does not expect to add new Circuits to the roster during FY 2024. HIF will, however, respond to requests from district attorneys who wish to go forward with the program.***

## ACES Page 4 Detailed Findings and Recommendations

In each of the six steps of the structured process, there are serious inconsistencies in operations. Triggering Event, page 4

### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI operates within the context of local school district policies. The report correctly points out that Triggering events for truancy range from three unexcused absences to ten unexcused absences. Because the triggering event is set by each school system, the trigger may differ even within the same judicial circuit. The differences in triggering events for truancy cannot be laid at the feet of HFI. Instead, the ACES report should recognize that without statewide definitions and policies regarding school district responses, no uniformity is possible for HFI or any other educational or law enforcement program.***

***HFI also believes that it is more useful to compare each participating Circuit with itself rather than with other Circuits. There are too many differences dictated by local control. Reports of success and failure will inform future decision makers on what is best in particular circuits.***

Engagement, page 5

Varied times of engagement across the state create inconsistencies which limit fidelity.

### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI disagrees that varied times of engagement create inconsistencies that limit fidelity. On the contrary, one of the strengths of the Helping Families Initiative is its ability to adapt to local institutions. School districts rightfully have a role and a responsibility to curb student absences. These efforts are not in conflict with HFI and in no way impede HFI's fidelity. Instead, HFI complements local efforts and provides laser like intervention when needed. For example, once the Local Unit establishes when HFI should become involved, the program then makes every effort to reinforce or enhance previous school-based efforts.***

***The ACES report itself admits that “letters and engagements from the District Attorney’s offices held more weight with families and students.”<sup>7</sup>***

Assign Case Officer and Conduct Family Assessment, page 5

Incomplete or partial use of the family assessment limits the usefulness of the tool therefore impacting both the fidelity and effectiveness of the program.

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<sup>7</sup> ACES Report, p.8.



***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI conducts family assessments and assigns case officers to families only when warranted. This determination is made after initial efforts to curb student absences have not been successful or if the nature of the student's behavior is such that an immediate intervention is needed.***

***For example, if a student continues to be absent even after initial letters from the district attorney to the family have been sent, then a case officer is assigned to the family and further actions such as a home visit may occur. At this point determinations as to which additional actions should be taken are made.***

***More timely documentation of family assessments will be possible after the new case management system is installed.***

Interagency Team: Individualized Intervention Plan, page 5

Although a critical component of the program, the proper use of the interagency team has been foregone.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***According to the ACES report, about half of the Local Units operate as planned. The ACES team was made aware of this during preliminary interviews with the State Support Team. Further, site visits and other communications with Local Units by the State Support Team indicate that the issue is more one of proper documentation rather than failure to comply. Efforts are underway to ensure that all Local Units properly document their work in this important area.***

Referrals, page 5

The non-adherence to the other program components creates potential discrepancies in the selection and effectiveness of referrals.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI agrees with the ACES report in that referrals can become subjective. However, a subject analysis of family needs is not limited to only the results of data collection instruments.***

***While these instruments are valuable and allow case officers to view families through a structured lens, they are not the only inputs to case officers' recommendations. This is particularly true for families in need of immediate assistance due to trauma precipitated by a variety of factors — alcoholism, family abuse, drugs, and other trauma related factors.***

***HFI case officers have seen these factors at work in families that need immediate assistance where there is no time for a more structured approach.***

Follow-up Family Assessment, page 6

Without the full completion of the family assessment, it cannot be determined if the program is reducing the associated risk factors for participants.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI agrees with the ACES report follow-up assessments would be an ideal standard to determine the reduction of risk factors. There are, however, more clear and objective data that can indicate if associated risk factors have been mitigated.***

***For example, if students who self-identified by excessive absences showed a marked improvement in school attendance after participating in the HFI program, then it is reasonable to conclude that HFI played a role in the change of student and family behavior. Similarly, students whose poor behavior at school indicated a need for intervention by HFI can be assessed by looking at a reduced incidence of maladaptive behavior.***

ACES Page 6 Non-Participating District Attorneys

The report states on page 6: “ACES interviewed district attorneys who are not currently participating in HFI. One of the top reasons for non- participation was existing interventions already in place, meaning the program would become duplicative in their circuit.”

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***Efforts should also have been directed toward interviewing district attorneys who are currently participating in the program. Interviews with district attorneys would have yielded substantive support and endorsement of the HFI program. For example, most recently District Attorney Scott Anderson of Morgan County discussed HFI in depth on the DA’s YouTube channel (<https://1819news.com/news/item/morgan-county-da-scott-anderson-taking-a-new-approach-to-truancy-and-bad-conduct-in-schools>).***

***In addition, testimonials from currently participating district attorneys may be found in Mobile (Circuit 13)<sup>8</sup> and Birmingham (Circuit 10 Birmingham Division).<sup>9</sup> HFI believes that the effectiveness of the program is best expressed by the practitioners who are involved. Please see the HFI web site: <https://hfiAlabama.com/digital-scrapbook>***

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<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/859802496/ed706c8f95>

<sup>9</sup> <https://vimeo.com/859762707/63d94130f9>

ACES Page 6 Structural Flaws

Local Units are not accountable to the State Support Team.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI disagrees with this statement. The State Support Team has, in fact, recommended termination of employees and termination of the program entirely in the Circuits where noncompliant units have failed to meet HFI standards.***

***The State Support Team also routinely meets with Local Units on an individual basis to point out problematic issues and to resolve these issues before they have a negative impact on the program.***

***In addition, Local Units participate in twice monthly remote meetings, attend training conferences planned and led by State Support Team staff, and engage with State Support Team personnel during on site visits. Additional accountability measures include routine telephone and email follow up of identified issues and needs.***

**There are structural flaws with expansion of the program.** Local Units are housed within a judicial circuit's district attorney's office. The stated reasoning for this organizational structure is two-fold:

1. The program model is built on the premise of connecting judicial institutions with schools and community resources to address the issues.
2. Under Alabama law, "[t]he district attorney shall vigorously enforce [*the written policy on school behavior adopted by the local board of education*] to ensure proper conduct and required attendance by any child enrolled in public school."

This means the HFI program is operated from within the division responsible for *enforcement* instead of the division responsible for *operating*, i.e., the school system.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***The ACES statement that the program model is built on the premise of connecting judicial institutions with school and community resources indicates a profound misunderstanding of HFI and the workings of state government. In fact, if a student or family becomes engaged with the judicial system while participating with HFI, then that student and family become ineligible to participate in the program. One of HFI's goals is to keep students and families out of the adult and juvenile justice systems.***

***ACES does not appear to understand that district attorneys are part of the Executive branch of government, not the Judicial branch.***

*This finding that there are structural flaws with expansion of the program is also a fundamental misunderstanding of the HFI model. Rather than a structural flaw, the enforcement of the Mandatory School Attendance Act by the District Attorney is a structural advantage.*

*It appears that the ACES report would leave the solution to the problems of student absences and bad behavior to the school system (the division responsible for operating). This statement suggests that no institution outside of a school system can make a meaningful contribution to these issues. This recommendation is fundamentally wrong.*

*If school systems alone could resolve these issues, they would have done so 30 or 40 years ago. Supporting and corrective actions are far beyond the scope and abilities of local school districts. The structure of educational systems is to support the function of delivering instruction and related social and cultural matters. Simply put, school districts are not designed to intervene or provide services to families whose needs exceed the capabilities of typical school system educational services.*

*The office of the District Attorney*

- *emphasizes the importance of Alabama's mandatory attendance law*

*The report itself correctly states "... school systems noted that letters and engagements from the District Attorney's offices held more weight with families and students."*
- *determines areas of need for families and, in some cases, neighborhoods*
- *serves as a catalyst to convene community resources to address identified family issues and problems through the model of the interagency team*

*Despite variations within local school system policies (e.g., number of absences to trigger intervention, the nature of the intervention, or even the agency that provides the intervention) HFI must operate within existing school policy and should not clash with local school or even juvenile court policies. Rather than viewing these variations as a structural flaw, HFI views its flexibility of the program as a structural strength that operates within the context of local needs, resources, and policies.*

***It is important to note that HFI through the District Attorney does not provide direct services to families. Rather, HFI brings together community agencies with families engaged with HFI.***

#### ACES Page 7 Recruiting District Attorneys Leads to Inconsistency

Because individual school systems set their own policies, recruiting district attorneys to create and operate a policy leads to inconsistent delivery across the state.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***Rather than viewing HFI as operating “a policy [that] leads to inconsistent delivery,” HFI views its work as customizing its process to meet the context of the local communities in which HFI operates. HFI believes that while striving toward core consistency is beneficial, there is no cookie-cutter approach that would be effective either operationally or structurally. That is, to impose a statewide workflow process for Alabama’s diverse communities with their varying resources, demographics, and policies would be ineffective at best and viewed as intrusion at worst.***

***The notion of customizing HFI to local needs is best stated by recently elected District Attorney Jeffrey Barksdale of Franklin County. His recent statement, “After positive discussions with the superintendents for the Franklin County and Russellville City school systems, our office applied for the funds necessary to implement a local version of the program.”<sup>10</sup>***

***It is critical to note the importance of local implementation — or as District Attorney Barksdale says, “local version” — that occurs in the context of local school policies, community mores, and other local factors.***

#### ACES Page 7 Non-participating School Systems

##### ***Non-participating School Systems***

HFI reports they are in 18 judicial circuits, but the program only has operating partnerships with 44 school systems out of the 70 school systems in those participating circuits.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***HFI has signed MOUs with 21 district attorneys. HFI believes that a measured approach to growth is in the best interest of all participating partners (school systems, district attorneys, and communities). Participation in HFI is voluntary on the part of the school systems. Because of the current level of***

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<sup>10</sup> Addendum to the response: *Supporting Students’ Futures – District attorney’s office implements Helping Families Initiative.*

*funding for HFI, it is often necessary for local school districts to supplement Local Units. While providing these resources has not been problematic for some school districts (Circuit 10 Birmingham Division or Circuit 13 Mobile), funds are simply not available in other school systems. This disparity is one factor that limits the growth of HFI and its services to schools and communities.*

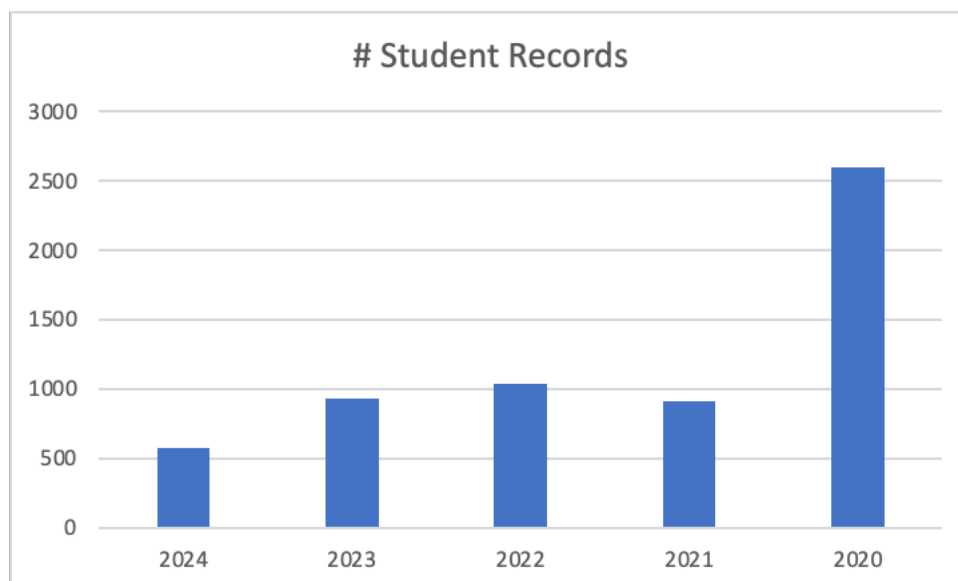
*Apparently, the ACES report agrees with HFI's request to fully fund the existing HFI Circuits. The request to fully fund the existing HFI circuits will remove fiscal obstacles that less wealthy school districts face and will lead to a more fully participating number of school systems. HFI treats all school systems and Circuits the same — same student ratio to Case Officers, same ratio of supervisors to case officers, and the number of case officers required to serve large geographic Circuits. This distribution of resources model again mirrors the Minimum Program of the Education Trust Fund in that all participating circuits are treated the same.*

ACES Page 8 Is the program effective at achieving intended outcomes?  
Individual participants' outcomes are not tracked.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

- *In the calendar year 2023 HFI collected data on 933 students.*
- *So far in 2024 HFI has collected data on 577 students.*
- *Data has been collected for 2,987 students during the period 2020-2024.*
- *During this period 714 family assessments were conducted.*
- *Over 12,000 journal entries have been made to track the work done with the families engaged with HFI.*

Figure 1 Student Records in Case Management System



**Figure 1. Student Records in Case Management System displays the number of student records created for the past five years.**

***The Alabama Department of Education has not had until recently the ability to share data regarding student attendance or behavior. As previously stated, HFI has been working with the Department for the past three years to develop a system that will seamlessly allow for the sharing of these data. The Alabama Department of Education provided to HFI the documentation for effecting the electronic exchange of data on March 6, 2024, after ACES concluded its work.***

***It is important to note that, with few exceptions, HFI case officers have entered student data manually due to these limitations.***

ACES Page 9 Current Use of Chronic Absenteeism

Data collection by both the State Support Team and the Local Units are self-reported, inaccurate, and unverified.

The current use of chronic absenteeism and self-reported, inaccurate, and unverified monthly reporting is misleading.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***This language represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the role that HFI plays in the enforcement of Alabama’s Mandatory Attendance Law. The focus of HFI’s work is not chronic absenteeism per se, rather our work is (1) improved attendance in school and (2) improved behavior.***

*The ACES report seems to take issue with the methodology of self-reported data. Scholars and researchers take a broader view.*

*In their work Handbook of Research Methods in Personality Psychology, Robins, Fraley, et al. ask the question: If you want to know what Waldo is like, why not just ask him?<sup>11</sup>*

*With specific reference to law enforcement, Thornberry and Krohn state: The self-report technique is one of three major ways of measuring involvement in delinquent and criminal behavior.<sup>12</sup>*

*In addition, as previously stated in this response, HFI has worked for over three years to create a system that yields more objective data. Our initial meeting on this topic and the development of an electronic data exchange was in September 2020. HFI received the documentation for effecting the electronic exchange of data on March 6, 2024, after ACES concluded its work. HFI is currently developing the new system. This new system will greatly enhance HFI's reporting and will yield more independent data*

ACES Page 9 Is the program efficiently using state resources?

Is the program efficiently using state resources? ...Half of the Local Units funded in FY23 received substantial investments from sources outside of HFI state funding.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*The current level of funding for HFI permits support for only one case officer for each Circuit, in most circumstances. Circuits with extraordinarily high enrollments (Circuit 10 Birmingham Division and Circuit 13 Mobile) are provided two case officer units. In both circuits, local school systems have made significant contributions to the program that require a Case Officer unit to serve as a supervisor.*

*The ACES report states: Local Units wanting to expand the program beyond the single case officer are seeking funding from the community by way of county commissions, local boards of education, federal Title IV funding, and non-profit organizations. Half of the Local Units funded in FY23 received substantial investments from sources outside of HFI state funding.*

*The fact that “half of Local Units ... received substantial investments from sources outside of HFI state funding” speaks to the extraordinary support that HFI has seen from its participating partners. Simply put, school systems and other community*

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<sup>11</sup> <https://scholar.google.cofootm/citations?user=BvBdIQUAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cnmcs-plcng/cn34984-v4-33-83-eng.pdf>



*agencies invest in HFI because they believe that the program is effective, efficient, and is beneficial to its students and families.*

*HFI also has an impact on the efficient use of state resources beyond the funding of the program itself. For example, the research conducted by the Russell County Schools indicated an improvement in the number of absences during the school year. The improvements amounted to 2% of the total number of absences during the school year.*

*For the two years examined in this research the budget impact for that school system was over \$1M. This work was accomplished with a total investment of \$60K/year.*

*The student enrollment of the Russell County Schools represents 0.5% of Alabama's student population. If extrapolated to statewide, these figures represent a potential recovery and more efficient use of over \$200M.*

*Another example of HFI's potential impact on resource efficiency is found in the work of the Alliance for Excellent Education. That report demonstrated that a 5% increase in the male graduation rate would yield crime related savings of \$367M for Alabama. This study also stated an increase in annual additional earnings for the graduates of \$16M for a total of \$383M.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that these figures were calculated in 2013. In today's dollars that amount would be over \$510M<sup>14</sup>*

ACES Page 10 HFI's Current Funding Model

**HFI's current funding model is neither diverse nor adaptable.** Since being funded by the state, HFI has allocated a base amount per Local Unit, with very few exceptions.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*Funding for Local Units and Jurisdictions is congruent with Alabama's educational formula funding for teacher and administrative units. Case Officer Units is a parallel construct to Teacher Units found in Alabama's Education Budget. Educational Teacher Units are allocated based on average daily membership during the first 45 days of the school year. HFI Case Officer Units are based on one case officer for every 6,000 students.*

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<sup>13</sup> *Saving Futures, Saving Dollars: The Impact of Education on Crime Reduction and Earnings.* Alliance for Education. September 2013.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/2013>

*HFI realizes that not every Circuit is fully staffed. HFI believes that planned growth and implementation is a better strategy. All Circuits are treated equally. A Circuit with fewer resources receives the same base funding as Circuits and school districts with more resources.*

*Just as the Education Trust Fund provides each school district with a Minimum Program, HFI follows that model. Local contributions, if available are, in fact, a strength of the funding model. Local funding in addition to State funding is the very definition of a diverse funding model*

ACES Page 10 Proposed Funding Formula

**The proposed funding formula is not based on needs or operational status.**

Rather than accounting for actual operations, actual students served, or the needs and risks of each locality, it relies on a flat distribution based on the total number of students enrolled in a participating circuit.

***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*Again, funding for Local Units and Jurisdictions mirrors Alabama's formula funding for teacher and administrative units. Case Officer Units is a parallel construct to Teacher Units found in Alabama's Education Budget. Educational Teacher Units are allocated based on average daily membership during the first 45 days of the school year. HFI Case Officer Units are based on one case officer for every 6,000 students.*

*As additional Case Officer Units are made available, more services can be delivered and HFI can have a greater impact working in cooperation with local school districts. The FY25 budget simply asks for full funding of the HFI model, just as school districts have funding based on their average daily membership.*

*HFI takes issue with the notion that the proposed funding formula is not based on needs or operational status.*

*The funding of one case officer for each Circuit is minimal. The HFI funding request for FY25 is based on measured growth, needs of local Circuits, student enrollment (one case officer for every 6,000 students), the geography of the Circuit, and Supervisor units. As resources for HFI increase — from either State or local funding — additional Case Officer allocations may be assigned on a more granular basis.*

*As previously stated, Circuits with more than six Case Officers can justify the addition of a supervisor. This ratio of six employees per*

*supervisor is a generally accepted span of control standard according to ICS Organizations.<sup>15</sup>*

*This approach renders moot the ACES report statement that HFI relies solely on a flat distribution based on only the number of students enrolled in a participating circuit. However, it should again be noted that the funding for school districts uses this exact 'flat distribution' model based on student enrollment and geography (e.g., additional allocation for student transportation in more rural districts).*

#### ACES Page 11 Local Units Funded

Of the Local Units funded in FY23:

- Three received funding of \$150,000 over two years while still not hiring a case officer until late in FY23.
- One received \$118,750 of funding over two years without ever hiring a case officer.
- One received the full \$75,000 startup funding without ever hiring a case officer.

These five Local Units (28% of all Local Units) are budgeted to receive the full \$85,000 funding in FY24. Collectively, these Local Units have funding surpluses totaling over \$538,000 through FY23 with an additional \$745,000 requested for FY25.

- Non-Operational Local Units...

#### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

*It is important to note that in each of these examples, although the funds were allocated, no funds were spent in error and all funds are accounted for. For example, in Circuit 2 the untimely death of the assistant attorney in charge of establishing the program interrupted the program's implementation.*

*HFI has in its 2024 plan of action to make quarterly payments to Circuits as funds are received from the State. HFI will require that participating district attorneys provide detailed statements of accounts that include all HFI expenditures and income from all sources.*

*The quarterly payments to Circuits and the data to be included in the statement of accounts will document all HFI expenditures and income from all sources must be approved by the VOASE Office of Finance.*

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ICS100.pdf>

## ACES Page 11 Administrative Expenses

Figure HFI's administrative expenses has averaged 29% a year since receiving state funding in FY17.

- HFI's administrative costs exceed 25%.

### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***It is again critical to note the basic misunderstanding in the difference between Indirect Administrative Costs (VOASE) and Direct Program Costs (State Support Team).***

***Funds allocated to Volunteers of America Southeast are indirect costs (IC), also known as facilities and administrative costs. These expenditures are defined as those costs that are incurred for common or joint objectives and therefore cannot be identified readily and specifically with a particular sponsored project, an instructional activity, or any other institutional activity.***

***Funds allocated to the State Support Team are Direct Costs related to providing program services to Local Units (Case Officers), and Circuits (District Attorney and staff). These services include, for example, direct training for HFI tools such as the North Carolina Family Assessment, Case Management training, Interviewing Skills for Case Officers, Strategies for working with local school districts.***

## ACES Page 13 Administrative Costs

**Rising administrative costs do not correspond with support or training for Local Units.**

Fewer Local Units are relying on the State Support Team and instead are looking to other Local Units for guidance and support. In multiple interviews, team leads and case officers referenced Circuit 19, in addition to other well-established circuits, as the primary source of training and support. Local Units are turning to each other for support, while the State Support Team is retaining state funds.

### ***[HFI RESPONSE]***

***This statement is a basic misunderstanding of the role of the State Support Team as it relates to training Local Units. Funds allocated to the State Support Team are Direct Costs related to providing program services to Local Units (Case Officers), and Circuits (District Attorney and staff). These Direct Costs should not be viewed as administrative costs.***

***Circuit 19 is a more mature site than many of the more newly chartered HFI sites. The State Support Team provided the case management training and developed the operating procedures with Circuit 19 for the past several years and has called on the Team Leader to conduct peer training. The State Support Team routinely***

*facilitates peer training using Circuit 19 as a model program. Peer training and mentoring is a planned and desirable outcome for the Helping Families Initiative, just as it is in many other professions and institutions.*

*In addition to facilitating peer training, the State Support Team conducts onboarding for newly hired and promoted employees. This two-and-a-half-day program includes:*

- *Legal issues*
- *Ethics and confidentiality*
- *Reporting requirements*
- *The HFI process*
- *Building an interagency team*
- *Establishing a working relationship with school systems*

*After completion of the onboarding, the employees receive additional training at selected sites and during the statewide in-person training conferences held twice each year. Collegiality and interdependence are encouraged throughout the training process.*

ACES Page 14 Recommendations

Cap circuit funding at the base amount until a targeted funding model is created.

*[HFI Response]*

*HFI already has a funding model. HFI proposes a measured approach to growth of the program. HFI's request for FY25 represents only full funding for existing Circuits and school systems. HFI believes that while it is commendable that local governmental and other agencies have chosen to contribute to HFI, it is unfair to those communities in Alabama that cannot afford even the most meager allocation of funds to support HFI or any other program beyond basic state funding.*

Create a targeted funding model.

*[HFI Response]*

*HFI already has a funding model that recognizes a practical ratio for case officers needed in relation to student enrollment. This ratio of one case officer for every 6,000 students has proven to be a workable solution when coupled with additional case officers based on geographic areas to be served. That is, more urban circuits with fewer counties in their jurisdictions may rely more heavily on the 6,000 students to one case office model. However, more sparsely populated circuits that service multiple counties will require additional case officers because of the additional geography to be traversed. In addition, a supervisor is provided is*

*provided to ensure an appropriate span of control for Circuits with extraordinarily large student enrollments that require a larger number of case officers.*

Require monthly itemized invoicing that includes all HFI related expenditures, regardless of revenue source.

*[HFI Response]*

*The previous practice of advancing program costs is moot in that all the participating district attorneys have already started or already have the funds necessary to begin operations.*

*A better practice is for HFI make quarterly payments to Circuits as funds are received from the State. HFI will require that participating district attorneys provide detailed statements of accounts that include all HFI expenditures and income from all sources.*

*The quarterly payments to Circuits and the data to be included in the statement of accounts will document all HFI expenditures and income from all sources. This documentation must be approved by the VOASE Office of Finance.*

Set a startup funding amount where additional funding is not provided until Local Units have invoiced HFI for the full startup amount.

*[HFI Response]*

*This recommendation is moot given that HFI has indicated it does not expect to add new Circuits to the roster during FY 2024. However, HFI will respond to inquiries from district attorneys who wish to go forward with the program*

*HFI will require that participating district attorneys provide detailed statements of accounts that include all HFI expenditures and income from all sources.*

## Addendum

### Franklin County — Supporting Students' Futures



From left: Assistant district attorney Fallyn Pharr, district attorney Jeff Barksdale and Helping Families Initiative director Mandy Cummings are establishing the HFI program to combat student truancy.

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS' FUTURES

### District attorney's office implements Helping Families Initiative

Story by **MARIA CAMP**

juveniles for delinquency and truancy. It functions as a partnership among a district attorney's office, local school systems and other community partners, including social services and faith-based organizations.

"After positive discussions with the superintendents for the Franklin County and Russellville City school systems, our office applied for the funds necessary to operate a local version of the program," Barksdale explained, noting the funding is provided entirely through an annual appropriation from the state legislature, thus not affecting any money from the local school system budgets.

"In making the decision to launch a program in Franklin County, I spoke to many other Alabama district attorneys who have had great success with their own HFI programs, and I also strongly felt that if there was funding available to assist local schools, I had a moral obligation to bring this money into our county," Barksdale added. "We have two wonderful, well-led school systems in Franklin County, and I want the district attorney's office to be as supportive as is possible to both as they prepare our students for the future."

Barksdale said Alabama law requires district attorneys to "vigorously enforce" school attendance laws, adding he believes that this program, along with the "hard work of the attendance officers and others in the local school systems" has already served to reduce the number of truancy petitions his office prosecutes.

"Ultimately, since studies show that excessive absences from school place children at risk of being either the victims or the perpetrators of crimes, my hope is that we will see a noticeable reduction in adult crime rates as a result of the HFI program," Barksdale added, explaining he appointed one of his office's current employees, Mandy Cummings, to serve as the full-time director of the local program.

"Mandy has a real heart for the work of the HFI program, and as a former Franklin County Schools employee, she is uniquely qualified to be its director," he said. "Mandy's many years working at East Franklin Junior High School prior to joining the district attorney's office in 2019 will be a great benefit to our local HFI program, not to mention the close personal relationships she has among the community partners we will be working with to help students stay out of the criminal justice system."

Cummings said students who have "excessive absences and discipline issues" at school are more likely to commit crimes or be involved in criminal activity when they become adults. "This program isn't just about perfect attendance or good grades, it's about understanding and identifying the underlying reasons why students are struggling," she added. "I have a passion for helping students reach their fullest potential and helping them make good decisions. When we started this program, I knew it was something I could pour my heart into."

The HFI program kicks in when a student registers three or more unexcused absences. "When there's a pattern of absences or discipline problems, there could be an underlying issue," Cummings explained. "The schools refer students to us that have three or more unexcused absences. We want to prevent them from being referred for 'early warning,' if possible, which is what happens after five unexcused absences. During the early warning process, the student and their family are required to attend a meeting at the courthouse. At this meeting, representatives from the district attorney's and juvenile probation office, along with school officials, discuss the consequences to parents and students of further unexcused absences and provide access to community support through the HFI program."

Franklin County assistant district attorney Fallyn Pharr said she thinks the program is going to be "great for helping kids out, to keep them from getting into the criminal justice system."

"At the beginning of the year, Joey Rushing and I went to every school in the county, including the Russellville City Schools, and we spoke to sixth through 12th grades. I spoke to the girls, and he spoke to the boys," Pharr said. "We talked about drugs, because that's an issue in our schools right now, and we talked about sexting - which I know is a touchy subject, but students need to understand the potential dangers and consequences - and we introduced HFI. It took us a good two months to get to every school."

Cummings said there are "a lot of moving parts" in the program, adding they're "just getting started."

"If we can prevent just one student from becoming a statistic of the criminal justice system, then it is worth it in my book," she added.

For more information about the Helping Families Initiative, visit <https://hfialabama.com>.

Franklin County's district attorney took on the role a little over a year ago, and he has wasted no time establishing a new program to benefit the county's students and families. Jeff Barksdale was elected DA Nov. 8, 2022, following his time as assistant district attorney; previous district attorney Joey Rushing decided not to seek re-election. Barksdale said the state director of the Helping Families Initiative contacted him to gauge his interest in implementing a version of the program in Franklin County before he was even sworn in to office.

HFI is a preventative program intended to decrease the number of prosecutions of

“After positive discussions with the superintendents for the Franklin County and Russellville City school systems, our office applied for the funds necessary to implement **a local version of the program.**”

*District Attorney Jeffrey Barksdale of Franklin County  
2024*





Graduate School of Education & Information Studies  
Moore Hall, Box 951521  
Los Angeles, California 90095-1521

May 26, 2016

John M. Tyson, Jr. | Executive Director  
Helping Families Initiative  
The University of Alabama  
Room 1108, Capital Hall  
Box 870372  
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487  
Phone | Mobile 251-533-1621  
[jmtyson@ua.edu](mailto:jmtyson@ua.edu)

Dear Mr. Tyson:

I am happy to send this letter that confirms my participation in the Helping Families Initiative. The work you and your colleagues have undertaken holds great promise to help families with at-risk youth make critical life choices. Truancy, chronic absenteeism, and maladaptive behavior are significant predictors of academic struggles. The work you propose will help youth and families mitigate these factors that incubate juvenile crime.

The problems exhibited by children who are engaged in the juvenile justice system are often symptomatic of deeper family problems. The Helping Families Initiative recognizes the fact that a comprehensive partnership between education, law enforcement, and other appropriate helping governmental agencies are essential to any juvenile justice reform plan. It is my belief that reform efforts must be comprehensive, coordinated, and collaborative.

The comprehensive nature of the reform plan ensures that all key stakeholders (e.g., district attorneys and school superintendents) are all on the same page working toward mutual goals. Coordination is required to facilitate effective communication amongst agencies, to share critical data, to avoid duplication of services, and to avoid gaps in services. I am hoping my work with diverse Networks and my history working with schools will aid you and your colleagues across the state of Alabama in this worthy endeavor.

I am excited by the collaborative nature of the Helping Families Initiative. No doubt your history will provide a social infrastructure that will provide support for a multi-faceted approach that balances agency priorities and ensures resources can be shared inter-institutionally while working toward shared goals and specific aims.

I am ready to use my expertise to help you create comprehensive reform plans that bring together the key agencies and institutions to focus on this ever-growing problem. I think you and your colleagues have the capacity and will to lead this reform effort in Alabama to create a data-driven, reliable and adaptable national model to help young people and their families.

Sincerely,

Louis M. Gomez  
Professor and MacArthur Chair in Digital Media Learning, UCLA  
Senior Fellow, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching



May 27, 2016

John M. Tyson, Jr. | Executive Director  
Helping Families Initiative  
The University of Alabama  
Room 1108, Capital Hall, Box 870372  
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487  
Mobile 251-533-1621; [jmtyson@ua.edu](mailto:jmtyson@ua.edu)

Dear Mr. Tyson:

Please accept this letter of support confirming my participation on the Advisory Board for the Helping Families Initiative. Your work to reform juvenile justice through partnerships among several sectors, education, law enforcement and family-centered agencies, is exemplary.

At the Everyone Graduate Center at Johns Hopkins University, we have for more than 10 years studied the characteristics of students who eventually drop out of high school — and significant numbers of high school dropouts enter the juvenile justice system or have indeed entered it before they left high school — by longitudinal analysis of national, state and district data bases. We can bring to your work research and analytic expertise.

It is evident that there are three prime indicators of potential dropout, beginning as early as sixth grade: absenteeism, behavior and course-passing. But it is not sufficient to identify indicators. If it is known how to spot students who are likely to get themselves into trouble, then strategies can be brought to bear early that help students change their ways. Marrying research with practice, we have experience with improvement efforts in low performing secondary schools across the country. The most relevant of these is *Getting To the Finish Line*, in which a U.S. Department of Education grant, enabled partnership with the Alabama State Department of Education and work in 20 of Alabama's lowest performing schools, rural and urban, spread across the state, on a dropout prevention effort specifically aimed at 9<sup>th</sup> graders (the grade level with the most severe challenges in almost every school in the country).

In keeping more students on track for graduation and out of the justice system, we have learned that schools often cannot do this work alone, and that multiple partners are needed to bring in the assistance that supports students, their families and communities in changing not only their behavior but their underlying thinking. The Helping Families Initiative and your comprehensive reform plan brings into play key elements on the community side of the equation that so often are missing and much-needed, and has the capacity and expertise to lead the reform effort in Alabama to create a data driven replicable national model for others to adapt to their local environments.

I and the Everyone Graduates Center are delighted to work with you as the initiative develops further, in a consulting or coaching capacity and for research analytics.

Sincerely,

Joanna H. Fox, Deputy Director  
Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University  
2701 N. Charles St. Suite 300  
Baltimore, Maryland 21218



## PATHWAYS TO ADULT SUCCESS

The intent of Pathways to Adult Success (PAS) work is to improve the future for America's youth through education and thus contribute to a stronger foundation for everyday life and the American economy.

The PAS initiative is rooted in the long-standing research and community-building mission of the [Center for Social Organization of Schools \(CSOS\)](#), a unit within the [Johns Hopkins University \(JHU\) School of Education](#), and for many years before that, a unit within JHU's [Boyer School of Arts and Sciences](#).

CSOS was born in the aftermath of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, under the leadership of JHU sociology professor James Coleman. With his team of graduate students (including future CSOS director Jim McPartland), Coleman laid the foundation for JHU's ground-breaking work illustrating the relationship of race, poverty, and educational attainment, and pragmatic spin-offs into direct services to boost students' progress in schools and into the future.

Pathways to Adult Success (PAS) is the latest of CSOS' research and outreach endeavors. With PAS we seek to refine a set of indicators – and the thinking – that help educators figure out which students are likely to need help staying on a path to success, and what help will be most useful to them.

Through PAS, we intend, with your partnership, to identify, refine, and communicate descriptors and processes for indicator and response systems that enable caring adults to intervene at crucial points in young people's lives to guide and keep them on track toward a bright future as adults.

We invite you to join our work.

### Words from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation:

Over the past decade, we've seen schools and systems make tremendous progress using indicators, such as Freshman On-Track and the ABCs (Attendance, Behavior and Course-passing/Credit accrual), to foster continuous improvement and increase the number of students earning a high school diploma.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is delighted to support this informal network of practitioners and researchers to take the next steps in building effective indicator and response systems.

In particular, we're excited about the potential to accelerate the development of new approaches and implementation practices through work together across a new and more formalized national network. And, we hope that this work will enable the field to more quickly learn and develop consensus, leading to more equitable student outcomes and similar increases in student post-secondary access, preparation, and success in the coming decade.

## PAS COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE FROM THESE ORGANIZATIONS

Achieve Atlanta  
AchieveMeasures  
Adience CTE  
Alabama State Department of Education  
Alliance for Excellent Education  
Allied Health Education and Career Pathways of Wisconsin  
America's Promise Alliance  
American Institute for Research  
Arizona State University  
Baltimore County Public Schools  
Baltimore City Public Schools  
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri  
City Year  
Community College of Philadelphia  
CORE Clinics  
Degrees of Change  
Denver Public Schools  
Douglas County School District  
Education Northwest  
Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

Georgia State University  
Gresham Barlow School District  
Jefferson County Schools  
Jobs for the Future  
Long Beach Unified School District  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
MDRC  
Metro Nashville Public Schools  
N2College  
National Equity Lab  
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform  
National Louis University  
New Mexico Public Education Department  
New Orleans for Public Schools  
New York State Education Department  
Ohio Department of Education  
Oregon Department of Education  
Panorama Education  
Partners for Education at Berea College

Public Education Foundation Chattanooga  
Riverside Unified School District  
Sacramento City Unified School District  
San Jose Unified School District  
Shelby County Public Schools  
Southern Regional Education Board  
Tusculum College Support Network  
The Alliance Group  
The Mississippi Department of Education  
The Philadelphia Education Fund  
UChicago Consortium on School Research  
University of Central Florida  
University of Memphis/Peer Power Foundation  
University of West Georgia  
UPK Education  
Volunteers of America Southeast/Helping Families Initiative  
Westat  
Willamette Education Service District

### Pathways to Adult Success Vision Statement

For schools, their systems and communities to ensure all youth, regardless of their needs, circumstances, place of residence and prior experiences, to obtain the competencies needed to attend and complete secondary schooling and a postsecondary pathway that leads to a family-supporting wage and adult wellness.

Pathways to Adult Success is supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Everyone Graduates Center  
Johns Hopkins University School of Education  
3600 N. Charles Street, Suite 420  
Baltimore, MD 21218  
410.516.8800  
info@pathwaystoadultsuccess.org



## DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICES, SCHOOLS, SERVICE AGENCIES COLLABORATE TO HELP TROUBLED STUDENTS

In Alabama, the Helping Families Initiative—a unique collaboration between [Volunteers of America Southeast](#) and the State of Alabama—supports local district attorney offices as they work with community leaders to fight crime and improve the academic performance of students who exhibit problematic behaviors.

The Helping Families Initiative, created in 2003, is based on several core tenets:

- students' absences and behavioral difficulties have root causes in individual, family, or neighborhood problems.
- There is a correlation between student absenteeism and behavioral difficulties, and crime and violence.
- HFI's early intervention to assist young people and their families and young people — based on trust relationships — has proven to be a cost-effective strategy for improving outcomes for youth, avoiding their inclusion in the juvenile and adult justice systems, and enhancing safety for families, schools and communities.
- Community agencies can serve young people and their families more effectively when they work together to deliver coordinated and comprehensive services, knowledge, and resources.
- HFI's intervention services to at-risk students are one of the most effective ways for schools to move the needle on improving student attendance, behavior, grades, and outcomes.

HFI centers, based in local district attorney's offices, are staffed by a team leader and case officers — one case officer for every 6000 students enrolled. HFI Center Inter-Agency Teams, comprised of 10 to 15 representatives of public and private agencies serving youth, meet regularly to discuss root causes of problems and intervention strategies for participating students and their families. HFI Center Inter-Agency Teams bring together a deep knowledge of local neighborhoods and services that are available, while the district attorney and local school superintendents provide the high-level leadership and influence to support HFI.

HFI Centers intervene with students who have exhibited truancy or other behavioral issues, and their families. The process begins with a letter from the district attorney inviting a family to meet with a case officer to explore problems, interventions, and supports. There is no obligation on the part of the student or the family to participate. Over the years the program has built trust within our communities by affirming each family's dignity and delivering on the message that "we are here to help."

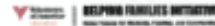
Case officers meet with families, establish trust, assess family strengths and challenges, and develop individualized intervention plans that are student-, family-, and neighborhood-specific. The HFI Center Inter-Agency Teams evaluate all interventions and assist in identifying available supports and services. A "Chinese Wall" of confidentiality surrounds HFI Centers and insulates student and families' information from access by the criminal justice system.

HFI currently includes ten local district attorney's offices, with plans to expand into all 67 Alabama jurisdictions. Each local HFI Center receives training, development, operational and technical support from the state support team at Volunteers of America Southeast, comprised of director John Tyson, Jr., a former district attorney and state school board member; training and operational coordinator Jayne Cannon, a licensed professional counselor and community leader; and technical coordinator Dr. Philip Holman, a former university associate dean and educational expert.

The cost for each case officer is about \$70,000 per year, including equipment and expenses, financed by a combination of state and local revenue streams such as school board, municipal and/or county funds, and grants. Volunteers of America Southeast also receives an appropriation from the Alabama Legislature for the state support team. Alabama stakeholders consider HFI a cost-effective way to reduce truancy and other problem behaviors, boost family, school, and community safety, and improve life outcomes for youth and their families who may be facing steep hurdles and significant challenges.

During the 2018-2019 school year, HFI delivered direct services to 13,272 families and indirect services to 116,600 grade-12 students. All faculty and staff in these jurisdictions also received indirect services. There is every reason to expect that the number of families receiving direct services will more than double during the 2019-2020 school year.

For more information, please visit our website: [volalabama.com](http://volalabama.com)



### Organization Mission

The Helping Families Initiative (HFI) helps grade-12 students in trouble at school for truancy or other bad behavior build productive futures while improving the safety and learning environment for all students. HFI:

- identifies the root causes of students' bad behaviors,
- plans and delivers combinations of services that meet individual and family needs, and
- communicates human and statistical results to the public and other stakeholders.

Population Served	0
Organization's Accountability	0
Important Factors for Success	0
Requirements for Success	0
Timeline	0
Overcoming Challenges	0
Lessons Learned	0
Future Goals	0
Major Takeaways	0

RETURN TO PAS IN ACTION

### Pathways to Adult Success Vision Statement

For all youth, their systems and communities to enable all youth, regardless of their needs, talents and past, present and/or experienced, to obtain the competencies needed to pursue and complete secondary schooling and a postsecondary pathway that leads to a family-sustaining wage and adult self-care.

Pathways to Adult Success is supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Executive (Pathways) Center  
 3100 Westcott Elementary School of Education  
 200 N. Charles Street, Suite 400  
 Baltimore, MD 21201  
 410-516-3800  
[info@pathwaystoadultsuccess.org](mailto:info@pathwaystoadultsuccess.org)

Proactive,  
Positive,  
Instructional  
Behavior



May 26, 2016

Dear Mr. Tyson:

This letter of support is provided to assure you that I will be delighted to participate as an advisor in the Helping Families Initiative. In looking at the initiative and in my conversations with you, I see the vast potential for improving the life outcomes for youth and their families for whom current trajectories suggest great risk for the future.

In my role as Director of *Safe & Civil Schools*, we help schools improve behavior and attendance, but we absolutely know that for the highest impact families, the schools cannot do it all. Further, we recognize that if a student exhibits high rates of absenteeism and chronic misbehavior, the correlation with juvenile crime, dropping out of school, and lifelong involvement in the judicial system is staggeringly high.

Children who are involved with the juvenile justice system are often associated with complex family problems that are beyond the scope of school personnel. The most exciting thing about the Helping Families Initiative is the comprehensive partnership between education, law enforcement, and other governmental agencies, all of which are essential to any reform plan. Our agencies have been in silos for too long; cross-community partnerships are essential.

The Helping Families Initiative ensures that district attorneys, school superintendents, and all key stakeholders are striving toward the same outcomes: getting kids to school regularly, helping them behave successfully, helping them succeed academically, keeping them in school to graduation, making support available beyond graduation, and providing high-risk families the support they need to accomplish those ends.

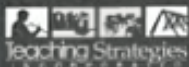
Communication and collaboration among agencies can include sharing critical data, avoiding duplication of services, and identifying and closing gaps in services. The Helping Families Initiative provides the most comprehensive

P.O. Box 50550

Eugene, Oregon 97405

(541) 345-1442

[safeandcivilschools.com](http://safeandcivilschools.com)



and detailed approach to this that I have seen in my four-plus decades in public education. The initiative guides agencies in how to collaborate with one another while allowing each to maintain the integrity of their own goals and service delivery.

Within *Safe & Civil Schools*, we have had great success in reducing chronic truancy, reducing out-of-school suspension, and reducing excused absences as well. The Helping Families Initiative would take that work even more deeply to assist the families with the most severe challenges.

I look forward to the opportunity to contribute to this initiative by sharing what we have learned regarding how to help schools while also actively learning how to deepen those successes with cross-agency community support. Clearly, the Helping Families Initiative has the capacity and expertise to lead the reform effort in Alabama and eventually to provide a data-driven national model that can maintain fidelity to the model while allowing for adaptation within local communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Randy Sprick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Randy Sprick, Ph.D.  
Director  
*Safe & Civil Schools*

RS/sf