



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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	Tallassee 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.

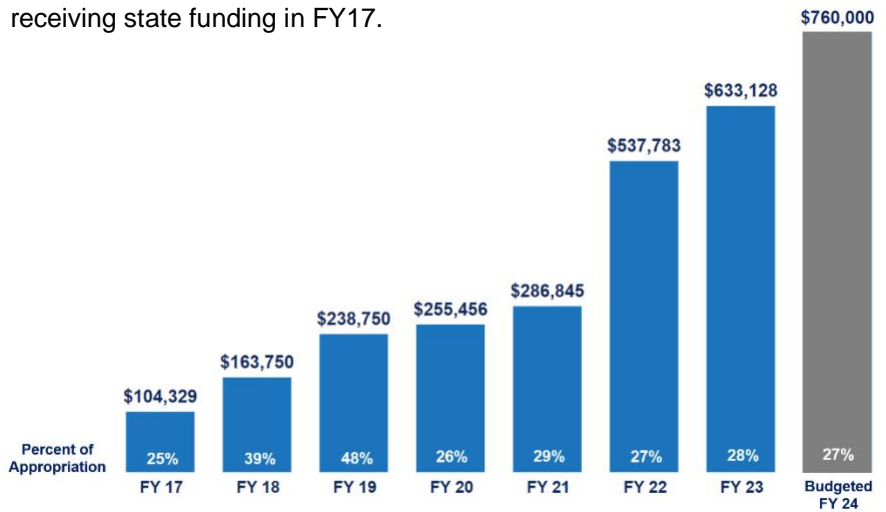
Recommendations

- **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 absenteeism¹ 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 (20th percentile nationally) in terms of chronic absenteeism rates. With campaigns such as Attendance Works,ⁱ chronic absenteeism has been a growing topic of interest in the state of Alabamaⁱⁱ as well as the nation. Attendance is cited to have a significant impact on student performance and graduation rates, among other things.ⁱⁱⁱ

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:

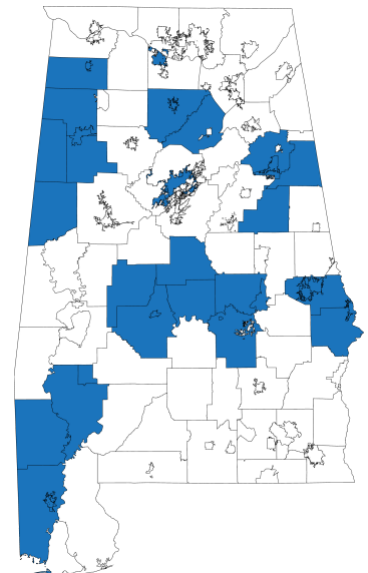
- **Circuit** – refers to judicial circuits that operate under a district attorney.
- **HFI** – refers to the program as a whole. This all-encompassing term reflects the program, statewide operations, the State Support Team, Local Units, and Volunteers of America Southeast when used.
- **Local Unit** – 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.



¹ Absent 10% or more of the school year (18 days).



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 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

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.

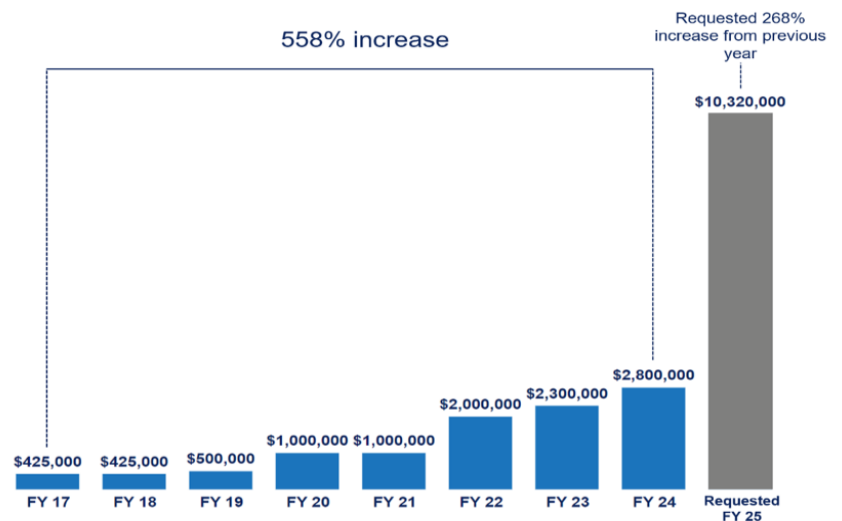
OVERVIEW OF THE HELPING FAMILIES INITIATIVE

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 office² 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.



² 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.^{iv}

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.^v

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.³

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**

³ 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."^{vi}

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.^{vii} 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

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:

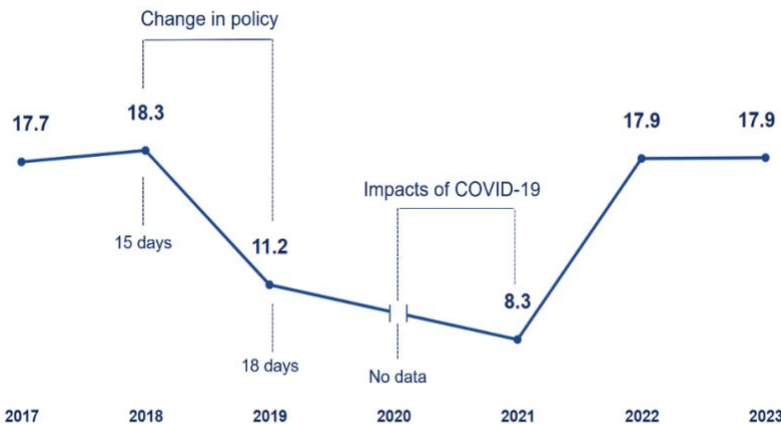
- Letters sent.
- Active cases.
- Fulfilled individualized intervention plans.
- Interagency team meetings.
- Community referrals by type.

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 absentee 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.^{viii} 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.***⁴

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

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 \$85,000⁵ 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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 funds⁶ 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:^{ix}

- 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.

⁶ 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.

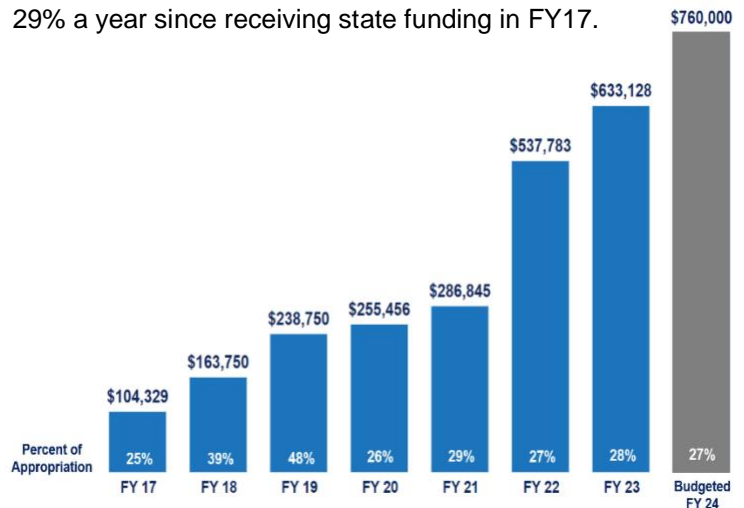
In total, there are nine Local Units (50%) receiving at least 95% of their funding from HFI state funds. Despite being nearly fully funded by state funds, their financials show a combined surplus in excess of \$830,000. Each of these Local Units is budgeted to receive the full base-funding in FY24. ***This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

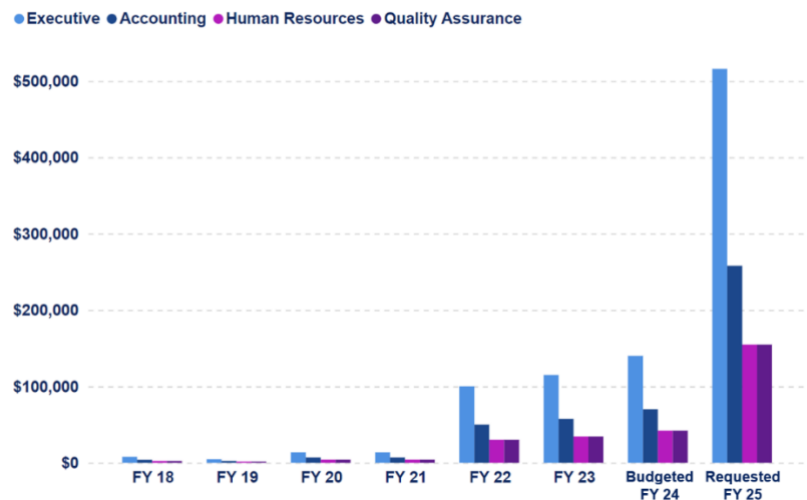
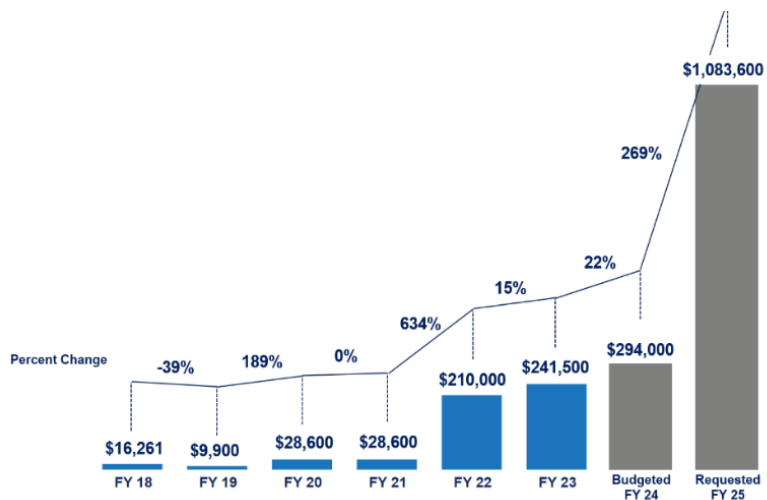


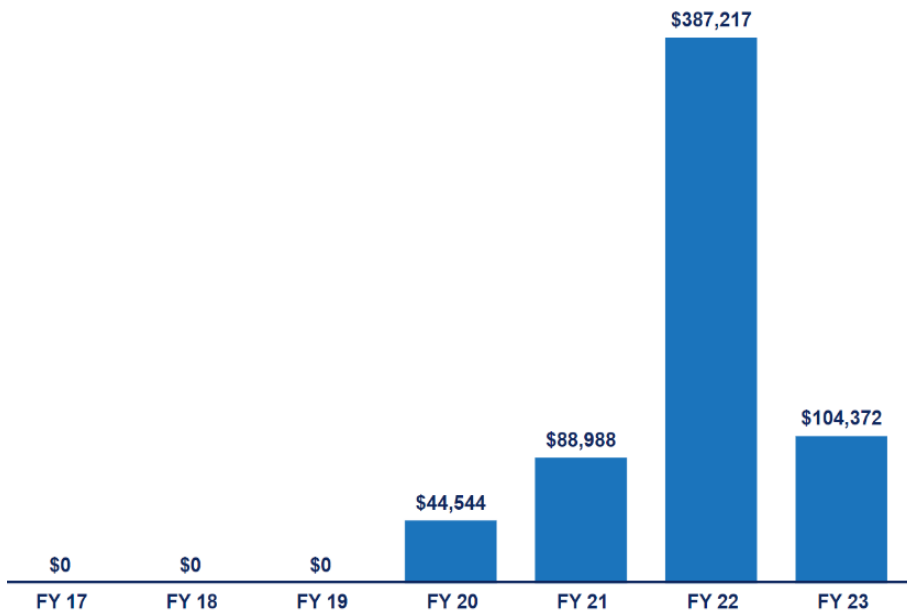
FIGURE 5 | Volunteers of America Southeast **administrative costs would balloon to over \$1,000,000** if the full funding request for FY25 is received.



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.^{xi} ***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

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

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%
Total	70	26	37%

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	\$362,500
2* - Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw	-	-	-	-	-	\$43,750	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$203,750
4 - Dallas, Wilcox, Hale, Perry & Bibb	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$235,000
5* - Macon, Tallapoosa, Chambers, Randolph	-	-	-	\$70,000	-	-	-	\$85,000	\$155,000
7 - Calhoun, Cleburne	\$56,250	\$56,250	\$56,250	\$70,000	\$64,167	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$537,917
8 - Morgan	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$160,000
10 - Jefferson – Bessemer Division	-	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$375,000
10 - Jefferson – Birmingham Division	\$104,421	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$150,000	\$170,000	\$789,421
13 - Mobile	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$150,000	\$170,000	\$320,000
15 - Montgomery	\$30,000	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$405,000
16* - Etowah	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$85,000	\$85,000
19 - Elmore, Autauga & Chilton	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$465,000
20** - Henry, Houston	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$85,000	\$85,000
24 - Pickens, Lamar, Fayette	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$235,000
25 - Winston, Marion	-	-	-	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$375,000
26 - Russell	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$525,000
32 - Cullman	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$70,000	\$70,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$525,000
34 - Franklin	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$235,000
35* - Monroe, Conecuh	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$160,000
37 - Lee	-	-	-	-	-	\$68,750	\$62,500	\$85,000	\$216,250
40 - Clay, Coosa	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$160,000
41 - Blount	-	-	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$85,000	\$235,000
	\$320,671	\$261,250	\$261,250	\$700,000	\$624,167	\$1,075,000	\$1,562,500	\$2,040,000	\$6,844,838
* 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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- ix Tyson, J. (2024, January 18). FY 2025 Helping Families Initiative Funding Request.
- x Tyson, J. (2024, January 19). Itemized List of VOASE Services for 10.5%.
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RESPONSE FROM VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA SOUTHEAST