



Member Spotlight: Peter Jones Helps Change Alabama's System of Fines and Fees

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"I don't think we could have gotten the bill over the finish line without [Jones's] contribution." - Leah Nelson, Research Director at Alabama Appleseed

Alabama SSN chapter leader and public budgeting professor [Peter Jones](#) had long found his state's punitive system of fines and fees to be problematic. One particular policy routinely suspends the driver's license of anyone who cannot pay a traffic fine on time – forcing many low-income Alabamians with traffic violations to have to choose between driving to work illegally or losing their job. But thanks to an impactful collaboration between Jones and a local civic organization, [Alabama Appleseed](#), far fewer Alabamians who struggle to pay traffic fines will see their lives upended.

Last week, Alabama passed a bill, [SB154](#), to make it easier for Alabama residents to get their revoked licenses back. And Jones's research has played a vital role in persuading Alabama policymakers to discontinue the harmful policy.

In January of 2022, Jones attended a series of Scholars Strategy Network workshops that guided chapter leaders on understanding the legislative process, and it inspired him to get involved with Alabama Appleseed. "The bootcamp left me thinking that it's so much easier if I just work with an advocacy organization like Alabama Appleseed who already has the skills and training to navigate the legislative process," he said.

Jones had met the research director of Alabama Appleseed, Leah Nelson, a month prior, after reading a report that Alabama Appleseed had done on fines and fees. The report detailed the harmful impact of suspending driver's licenses based on a survey of 989 Alabamians affected by the system of fines and fees. "They essentially asked them what kind of impact the fines had had on their life," Jones said. "Eighty-nine percent had to choose between basic needs like food or utilities or paying their unpaid fines and fees. About a half were jailed in connection with unpaid fines and fees, and 30% committed a crime to get the money to pay the fines and fees."

Alabama Appleseed put a plan in motion to help introduce a bill that would address the suspension of driver's licenses as a result of unpaid fines and fees, but they were missing one key ingredient: research-based evidence pointing to precisely how costly the policy was. And as an expert in budgeting and finance, Jones's most useful contribution was going to be calculating numbers.

"They said, we need a number that reflects the amount of money lost by the state for every person who has their driver's license suspended," Jones remarked.

Jones wasted no time in coming up with that number: \$804.86, which he presented in a letter to the Alabama legislature. Alabama Appleseed, who by this point had already worked with policymakers such as Senator Will Barfoot and then-Representative [Merika Coleman](#) to get the bill introduced, handed the letter over to the Senate committee that would be hearing it.

The bill died in the 2022 legislative session. But Alabama Appleseed continued their efforts, leading up to the passing of the bill last week. “This year I think they did a lot more legwork with the attorney general’s office, and they got commitments from both Democrat and Republican lawmakers to prioritize the bill earlier on,” Jones said.

While the bipartisan support [has stunned many](#), Jones pointed out the overwhelming incentive for policymakers from both sides of the aisle: “For a pro-business state with a remarkably low unemployment rate, we don’t want to stop people from driving to work,” he said. But he added that another motivator has been the lack of revenue. “What we know broadly is that fines and fees never really get paid.”

Nelson shared that it was the revenue collection standpoint that really moved the bill forward, and credited it to Jones. “Lawmakers were worried that our proposed change in law would reduce revenue. Pete’s research gave us a formidable response to that concern, showing that overall tax revenue would likely increase with reform,” she said. “I don’t think we could have gotten the bill over the finish line without his contribution.”

Once Governor Kay Ivey signs the bill, Alabamians fined for traffic violations will be permitted to miss two payments on a payment plan, or one post-adjudication court hearing, before their license can be suspended.

While the policy change will directly touch the lives of those in Alabama, that doesn’t mean it hasn’t garnered attention outside of the state. [An annual colloquium at Yale Law School](#) focused their discussion on fiscal policy and monetary sanctions this year. Jones and members of Alabama Appleseed were invited to be part of the event. “I’m not a person that would normally get invited to Yale,” Jones laughed.

Jones’s work on fees and fines in Alabama isn’t done yet. Next up, he and Alabama Appleseed will be working with the decision makers in the Jefferson County court system to craft better processes that are evidence-based.

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Jones’s research focuses on public budgeting and finance, education policy, and research methods. Overarching themes in Jones’s writing include K-12 funding and the financial ramifications of various education policy issues.