



Q&A: Turning Research into State Impact and Lessons from a Civic Partnership

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On January 21, 2026, SSN featured Alabama SSN co-leader Pete Jones alongside Leah Nelson, Senior Research Associate at Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, for a Q&A on what makes scholar-advocate partnerships effective at the state level. Drawing on their long-time collaboration on fines and fees reform in Alabama, they discussed what makes scholar-advocate partnerships effective at the state level, how to nurture them, and how sustained engagement can lead to lasting change.

Here are some highlights from their conversation:

Pete Jones on how the partnership started and the value of starting small

"I'll begin with Leah's report, *Under Pressure*, which came out in 2018. She talked with over 1,000 Alabamians across the state to understand how fines and fees impacted their lives—how they decided whether to pay, and the collateral consequences when they owed money. In 2020, in my regular professor life, I came across an article in *Urban Affairs Review* on race, representation, and revenue. It looked at fines-and-fees revenue from a public finance perspective and how cities respond to those revenue incentives.

This came together through a former student of mine, Alex, who had been in an MPA-JD joint program at UAB and then went to work for Alabama Appleseed. I invited her back to speak in an undergraduate course on public service leadership. As I walked her out after class, I casually asked whether Appleseed was interested in studying fines and fees. She said their research director had written a report and was deep in the issue, and she offered to connect us. In November 2021 she introduced us by email, we met a couple weeks later, and that began the partnership.

One recommendation if you're trying to develop a relationship like this is to start small. Our first collaboration was low stakes. If I had ghosted Leah, it wouldn't have been existential. It ended up working out really well, but it was low stakes relative to other pieces. It was a first meeting where we were trying to feel each other out and understand each other's workflow. She wanted it done in two weeks. I wanted it done in two months. So we compromised."

Leah Nelson on choosing an issue legislators can act on

"We were looking for something actionable that had happened in other states—ideally something where there would be something in it for the state of Alabama if they changed the law, as well as something in it for the people who would benefit from the change, because that's how advocacy has to go.

First we had to educate lawmakers about the issue at all: this is a thing that Alabama does, and here are the consequences it has for people. Overall, there was bipartisan support for changing this. But law enforcement is a really powerful voice here. They would come in and say, 'All of these people are dangerous drivers and Appleseed's actually trying to make the roads more dangerous.' Over time, the bill would die.

Over time, I came to understand that a significant anxiety hiding underneath the hyperbolic 'everyone will die in a traffic accident' rhetoric was fear that money would be lost—different types of revenue, fines and fees revenue, and reinstatement fees that go to a specific agency that relies on them as part of its budget.

We were all realizing that human-rights arguments were not going to win, even in blue states, when there's concern about revenue. So when I connected with Pete and realized he knew how to figure out how much money a policy change might cost—or lose—the state, I explained the issue to him."

Leah Nelson on making research "imaginable" to lawmakers

"He wanted to write a big report. I wanted one number. He wrote a big report, and then we figured out how to pull out one number. It was \$804. That's how much the state loses when someone loses their driver's license because of debt. The picture you see here is me and a bunch of people—including three of the women who participated in the survey that underpinned all of this—standing behind Governor Kay Ivey as she ceremonially signed the bill. That was a pretty awesome moment. And we would not have gotten there but for having this \$804 number, which was really imaginable to lawmakers. They were like, 'Oh, that sounds bad. We like having \$804. What do we have to do?'"

Leah Nelson on a second collaboration to inform state policy

"Around that time, I was talking with judges in Jefferson County (where Birmingham is) about fines and fees, because I was griping about this to anybody in the state who would listen for half a second. We were trying to figure out what to do next if we wanted to advance past driver's license reform. What we came up with was that they would hand over case-level data—not to me, because I don't have the capacity to do anything with it—but to research partners. And we would figure out together with the judges what questions could be usefully asked of, and answered by, that data. I knew I wanted to work with Pete again, so I instantly called him when a funding opportunity came up to think about what was happening on the money side of things.

So first we just looked at the money and found that a lot of money remained unpaid. Going through the data in more depth, we found that people who were assessed less paid more. Assessing people unimaginable sums of money is not good for them—and it's not good for revenue."

Pete Jones on how partnerships compound and open new opportunities

"I think at this point it's helpful—with those first two collaborations—to point out that they really grew in terms of commitment and expectations. That led to the bigger data analysis, where she started to understand: people will do pretty much anything for data and good data, so she dangled a great dataset in front of me. And I started understanding that Leah didn't necessarily care whether the logistic regression yielded whatever thing—she needed something to be able to explain to judges. Each collaboration compounded in terms of what we were able to do and what we were expecting from each other—and then some funding opportunities. Leah and I were able to take the partnership to the next level: we got funding, and we branched out to work with other jurisdictions.

Once you start to build a relationship like this, it requires you to get out of your comfort zone a little bit—but the payoff is incredible. I was not looking into fines and fees the way I've gotten into it over the last few years, but it opened up opportunities. My field doesn't do federal funding in the way that some 'med-heavy' fields do, and this opened up that opportunity. It's a lot of credit to Leah—her ability to think about where funders are, and the skill sets she brings. You've got to be open to doing things a little differently, but it opens up avenues that won't normally be there."

Leah Nelson on the institutional realities of doing this work

"Another thing that surfaced through all of our work together was how hard it is to make changes within courts, often for really invisible reasons. One is that judges love discretion. As much as they all think they always use their discretion in the most merciful or best possible way, it makes them hard to partner with on a research project. We learned you can't have a court research study that expects judges to act consistently—it's against their DNA (and, in some interpretations, their code of ethics). The other thing is that software and division of labor in courts is really weird and creates extra work and friction. There are no managers in courts—everybody has an assigned task and no one's in charge of making sure people can work together. There's no HR department. There's an IT department, but it has no flexibility. All of that became stuff Pete and I understood and were building into projects.

We have a judge in Jefferson County named Stephen Wallace who is an equal partner in this work. He is a practicing judge in a court of general jurisdiction, which means he sees everything—serious violent felonies all the time. He's also a former civil rights and criminal defense lawyer, and he's really interested in improving the fair administration of justice in his court. He's someone we can come to and say, 'We have an idea—will you

do this?' Or he can come to us and ask, 'How would we go about raising money to fix this problem?' Having that relationship—and a couple of other less firm relationships with people who have hard power—has been really valuable in keeping this work going."