

Economic Policy Institute

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NCRP: Why is EPI's Economic Analysis and Research Network especially relevant today?

DS: EARN is a network of 62 organizations in 43 states that are focused on the economic conditions of working families and are affiliated with EPI. Network members publish annual reports titled "The State of Working XX" (e.g., Florida or Ohio), which not only provide a snapshot of the economic wellbeing of people in their state but also offer proposals to address the economic challenges working people face.

EARN groups are actively involved in efforts on the ground to advance policies at the state and local levels to boost economic security for low- and middle-income working people. EARN groups often provide their state's only source for reliable analysis on economic policy issues affecting workers and their families and have recently been key in the initiatives related to minimum wage and paid medical and family leave.

EARN's relevance has never been greater, prompting EPI and EARN to invest in a ramp-up and reboot of the network to meet the challenges and opportunities of the moment. The 2016 elections opened the country's eyes to the fact that a substantial contingent of working Americans feel economically insecure and neglected. EARN sees this as an opportunity to create a proactive pivot, focusing on the potential for action at the state and local levels that can make meaningful progress for working families.

NCRP: EARN is shifting resources to focus more intentionally on "red" states, especially the South. Why now?

DS: EARN has always had members in the South; in fact, some of its strongest members are in the region. However, the network has in the past typically focused on policies that are often impractical in more conservative states. There was an appetite for "gateway" analysis and policy efforts that EARN's members in southern states could successfully pursue.

Our theory is that the South is where the need is greatest, and it is an abdication of responsibility to working families to neglect building the infrastructure there that can advance economic progress – even if initially the gains are incremental. The heartening development of movement-building and organizing efforts in southern states deserves a parallel creation of strategies to build the economic policies that improve the conditions of working families.

EARN is launching another project called The State of Rural XX (your state name here), which will overlap with our work in the South. Recent events have revealed the degree to which well-meaning analysis and policy approaches have emphasized conditions in large cities, eclipsing the very real economic

challenges in non-urban areas. Building on EARN's long-standing "The State of Working XX" reports, this project will focus on the state of working families in rural areas, providing both data analysis of the current economic situation in the small towns and cities in each state and ways to create the conditions that can spur the creation of good jobs and better living conditions.

NCRP: What tips would you offer grantmakers that wish to make lasting impact in their communities but are cautious about supporting policy advocacy and policy change?

DS: Particularly in the South, long-term impact requires a systemic view of the challenges people face every day. People internalize the notion that they are personally responsible for their insecure employment, their lack of health care, the fact that they have to work three jobs to make ends meet. Historically embedded social and economic structures are the taproot of these challenges, and among the tools that are necessary to root them out is intentional, concerted, systemic change; in other words, policy change. While we build movements and organize for community power, we must also equip these activists with concrete policies to improve the economic condition of people who have been left behind. This means investing in the home-grown analytic and policy expertise that is tied to the future of the community and the state. ■