

# Helping Families Initiative Successfully Heads Off Crime and Saves Society Money



The Helping Families Initiative (HFI) that began in Mobile 15 years ago seeks to expand in Alabama to enable more families and schools to turn young people away from crime and toward more productive lives.

Former Mobile County District Attorney and state school board Vice President John Tyson Jr. is the director of HFI. It's been proven successful in preventing serious crime, making schools safer and more effective, and protecting young people from involvement in crime, Tyson said.

Tyson seeks to organize a myriad of family services by expanding HFI statewide and help keep youngsters in school and dissuade them from going

down the destructive path of drugs and crime. The work of HFI is particularly timely given the crisis Alabama faces with its critically overcrowded prisons and the staggering costs of crime, Tyson said.

[HFI](#) today is active or under development in six judicial circuits – the 7<sup>th</sup> Circuit, Cleburne and Calhoun counties; 10<sup>th</sup> Circuit, Jefferson County-Birmingham Division; the 15<sup>th</sup> Circuit, Montgomery County (operating as the Helping Montgomery Families Initiative); the 19<sup>th</sup> Circuit, Autauga, Elmore, and Chilton counties; the 26<sup>th</sup> Circuit, Russell County; and in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Circuit, Cullman County.

“A great benefit of HFI is by reaching boys and girls it will save lives, future taxpayer dollars, and society costs by preventing crime,” Tyson said.

The actual monetary costs to the public in criminal prosecution and prisoner incarceration are staggeringly high with no signs of abating. The Alabama Department of Correction’s annual budget, for instance, is currently approaching \$500 million and will likely increase, especially if prison populations continue to swell as expected.

Tyson was in Montgomery last week drumming up support for next year’s financing. “We are trying to persuade the Legislature to take another funding step,” Tyson said.

Tyson seeks an increase in state funding for HFI, currently \$425,00 in the Education Trust Fund. Tyson said that a state appropriation of \$1.9 million next fiscal year and eventually \$10.5 million a year will expand the HFI and attack root causes of problem behaviors of K-12 students by strengthening families and improving high school graduation rates.

Tyson said successful expansion of HFI will yield an economic benefit to Alabama of between \$125 million and \$383 million a year in crime reduction and personal earnings just by an improvement of 5 percent in the male high school graduation rate. That compares favorably with significant private-

sector economic development projects.

(In 2015, the Business Education Alliance released a report, [\*Obstacle into Opportunities\*](#), how an Alabama high school graduation rate of 90 percent by the year 2020 is the economic equivalent of a mega-industrial project in higher wages and productivity every year.)

HFI works with schools and district attorneys to identify and intervene with youth and their families. These plans broker community services and focus on environment, parental capability, family interaction, family safety, child well-being, social and community life, self-sufficiency, family health services, trauma, and well-being.

Tyson said that in Mobile County, more than 93 percent of HFI students who had been suspended from school for serious misbehaviors were not suspended in the year following intervention. These students significantly improved their performance in grades, unexcused absences, suspensions, and school infractions.

In Montgomery, research on 218 youth, who successfully completed the Helping Families program between 2008-2013, showed that 75 percent had no involvement with the justice system after their cases were closed, Tyson said.

“If we can avoid future crimes by engaging the child and family in a meaningful, positive way, then we’ve really taken a long step in the way of putting our teachers in position to actually deliver education services and help these kids become productive citizens,” Tyson said. “I like to call that power of community.”

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