

Alabama Workplace Savings Program Would Help 831,000 Workers Save for a More Secure Financial Future

If retirement savings stay at current low levels, cost to Alabama taxpayers will be nearly \$3.8 billion in additional state spending by 2040

Overview

Retirement security depends on individuals saving for their future, but millions of Americans lack access to an employer-provided savings plan that might help them do so. Research shows that workers are 15 times more likely to save for retirement if they can set aside money through payroll deductions. But many small businesses cannot offer retirement benefits because of high startup costs and a lack of administrative capacity.

Nationally, 56 million workers—nearly half of the private sector workforce—don't have retirement benefits at their workplaces, which affects the ability of working families to plan for their financial future. The lack of access to workplace savings also affects taxpayers, as shown in a recent study by The Pew Charitable Trusts that quantified the costs of insufficient retirement savings both nationally and in Alabama. Pew found that insufficient savings results in decreased household spending and increased demand for social assistance programs, placing a greater burden on a shrinking tax base.

Retirement in Alabama by the numbers

- 831,000 workers—50% of the Yellowhammer State's private sector workforce—do not have access to a retirement savings plan through their jobs.
- If the situation in Alabama doesn't change, Pew estimated that inadequate retirement savings would cost the state almost \$3.8 billion in additional spending through 2040.
- By 2040, older households without adequate retirement savings in Alabama will face an average income shortfall of \$8,560 per year.
- From 2021 to 2040, the ratio of older households to working-age households will increase by 44%, exacerbating the burden on Alabama taxpayers.

Why state automated savings programs matter

But there's good news: Even small savings now could help offset the impact of this projected \$3.8 billion taxpayer burden. If Alabama households saved an average of an additional \$2,045 a year—about \$170 a month—they could erase the taxpayer burden while ensuring themselves a decent standard of living in retirement.

To spur such savings, lawmakers in 17 states have passed legislation to create automated savings programs designed to make it easier for businesses to help workers save for retirement. In these programs—variously

known as “secure choice,” “auto-IRA,” or “work and save”—employees who don’t have access to employer-based retirement benefits are automatically enrolled and begin saving in an individual retirement account (IRA) overseen by a state-approved financial services firm. Workers control their contribution level and can opt out at any time; no one is required to participate. Businesses incur no costs; they simply enroll workers and process payroll deductions. In addition, businesses can stop participating in the program at any time by adopting an employer-sponsored plan, such as a 401(k).

If Alabama were to enact similar legislation, it would join California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington in expanding retirement security for its residents. Although some of those state programs are relatively new, as of December 2024, more than 965,000 funded accounts across eight states had already amassed more than \$1.8 billion in assets. These workers are saving \$166 per month, on average.

Benefits of an Alabama automated savings program

For employees:

- Workers are automatically enrolled to start saving for their future via payroll deduction—they don’t have to do anything to sign up. But they can opt out of the program or change their contributions at any time.
- Contributions are deposited into a post-tax Roth IRA owned by the worker, who can access that money at any time with no penalty for any reason, including unexpected financial emergencies.
- The IRA moves with the worker if the person changes jobs.

For employers:

- The program is provided at no cost to employers, and setup is simple.
- Businesses enroll their workers and process payroll deductions; they are not plan sponsors and are not legally liable for the accounts. A financial services firm hired and overseen by the state handles all administration and reporting.
- Offering a retirement savings benefit helps small businesses recruit and retain workers, putting these employers on a more level playing field with larger businesses.
- An employer can start its own plan, such as a 401(k), at any time, replacing the state program. In fact, data from the first states to adopt automated savings programs shows that more employers have started their own plans since the state programs were established.

For taxpayers:

- Like the rest of the country, Alabama faces the fiscal strain of an aging population. Making it easier for people to set aside even modest levels of savings during their working years will pay dividends for workers and taxpayers in the long run—and help reduce the anticipated \$3.8 billion increase in state spending.

The Pew Charitable Trusts

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