

HIGHLIGHTS
2003-2013
A DECADE OF PROGRESS

10
YEARS | **MISSISSIPPI**
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE

Advancing Racial and Economic Justice








'03

- With support from a few generous donors who had faith in the future, the Mississippi Center for Justice was born and set out on a journey to tackle the unfinished business of the civil rights movement.
- Ribbon cutting for the first office in Jackson took place on June 12, 2003, the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Medgar Evers.
- The Center identified 12 pressing issues, a “dirty dozen” of the state’s worst social injustices on which to focus its attention.
- MCJ joined in forming the Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse, promoting reforms to keep troubled children in school instead of incarcerating them in jails and juvenile training schools.
- The Center secured its first litigation victory in a Holmes County voting rights case that restored the right to one person, one vote in elections for school superintendent.

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- Targeting predatory lending schemes that pull working families into an endless cycle of poverty, the Center convened an Economic Justice Action Forum. This was the beginning of the Center's ongoing efforts to achieve economic justice in Mississippi, which has the highest per capita concentration of payday lending stores in the nation.
 - MCJ filed a lawsuit to overturn an attempt by the governor to eliminate Medicaid benefits for poverty-level aged and disabled Mississippians. The federal court's ruling returned 60,000 people to the Medicaid rolls. This litigation led the legislature to reinstate Medicaid coverage for the elderly and disabled.
 - In partnership with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the Center launched an election protection program that recruited and trained more than 200 lawyers, assuring that voters across the state would have their votes counted on election day.

'04

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- Following advocacy and an MCJ lawsuit, the legislature passed a landmark juvenile justice reform act, which required community-based alternatives to incarceration for youth and eventually resulted in the closure of one of the state's two notorious juvenile training schools.
- When Hurricane Katrina smashed into the coast with unprecedented destruction, MCJ immediately opened an office in Biloxi to advocate for low-income families affected by the storm and to ensure fair distribution of recovery funds.
- The Center organized lawyers and law students from across the state and the country, who flocked to the coast and became key players in a massive pro bono response to the crisis.
- MCJ partnered with Enterprise Corporation of the Delta (now Hope Enterprise Corporation) to launch the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, which provides credible, accessible, and timely data analysis to educate policy makers and advocates about the allocation of public resources.




'06


- The Center held numerous legal clinics across the coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Residents stood in line for hours to get help understanding their rights and navigating the complex FEMA claims process. These clinics continued for almost four years.
- MCJ and its partners successfully advocated for substantial improvements in the housing assistance program for Katrina's most vulnerable survivors, most notably a doubling of the cap (from \$50,000 to \$100,000) on housing assistance grants to lower-income coast residents.
- Working with a number of legal and community partners, MCJ won a lawsuit against FEMA mandating that elderly and disabled Katrina evacuees receive accessible trailers. The Center also successfully countered FEMA's attempts to evict thousands of residents from FEMA trailers and blocked the displacement of hundreds of low-income public housing tenants from livable rental units.
- The Center and partners on the coast issued the first in a series of annual Katrina anniversary reports, documenting the story of "two recoveries" with data, maps, charts, and client stories.
- In partnership with the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative, Center staff provided legal and policy advocacy to improve the availability and administration of child care assistance for working families.

THANK YOU


HURRICANE
VOLUNTEERS

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- The Center issued a comprehensive report outlining the barriers that prevent eligible children from receiving Medicaid in Mississippi. These barriers include a requirement for face-to-face meetings for annual recertification, a huge burden to families without access to transportation.
 - Following advocacy by MCJ and the Mississippi Coalition for Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse, the legislature passed a bill allowing low-income families to automatically qualify for a waiver of school fees for academic supplements such as textbooks and lab fees. The new law was modeled on a settlement the Center reached with a Delta school district.
 - When the governor announced a plan to divert \$570 million in Katrina recovery funds to expand the Port of Gulfport, the Center joined a coalition of community organizations – the Steps Coalition – in its “People Before Ports” campaign. Congress had explicitly stated that the funds be used to help low- and moderate-income homeowners rebuild.
 - The Center’s advocacy led to the creation of a program that provided recovery assistance to small landlords who agree to make their restored properties affordable.
 - MCJ represented Mississippi plaintiffs in federal litigation that brought a halt to FEMA’s violations of due process in the recoupment of housing assistance payments.

’07

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- A sepia-toned photograph of a woman with glasses and a young girl. The woman is on the left, looking down at something the girl is holding. The girl is on the right, holding a white LEGO car with black wheels. They are both smiling and appear to be playing together. The background is slightly blurred, showing what might be a table or another person's arm.
- The Center and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to halt the diversion of disaster housing funds to the Port of Gulfport.
 - Center staff took on a national policy role around hurricane recovery, testifying before Congressional committees about such issues as diversion of housing funds and improvements to disaster recovery legislation.
 - When a motel clerk – fired in the immediate aftermath of Katrina for refusing to engage in illegal price gouging – was denied unemployment benefits, the Center appealed her case and won before the Mississippi Supreme Court.
 - Moore Community House reopened the doors to its child care center after MCJ and pro bono attorneys helped Moore appeal FEMA's denial of reconstruction funds on the grounds that child care was not considered an "essential service."
 - Center staff helped organize a series of statewide hearings sponsored by a new Access to Justice Commission, raising public awareness about the legal needs of low-income Mississippians across the state.

'08

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- With predatory lending reform stalled in the state legislature, the Center successfully pursued local options. Jackson passed a moratorium on new payday lenders, and 20 other municipalities across the state subsequently followed suit.
 - MCJ filed a lawsuit against South Delta Regional Housing Authority challenging unfair and extravagant rent hikes on homes where maintenance had been neglected for years.
 - Fighting restrictive zoning regulations on the coast, MCJ focused on litigation, zoning appeals, and community organizing to ensure that residents living in modular “Katrina cottages” on the coast could remain in their homes.
 - Addressing a growing home foreclosure crisis, the Center launched a statewide initiative that provided assistance in individual cases as well as advocacy for policy change. The Mississippi Bar took the lead in recruiting attorneys to participate on a pro bono basis, and MCJ presented a two-day training that prepared more than 60 pro bono attorneys to accept referrals to assist families facing foreclosure.

’09




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- The Center's staff announced the settlement of the 2008 lawsuit against HUD. The settlement resulted in the allocation of \$132 million for housing recovery assistance for 4,500 families who, five years after the storm, still had not received the benefit of federal assistance.
- Even as Katrina recovery continued, the coast faced another economic and environmental disaster when BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. Again MCJ quickly moved into action, negotiating an agreement with the Gulf Coast Claims Facility that enabled a dozen legal aid programs across five Gulf states to provide legal assistance to claimants.
- MCJ joined the East Biloxi "Save Our Schools" campaign with the goal of re-opening a top-performing, state-of-the-art school that had been rebuilt after Katrina but was then closed with no notice to parents or the community.
- The Center and its partners mobilized the Mississippians for Fair Lending campaign to prepare for the next legislative session – when the state's payday lending statute would be up for reauthorization.



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- Center staff monitored implementation of its settlement agreement with HUD and the State of Mississippi, securing improvements in eligibility rules, streamlining the process for proving land ownership, and providing direct assistance to many of the eligible families.
- Settlement of the Center's lawsuit against South Delta Housing Authority resulted in lower rents and better maintenance for hundreds of tenants. The housing authority director was subsequently convicted of multiple counts of fraud as well as perjury in the Center's lawsuit.
- The Center opened an office in the heart of the Mississippi Delta to expand services to the poorest part of the state. The new Indianola staff focused immediately on two of the region's most pressing issues, access to quality public education and access to affordable health care.
- With passage of the federal Affordable Care Act, the Center began to focus its health care advocacy on securing the full benefits of the new legislation for low-income Mississippians.
- Center staff began working with HIV/AIDS direct service organizations to identify legal issues affecting people living with HIV/AIDS. Staff began providing legal assistance to combat discrimination in housing, employment, and access to health care.

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- A woman with blonde hair and a man with dark hair are looking down at a document held by the woman. The woman is wearing a dark top and a necklace with a round pendant. The man is wearing a white t-shirt with a floral pattern. The background is a solid olive green color.
- When settlement of the BP oil disaster litigation altered the claims process, MCJ negotiated a new contract to continue providing legal assistance to thousands of low-income victims. The American Bar Association Section of Litigation recognized the success of this innovative program with its John Minor Wisdom Public Service and Professionalism Award.
 - When the National Mortgage Foreclosure Settlement enabled Mississippi's attorney general to create a foreclosure prevention initiative, he tapped MCJ to administer a three-year contract with the Center and its partners to provide legal assistance statewide to families facing foreclosure.
 - The Center and its partners pursued environmental justice and job equity in the \$500 million restoration of the Port at Gulfport, helping to force changes in the Port's leadership and bringing about increased HUD scrutiny of job creation.
 - MCJ offered training events to prepare 75 Mississippi lawyers to represent children with special education needs or disciplinary issues that threaten their rights to an appropriate education. The Center has since fielded 200 requests for service and has provided representation to 150 families.
 - The Center has become nationally and even internationally recognized for its disaster recovery expertise. A Center attorney was invited to Japan to offer counsel and policy advice in the wake of its devastating tsunami, and three Japanese attorneys in turn traveled to Mississippi to get a more in-depth look at the MCJ model. When Superstorm Sandy struck New Jersey and New York, four MCJ lawyers traveled to the area to assist local legal aid programs.

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- In partnership with the University of Mississippi Medical Center and others, the Center launched a medical-legal partnership to provide free legal aid to people living with HIV/AIDS. Center staff provides on-site legal assistance to clinic patients, focusing on HIV-status-related discrimination in housing and employment. The collaboration marks the first-ever medical-legal partnership in Mississippi.
- MCJ's oversight of its settlement agreement with HUD and the State of Mississippi revealed that 1,500 additional households should qualify for \$40 million more in Katrina housing recovery assistance. The additional support brings the estimated number of families assisted to 6,000 and the settlement value to \$172 million. The repair program has employed hundreds of construction workers, almost half of whom are low- and moderate-income residents.
- Relying on MCJ's research and policy analysis, the legislature enacted two laws that add protections for students of for-profit schools that rely on federal student loans for up to 90 percent of their profits. The legislation – a first step toward greater accountability to consumers and taxpayers – provides for state registration of recruiters and oversight of their accreditation.
- MCJ celebrated its 10th anniversary by launching the New Roots Credit Partnership. Aimed at loosening the stranglehold of predatory lenders across the state, New Roots is a joint venture with financial institutions, corporate partners, and community leaders. It will offer alternatives to predatory lending through fair loans and financial education and is backed by the Clinton Global Initiative.

NEW ROOTS CREDIT PARTNERSHIP



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WATER CAP ANGLE

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INTERDISCIPLINARY

INDIANOLA, MISSISSIPPI

JANUARY 13, 2012

JANUARY 13, 2012

