



VOICES OF CHANGE

The Story of the Mississippi Center for Justice





IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI...

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where youth who get in trouble at school get the help they need instead of being sent to training schools.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where all children get a quality education and stay in school to graduate.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where vulnerable families can get services in their own communities.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where elderly and disabled people living in poverty have health coverage that includes prescription drugs.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where health and safety laws are enforced for poultry processing workers.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where low-income residents are protected from high-cost loan scams.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI . . . where poverty has been eradicated.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI... THE SOCIAL JUSTICE STATE

INTRODUCING THE

MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE

AN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO ADVANCING
RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

MISSISSIPPI
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE



INTRODUCTION

Mississippi has a strong legacy of struggle for social justice. After all, this is the state that inspired a nation and helped give birth to the civil rights movement. This is a state that ended 100 years of post-slavery apartheid.

Mississippi experienced profound change in the 20th Century, much of it positive. Not too many years ago, the best and brightest of lawyers and organizers spread out across the state to work for social change. Federal funding and foundation grants supported advocacy in voting rights, housing, education, public benefits, and consumer rights. Busy storefronts on Farish Street in Jackson housed legal aid groups with dedicated staff ready to fight for racial equality and opportunity. Progressive federal laws and court decisions overturned many of the Jim Crow restrictions that limited the future of so many in the state. Mississippians of all races stood up to demand their rightful place in society.

This legacy of racial justice and equality is still alive in Mississippi. But by the advent of the 21st Century, funding for legal advocacy to advance social change had dried up, and many civil rights lawyers and legal organizations had moved on or out of state. Mississippi no longer had a wide range of local groups that held firm to the values of racial and economic justice. Progressives in Mississippi no longer had sufficient legal capacity to combat the everyday tyranny of discrimination and poverty. The gap between the promise of justice and equality and the realities of discrimination and poverty became a growing chasm.

Enter the Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ), a nonprofit organization to help amplify the voices of low-income and working Mississippians. With a small staff of lawyers, a large vision for change, and a new model of legal advocacy, MCJ has embarked on a journey to help make Mississippi the social justice state.

The possibilities for making a difference are as numerous now as they were during the years of the civil rights movement. The state's population has reached almost 3 million

people, yet more than 500,000 of them live in poverty, making Mississippi still the poorest state in the nation. The state ranks at the bottom when it comes to funding for quality education, high school graduation rates, pay scales for teachers, health care, and more. School discipline policies mean children who skip class regularly or get into fights are sent to youth court and often end up in inhumane training schools instead of receiving the special education or counseling they really need. Low-wage earners are at the mercy of pay-day loan companies and check-cashing operations that trap families in a never-ending cycle of high interest rates. In the state's numerous poultry processing plants, workers' rights are trampled and safety requirements are often ignored.

Faced with such entrenched problems, a few dedicated lawyers and activists in Mississippi came together in 2002 to discuss options. Initial donations boosted their conviction that it was time again in Mississippi for coordinated action. An anonymous donor turned this early commitment into reality with a contribution of \$300,000, which the founders were able to leverage into \$1.4 million in the following two years.

The Mississippi Center for Justice opened for business in mid-2003. In 2005, the offices fill a small, red-brick duplex on North Congress Street in central Jackson. One side of the duplex was the childhood home of novelist Richard Ford. Across the street is author Eudora Welty's birthplace. Next door is Davis Elementary School, where laughter streaming into the offices from the playground is a daily reminder of the need for MCJ.

This report is the story of why MCJ was founded, how its committed, energetic board and staff work, who they work with, and what they've accomplished so far.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THE MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE

Social justice 21st-Century-style means using the best of Mississippi's progressive history in a new way.

The Mississippi Center for Justice is not a traditional legal advocacy group. It does not speak for low-income Mississippians. Rather, staff members take their lead from activists and leaders grounded in the work of their own communities. MCJ attorneys are a new breed of “community lawyers” who develop partnerships with community leaders. Together, they find practical and local social change models.

MCJ's lawyers work with and support community leaders; channel the energies of the state's legal community to local justice campaigns; and extend successful efforts from one community to others.

With partners across the state, MCJ listens, collaborates, communicates, convenes, advocates, persuades, plans, organizes, and, when the time is right, goes to court. Lawsuits are but one tool of community lawyers, one method among many to achieve legal redress.

Operating Principles: The Mississippi Center for Justice is *opportunistic* – responding to specific and immediate need; and it is *strategic* – looking ahead to solve the most serious problems affecting Mississippians. Four principles are at the heart of everything MCJ takes on:

- **Developing partnerships with leaders statewide.** MCJ convenes stakeholders and works with them to develop legal advocacy strategies that will advance their efforts to remedy social injustices.
- **Generating commitment from the wider legal community.** MCJ mobilizes and brokers legal talent—private and public interest attorneys from both inside and outside the state—to support community goals.
- **Making every event a “call to action.”** MCJ convenes people in a way that educates, builds commitment, and causes “breakthroughs” in enrollment of leaders and legal talent.
- **Looking for models that work and adapting them to Mississippi's situation.** MCJ publicizes and celebrates examples of community and legal leadership that serve as inspirations and helps extend a successful campaign in one community to other communities around the state.

SETTING THE STAGE

Mississippi has no lack of problems to capture the attention of those who advocate for justice. When MCJ first opened for business, ideas and requests for help flooded in over phone lines, the Internet, and even through the front door. Board members identified 12 major social injustices in Mississippi, any one of which could keep the center busy for years. They called it their “dirty dozen” list of problems.

Board and staff also identified three overall objectives:

- 1. Establish a permanent, statewide infrastructure to advance social justice.** Foundation grants and individual contributions sustained the center during its first critical two years. There is a full-time staff of six, who are already outgrowing their office space. They have an expanding database of donors and are reaching out to more foundations and individuals who may not be based in Mississippi, but care about injustice and those who suffer from it. They work with lawyers across the state and have partnered with national legal advocacy groups.
- 2. Launch at least three well-defined social justice campaigns with at least**

a dozen partner communities. A campaign begins when local leaders step up to right a wrong in their community. In the beginning, the challenge for MCJ—and the opportunity—was deciding where to concentrate limited resources and its small staff. The board listed 12 specific social injustices prevalent in the state. With support from community partners, MCJ is already involved in three well-defined campaigns and is providing legal assistance to address several other injustices on the “dirty dozen” list. Each campaign brings together multiple issues and partners: educational opportunity and juvenile justice reform; access to health care; and economic empowerment, with a focus on the plight of immigrant and local poultry workers.

- 3. Secure a commitment to “justice for all” in Mississippi.** Legal aid to low-income families in the state has been provided by a committed but overwhelmed few. Programs are dramatically under-funded and often rely on an inadequate pool of *pro bono* lawyers. The state is the lowest funded in the nation when it comes to *per capita* resources for legal aid. MCJ’s goal is to change this picture.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

A ‘Dirty Dozen’ List of Critical Issues to Address in Mississippi

- Children with discipline problems at school are channeled into the juvenile justice system with little or no recourse, while their educational opportunities evaporate.
- Predatory financing disables low-wage workers, putting them at the mercy of pay-day loan companies and check-cashing operations.
- The foster care system is under-funded and under-staffed. Children in foster care fall through the cracks, aging out of the system with no jobs, skills, or support networks.
- Legal representation for low-income Mississippians is inadequate.
- Social services for low-income Mississippians are inadequate. The Department of Human Services gives far too few services to low-wage workers who are eligible for child care, transportation, job training, and other support programs.
- African-Americans have the right to vote, but these rights are still imperiled by electoral barriers. Access to civic participation is threatened in some communities.
- Lack of adequate shelter is a pressing problem for the state’s low-income families. Mississippians have substandard and unequal access to housing.
- Access to health care is inadequate and leads to disparities in cost and health status based on race and income.
- Immigrant workers are exploited, particularly in the poultry processing industry. Working conditions are abusive and unsafe. Housing is overcrowded and substandard.
- Low-income communities and people of color are discriminated against in getting start-up loans for small business development.
- Low-income families suffer from a childcare crisis. The Department of Human Services, which administers funding to childcare providers, imposes discriminatory barriers to participation.
- State personnel procedures fail to protect low-wage state employees. Workers who try to redress discriminatory practices of state agencies are blocked by procedural impediments, thus closing doors to advancement in the public sector.

PROGRESS SO FAR

In the quest to help Mississippi become the social justice state, MCJ's board and staff have placed many balls in the air. Their first victories took them to the heart of Mississippi's juvenile justice system and to the mat with the governor and the legislature to save Medicaid benefits for thousands of elderly and disabled citizens. They are also addressing the alarming growth of the predatory loan industry in the state and are poised to take on the crisis of inadequate funding for public education. Each campaign is supported by MCJ's community-based style of advocacy, public awareness, organizing, and litigation.

Juvenile Justice: Helping Children When It Really Matters

Robert was 15 when he was first sent to Oakley Training School, one of Mississippi's two "prisons" for troubled youth. Robert had not committed a crime. He was involved in fights at school and needed help for mental problems. Instead of help, he got 12 weeks at Oakley.

Robert's response was to run away. This got him another 10 months, starting out in Ironwood, a maximum security block at Oakley. In Ironwood, he was kept in solitary confinement almost 24 hours a day. The small cell where he spent his time was all concrete, with a tiny window; even the bed was a cement slab with a thin mattress. He was not allowed books, writing materials, a walkman or radio. He got no rehabilitation and no services. Sometimes, depending on the mood of the staff, he received two hours of inadequate schooling a day.

Robert's story, with alarmingly little variation, has been repeated over and over in Mississippi. For years, almost any ongoing school discipline problem was likely to land children in youth court and a resulting stint at Oakley or the state training school for girls, Columbia. In Mississippi, they call this the "schoolhouse to jailhouse" syndrome; one in 18 Mississippi children is caught in the pipeline.

This syndrome is sustained despite the fact that it costs state taxpayers from \$35,000 to \$50,000 a year to incarcerate a child, at least twelve times more than it would cost to provide community-based services. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of children at Oakley and Columbia are nonviolent. (In Mississippi, serious offenders age 12 and above are tried as adults, so they don't find themselves in the juvenile system at all.) In addition, the children in Mississippi's youth courts, detention centers and training schools are disproportionately African-American. Some 80 percent of incarcerated children are African-American, yet they are only 36 percent of the state's population. One study indicated that up to 85 percent of the youth in training schools have some form of mental illness, compared with 17 percent in the general population; yet they get little if any help for mental problems.

Kids in places like Oakley and Columbia lose hope. Darrell, a 17-year-old who has been in and out of institutions much of his young life, was recently released from Oakley. He has few dreams for his future and little idea of his possibilities after his time in the institution. Like many at the training schools, he is not even clear why he was there.

It's not that state officials were unaware of conditions at Oakley and Columbia. Lawsuits over



the course of 27 years required the state to improve conditions. But state officials admit they did not make the necessary changes. The Mississippi Department of Education confirmed that the academic programs in the training schools were of little benefit to the youth. A U.S. Department of Justice investigation in 2003 cited numerous instances of abusive discipline and force at the training schools, including “hog-tying, pole-shackling, improper use and overuse of restraints and isolation, staff assaulting youth, and OC spray [mace] abuse.” The report noted that suicidal girls at Columbia were stripped naked and locked in windowless cells with no toilets.

Judges did not condone conditions in the training schools; but they felt hamstrung, seeing little choice other than probation or incarceration. They knew youth with substance abuse problems or serious emotional disturbances needed treatment, but it just was not available. Almost everyone acknowledged that the system was failing the children and failing taxpayers.

Breaking the Pattern: The story began to change for Robert, Darrell, and hundreds of other youth when MCJ helped create the Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse. This coalition of some 30 organizations was determined to break the pattern of inhumane conditions and to fundamentally transform the juvenile justice system in the state.

MCJ attorneys became counsel for the class of incarcerated children in a 1970s lawsuit that required Oakley to improve conditions. They met with youth at Oakley and advocated for them to receive adequate medication, treatment and mental health services. At Columbia, MCJ had to file a lawsuit to get access to the grounds to meet with the girls.

The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Coalition knew that it took more than one-on-one advocacy to make a difference. Legislative action was necessary to change outcomes for all children in the juvenile justice system. So coalition members took up residence in the halls of the state capitol, organizing hearings and rallies, educating lawmakers, and pushing for change. Those who couldn’t get to Jackson sought out legislators in their hometowns, talking about

reform in the grocery store or at a restaurant, holding their representatives accountable.

MCJ and the coalition developed a media campaign to show how badly the training schools had failed and why resources should be placed in community-based alternatives. The *Clarion-Ledger*, the largest paper in the state, published an editorial calling for Oakley and Columbia to be closed. The media provided extensive coverage of litigation and legislative activity.

Mississippi’s youth also made the case for reform. Robert came to Jackson to testify at legislative hearings, telling lawmakers that he and others in training schools were “more than a bunch of bad kids.” Asked later about the staff and guards at Oakley, he said, “There was only one who cared about me. He would come let me out of my cell and we’d sit down

and talk. He wanted to help us with our problems. Most of the staff there don’t like the kids.” When asked what he’d learned at Oakley, he noted: “I learned how to make jailhouse dice, how to break out, how to trade pats of butter [night snacks of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches] for toilet paper and stamps.”

A Major Victory: The Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2005, which passed by overwhelming majorities in both houses, was signed into law on April 1. Governor Haley Barbour praised the reform. Coalition

members almost had to pinch themselves to believe this was not an April Fool’s Day joke. Representative George Flaggs, chair of the House Juvenile Justice Committee and a leader of the campaign to help Mississippi’s youth, called it “a major piece of legislation.” The *Clarion-Ledger* described it as “the most important legislation to emerge from the 2005 session.”

The bill is aimed at radically improving conditions in the training schools and providing community programs for all nonviolent youth. It requires the state to provide troubled youth with support from school counselors, mental health professionals, social service workers, youth court counselors and parents. Nonviolent offenders will not be incarcerated in either of the two training schools or the county-operated detention centers around the

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state unless ordered by a judge after all other options have been tried. Within four years, all 82 counties must have local alternatives to incarceration.

Even before the legislation passed, Oakley was changing, thanks to the attention from MCJ, the legislative hearings, and a new acting commissioner. Ironwood, where both Robert and Darrell spent time, is now closed. Darrell reports that there is more recreation and less lock-down; he adds that the staff doesn't curse as much. When asked what *he* would do with Oakley, he said: "I'd get rid of most of the walls, the doors, and have more counselors talk to the kids, more psychologists. Me, I feel like most of the kids aren't really supposed to be here. Just by looking at them you can tell they have mental problems. Putting somebody in a cell and sending them to school for four hours and beating them—that makes them worse. Oakley and Columbia were made to help somebody, but they failed at that. This ain't what it's supposed to be." He added: "It's hard to feel cared about in a place like this."

Dr. James Porter, the new acting commissioner at Oakley, cares. He supports the reforms that lie ahead and supports MCJ's participation in the effort. He believes each child has "some good" inside; he wants to find that good quality and figure out how to build on it.

What's Next? The Mississippi Center for Justice and other members of the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Coalition know the job of caring is not over; in some ways, it has just begun. The U.S. Department of Justice settled a long-standing lawsuit against the state after the bill was passed, but oversight is needed to make sure the bill's requirements are met, that counties really do develop and use community-based programs, and that funding is adequate for high-quality services. In addition, there is a need for more substantive reform. As the *Clarion Ledger* said in a May 2005 editorial, "the bill the legislature approved falls far short of what should be the system." The newspaper called on lawmakers to expand the law, to make it more comprehensive and to look at improving the current "hodge-podge of

juvenile court and mental health services" for youth in the state.

Despite the shortcomings, the bottom line is clear: children who get into fights at school, children who need psychological help, and children who are involved in nonviolent offenses are not appropriate candidates for incarceration. Already, MCJ's work has helped reduce the number of children in state custody at Oakley and Columbia by half – from more than 400 at the time of the Department of Justice investigation to just over 200 today. Mr. Flaggs wants to close Columbia as a training school and turn it into a treatment center for youth with substance abuse problems. He said with a smile, "Given where juvenile justice is all across this nation, if you can make these changes in Mississippi, you can do it anywhere."

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The Role of MCJ: Because individual Mississippi lawmakers do not have full-time staff, MCJ's educational role researching federal and state laws was critical in this case. The coalition helped Mr. Flaggs identify model laws in other states; it brought partners to the table from around the state; it helped him redefine the mission of both Oakley and Columbia Training Schools. Mr. Flaggs noted, "It usually takes five to six years to change a law like that. But the information we had was so accurate and current that the governor recognized the time had come for change. It's a blessing from

heaven that the Mississippi Center for Justice was there to help." And he added: "After the bill was signed, I visualized a door being opened for so many children, particularly African-American children, who didn't even know why they were in a training school."

Robert, now 18 and living in the community, is free to put the abuse and neglect of Oakley behind him. He says he wants to get his GED and hopes to find a job in Brookhaven, Mississippi. Darrell was recently released as well. He was hesitant, almost afraid, to say out loud what he wanted to do when he got out; he has no family to go home to. Finally, he mentioned that the Job Corps might be a good idea. He said he liked cooking; perhaps he could be a chef. MCJ promised to get him a Job Corps application.



Medicaid Benefits: A Life-Saving Campaign

Maxine Mahoney is 82 years old, a great-grandmother to thirteen. Frail in body but not in spirit, she suffers from heart trouble, arthritis and neuropathy, a painful nerve condition. She takes 13 medications. Her sole income is from Social Security, \$605 a month. She pays \$165 a month in rent for her subsidized apartment in Madonna Manor, a large and pleasant complex for senior citizens in South Jackson. Her prescription drugs—most paid by Medicaid—add up to \$890 a month.

Clearly, the math does not work. As she put it, “If I had to pay for my own prescriptions, it would cost me more than my income.”

Paying for her own drugs—or going without—is exactly what would have happened to Mrs. Mahoney if state policy makers had their way. Faced with a Medicaid budget deficit, the governor’s solution was to terminate Medicaid benefits for some 50,000 Mississippians who fall under an eligibility category called PLAD, Poverty Level Aged and Disabled. The legislature supported the plan, and the governor signed it into law in late May 2004. The cutoffs were scheduled to go into effect less than six weeks later, on July 1.

Never mind that in order to save \$40 million in state Medicaid costs, Mississippi would forego \$120 million in matching federal funds. Never mind that this was the largest proposed cut in the history of Medicaid and that the state offered no viable alternative for the PLADs, all of whom are not only poor but also either elderly, disabled or both. Never mind that medication means the difference between life and death for many and that taking drugs to stabilize their health means patients *save* the cost of hospital and doctors’ visits. The governor chose to dwell on anecdotes about people who take advantage of the program, spinning a message of “fraud and abuse.”

There was no advance warning of the cuts. Mrs. Mahoney found out about her pending prescription cuts from a letter. So did Gene Grant, 79, a neighbor at Madonna Manor who

also lives solely on Social Security and whose prescription drug bottles fill two bookshelves in his apartment. The state advised Mrs. Mahoney, Mr. Grant and the thousands like them to get free samples from doctors and pharmaceutical firms. The letter said someone from the state would call to offer help. Gene Grant remembers that phone call, but it was a recorded message. As he put it, “The call said, ‘Don’t worry. Everything will be all right.’ ”

Save the PLADs: Everything was clearly *not* all right. Fifty thousand elderly or disabled Mississippians were scheduled to be cut from life-saving drugs. MCJ mobilized a legal response team, including both national and state partners. A statewide coalition of health care advocacy groups organized a fierce grassroots and media effort to “Save the PLADs” and convinced the governor to delay implementation of the cuts from July 1 until October 1, 2004. The advocacy campaign continued, but by the end of September, when there was no indication that the governor would back off again, MCJ filed suit in federal court.

Within three days, the court granted a temporary restraining order and two weeks later ordered that Medicaid benefits for PLAD recipients be extended until January 31, 2005, when the legislature would be in session and could reconsider the policy that initiated the cuts. With no consensus forthcoming, MCJ kept the path to the courthouse open; at MCJ’s urging the judge extended the Medicaid benefits twice more. Finally, in a major victory, the legislature passed—and the governor signed—a bill reinstating benefits for PLADs until January 1, 2006, the effective date for expanded drug coverage under the federal Medicare program.

In the meantime, uncertainty took its toll. Mrs. Mahoney said it felt like things were changing from month to month. She continues to hoard free samples of drugs. Gene Grant is grateful that MCJ decided to sue the state. “That saved our skins,” he said. “Senior citizens shouldn’t be put through all this. It’s not good for your blood pressure.”

What Lies Ahead: Because Medicare and Medicaid coverage have loopholes and are not adequate to meet the health care needs of Mississippians, the coalition will remain in place. This is good news to Mary Troupe, head of the Mississippi Coalition for Citizens with

Disabilities and a key coalition leader. Having worked on health care issues for years, she, too, appreciates MCJ and the fact that her group finally has a place to go for legal help.

Ms. Troupe is a seasoned advocate. She was angered more than surprised by the governor's initiative to cut Medicaid. She resented the use of scare tactics and the characterization of Medicaid recipients as "deadbeats" who took advantage of the system. She pointed out that the prescription drug cuts would have been particularly devastating for those with mental illnesses who depend on medication to function. If the cuts had gone into effect, disabled people in nursing homes would not have been able to leave and live on their own. This is not only demeaning to someone who is building the skills to live independently, but costs the state *more* to keep that person in an institution.

Mary Troupe saw the crisis as an opportunity to educate consumers as well as legislators. She and the campaign hit the highways of Mississippi with a "Medicaid Road Show," beginning in Tupelo and going to six sites in all. Crowds of 300 – 400 people showed up in each place, many of them carrying their letters about the Medicaid cuts, trying to understand what it all meant.

Although the road show focused on the cuts to PLADs, speakers also addressed larger health care issues important to the elderly and disabled, such as proposed federal cuts that will limit days covered for home health care or cut emergency room visits. Ms. Troupe knows funding is scarce, from both the federal and state point of view. But she also knows how to make state budgets work to keep people covered. "For years, we've used Band-aids," she explained. "But the Band-aid box is empty now. We need to look outside the box."

Ms. Troupe intends to stick with the campaign and with MCJ. She wants to see Mississippi relinquish an "honor" it has held for years—the Golden Bedpan Award for the state with the most people *per capita* in nursing homes.

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Economic Empowerment: Safeguarding Family Pocketbooks

Signs, banners, and billboards of all sizes almost scream at you from the highway: "E-Z Cash," "\$ Advance \$," "Express Check Advance," "First Check Free," "Need Cash?" Open the door to one of the storefronts that line the highway and you will likely be greeted with respect, good cheer—and a very hard sell. The blatant billboards promise the world, but all too often they deliver financial catastrophe and an ever-increasing cycle of debt.

Welcome to the growing industry of "predatory" lending, where the cost of cashing a check is a hefty percentage of the sum. A typical scenario goes like this: to get a payday loan—i.e.

an "advance" on your paycheck—or even to get a legitimate loan for short-term needs, you must sign a post-dated check made out to the lender. If you do not have the funds to cover the check when it is due, you extend or "roll over" the loan. Each time you extend the loan, you pledge to pay more fees. If you miss a payment, the cycle of debt deepens. All too often, this sequence leads to financial ruin that includes foreclosure on your home or your car—or even prosecution for writing bad checks.

This is not the kind of economic opportunity MCJ has in mind. Yet these under-regulated "mom and pop" storefronts are blossoming across the state. They target low-wage families, the unemployed, people on public assistance, and the military—those who have no savings to meet a need for emergency cash. There are some 2400 licensed lenders in Mississippi, ranging from small loan and car loan outfits to check cashing and pawn shops. As of August 2003, they held nearly two million transactions and loans totaling \$4.7 billion.

To consider solutions to these problems, MCJ convened an Economic Justice Action Forum co-sponsored by AARP Mississippi, Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, and the University of Mississippi Civil Legal Clinic. In the fall of 2004, 75 consumer credit

and economic development experts, lawyers, law students, and community leaders came together for two days to find a way out of poverty in Mississippi by helping low-income communities get access to alternative, effective financial services. They explored specific strategies that work and discussed how to take them to scale.

A Promising Model: One successful model is the Hope Community Credit Union, sponsored by the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta (ECD). Hope's goal, true to its name, is to leverage assets and help low-income families in Mississippi create the kind of wealth that will allow them to buy a home or a car, or save for a college education for their kids.

Hope offers its members the services of a bank—checking and savings accounts, an ATM, money markets and certificates of deposit. And they offer loans. Ed Sivak, senior program officer at ECD/Hope, tells the story of a woman who bought a new car and financed it through a loan obtained for her by the dealer. The interest rate was 18 percent. At Hope, she refinanced the loan, lowering the interest rate to seven percent and shortening the term of the loan from six years to five. Her monthly payments dropped from \$537 to \$470, and over the life of the loan she will save \$14,000. This story is not about her car; it's about the financing. Car dealers make their money on the loans, not on the cars.

Sivak points out what so many citizens of Mississippi already know from experience: "It costs a lot of money to be poor." Mississippi has a very permissive environment for predatory lenders. As partners, Hope and MCJ are pushing to change this environment, focusing on several strategies: putting safeguards in place to reduce the cost of loan services; litigation and legislation to change policies; provision of alternatives such as Hope Community Credit Union; and financial education. Hope has the financial expertise; MCJ has litigation and advocacy experience. They have plans to go far together.



Poultry Workers: Changing the Workplace

Mississippi is one of the nation's top poultry producing states. For the processing plant owners and managers, the industry is profitable. But poultry workers are the epitome of exploited wage earners. Their working conditions are abysmal; injuries on the job are rampant. Pay scales are not high enough to keep working families out of poverty. The majority of the workers are minorities, most are women, and many are immigrants. Many, especially immigrant workers, live in overcrowded trailer parks near the plants.

There is more. The industry routinely takes advantage of workers who cannot afford to lose

their jobs. Employees injured on the job are often refused compensation; those who try to organize are fired; undocumented immigrants are threatened with exposure if they make abuses public.

The plight of Mississippi's poultry processing workers is not unique; such conditions are widespread in poultry processing and meat packing plants across the country. There are both state and national strategies for change. MCJ and the Equal Justice Center's Mississippi Poultry Workers Center in Morton have formed the Poultry Worker Justice Collaborative. They are working with other partners to raise public awareness of the problems faced by poultry workers, to advance needed policy changes, and to enforce state and federal laws that protect workers' employment rights and their right to compensation for work-related injuries.



In Mississippi, poultry workers make up the largest group of immigrant workers. Often locked out of the economic system by their immigrant status and by language and cultural barriers, they are highly vulnerable to predatory financial practices. The collaborative is working with Hope Community Credit Union to bring safe and affordable financial services to these workers. One area of particular need is remittances—funds that immigrants send to family members in their home countries. Without access to banks (where immigrants often believe they need proof of legal residency), immigrant workers use money transfer services that often charge high fees. Hope and other credit unions can serve these workers and their families by offering reasonably priced remittance services, as well as savings and checking accounts and fair consumer loans.

On the Horizon: Improving Educational Opportunities

For the first time in history, the Mississippi legislature adjourned its regular 2005 session in April without adopting a state budget for the coming fiscal year. The legislature and the governor had reached an impasse over funding for public education. A series of special legislative sessions subsequently produced a budget that, for the eighth consecutive year, fails to provide full funding for the state's own statutory requirements for adequate education.

This fiscal crisis over school funding has the state's education advocacy community up in arms. Mississippi is a state that ranks at the bottom in per pupil spending, yet until now it has been one of the few states without a litigation strategy as part of a comprehensive campaign to improve educational opportunity. Community leaders and representatives of several school districts turned to MCJ for advice. As this report goes to press, MCJ is enlisting national expertise and resources to help fulfill the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Every child in Mississippi deserves a high-quality education and the support to stay in school and succeed.





CONCLUSION

The Mississippi Center for Justice is home-owned and home-grown. With a host of strategic partners, MCJ is restoring the connection between racial justice and anti-poverty advocacy in the state. The center is bringing the new concept of “community lawyering” to Mississippi, taking the lead from the concerns of working families and community leaders.

MCJ has reinvigorated the social justice community in Mississippi. The passion of the small staff gives MCJ the agility to act fast when the occasion arises, as when the governor tried to cut Medicaid prescription drug benefits. That same passion provides the strength and stamina to join a 30-year fight to reform juvenile justice in the state and a 50-year struggle for educational opportunity.

The anonymous donor who gave MCJ an early lease on life – with a donation of more than \$300,000 – predicted that if the center could make it for five years, it would be around permanently. Less than three years later, this person noted, “Who would have thought that they could do so much with so little?”

The “dirty dozen” problems the founders identified at the beginning should keep them

busy for a long time to come. The center has the potential to affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Mississippi.

Many challenges lie ahead in the effort to make Mississippi the social justice state. It remains the poorest state in the union. The quality of education is unacceptable. Jobs do not pay a living wage. State budget shortfalls harm low-income families. Cuts at the federal level will disproportionately affect poor families in Mississippi.

Yet the Mississippi Center for Justice, its board and staff are nothing if not optimistic. And they have big plans. With their partners throughout the state, region and country, and their own unique brand of advocacy, organizing and litigation, they know the future is rich in possibilities.

IMAGINE MISSISSIPPI... THE SOCIAL JUSTICE STATE

CHAMPION OF JUSTICE AWARDS

2003 Champions of Justice Dinner

HENRY J. KIRKSEY

Former Mississippi State Senator, who made the right to vote a reality for thousands of Mississippians

MIKE MOORE

Mississippi Attorney General, who brought accountability to the tobacco industry for the benefit of Mississippi's children

2004 Champions of Justice Dinner

DR. HELEN BARNES

University of Mississippi Medical Center Professor of Obstetrics emerita, who raised the standard of health care for Mississippi women and children

RIMS BARBER

Civil rights advocate, who expanded access to the legislative process for all Mississippians

MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE



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As of January 2005

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Norman Chronister, *Policy & Communications Advocate*

Leslie Gross Davis, *Advocacy Director*

Monica Galloway, *Business Manager*

David B. Miller, *Equal Justice Works Fellow*

Jennifer A. Riley-Collins, *Juvenile Justice Fellow*

Sheila Bedi, *Southern Poverty Law Center Staff Attorney at MCJ*

Merrill Tenney McKewen, *Public Affairs and Fundraising Consultant*

Amanda Green Alexander, *Election Protection Coordinator (Fall 2004)*



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PARTNERS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE CAMPAIGNS

We thank the many community organizations and advocacy groups who have welcomed us to their campaigns for social justice throughout the state and allowed us to offer them our legal assistance. We also thank the state, regional and national

organizations whose generous and capable assistance made it possible to keep our commitment to provide the right legal help at the right time to accelerate the pace of change in Mississippi.

STATE PARTNERS

AARP MS
Action Communication and Education Reform
Activists With a Purpose
ACLU of MS
Catholic Charities
Catholic Hispanic Ministries, Jackson Diocese
Child Advocacy Committee,
MS Bar Young Lawyers Division
Children's Defense Fund, Jackson Office
Citizens for a Better Greenville
Citizens for Quality Education
Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County
Enterprise Corporation of the Delta/Hope
Community Credit Union
Excel Community and Learning Center
Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center
Hinds County Mental Health Commission
Hispanic Ministries, United Methodist Church,
MS Conference
Indianola Parent Student Group
Juvenile Advocacy Clinic,
University of MS School of Law
Laborers' Union Local 693

Magnolia Bar
MS American Federation of Teachers
MS Association of School Superintendents
MS Bar
MS Center for Legal Services
MS Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities
MS Consumer Protection Division,
Office of the Attorney General
MS Education Working Group
MS Families as Allies for Children's
Mental Health
MS Health Advocacy Program
MS Human Services Coalition
MS Immigrants' Rights Alliance
MS Low-Income Child Care Initiative
MS Poultry Workers Center
MS Protection and Advocacy Program
MS Volunteer Lawyers Project
MS Workers' Center for Human Rights
NAACP, MS State Conference
NAMI of MS
North MS Rural Legal Services
Parents for Public Schools
Parents for Public Schools, Jeff Davis County
Parents United Together

Public Policy Center of MS
Rutherford Calder Attorneys
Second Chance
Southern Disability Rights Center
Southern Echo
St. Michael Catholic Church
Teens Helping Teens
United Methodist Hispanic Ministries of Jackson
United Food and Commercial Workers
Local 1529
University of MS Civil Legal Clinic
Youth Innovation Movement

REGIONAL PARTNERS

Critical Resistance South
Duke University Law School
Equal Justice Center
Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana
North Carolina Justice Center
Self-Help
Southern Juvenile Defender Center
Southern Poverty Law Center

NATIONAL PARTNERS

AARP Foundation Litigation

Advancement Project
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Children's Rights
Equal Justice Works
Harvard Civil Rights Project
Housing Works
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Mexican American Legal Defense and
Educational Fund
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational
Fund, Inc.
National Association of Criminal
Defense Lawyers
National Coalition of Education Activists
National Economic Development
and Law Center
National Health Law Project
National Immigration Law Center
National Juvenile Defender Center
National Senior Citizens Law Center
NLADA/CLASP Project for the Future
of Equal Justice
Southern Education Foundation
Trial Lawyers for Public Justice
Youth Law Center

S U P P O R T

Each contribution represents a stepping stone toward the legal capacity Mississippi needs to secure racial and economic justice.

Founding Donors

In June 2002, at the first meeting of MCJ's board of directors, Isaac Byrd became the newly incorporated organization's first Founding Donor with a contribution of \$10,000. His willingness to put hard cash in service to an inspiring idea made it easier for others to follow. In the following year, MCJ acquired ten Founding Donors who committed \$10,000 or more. Like the signers of the Declaration of Independence, their names are enshrined in the history of the center.

The Anonymous Donor

Soon after that first board meeting, newly elected Vice Chair Rob McDuff attended a rally on the Mississippi State Capitol grounds to protest the state's first execution in 13 years. Rob helped dispel the gloom by enthusing about plans for the new center and the board's effort to raise money for it. Afterward, someone approached Rob with an offer to help and a question: How

much was the board trying to raise? The board set a target of \$300,000 for MCJ's first year of operation. Soon afterward, when that person promised to contribute, Rob asked how much. "Well," the donor replied, "you gave me a number." And so it happened that Rob's contagious enthusiasm for an inspiring idea suddenly brought the idea to fruition. In October 2002, an anonymous donation of more than \$300,000 catapulted MCJ into the implementation phase.

Many More Individual Donors

We are deeply grateful to individual contributors who have stepped up to the task of building a home-owned capacity for legal advocacy to support racial and economic justice. If an anonymous donation large enough to stake MCJ's first year was not reason enough to believe the center's time had come, the eagerness of so many to contribute to our success has proved the proposition beyond doubt. In

little more than two years – from mid-2002 to the end of 2004 – more than 300 individuals have made donations large and small totaling almost \$700,000. Each contribution represents a stepping stone toward the legal capacity Mississippi needs to secure racial and economic justice.

Foundations, Institutional Contractors, Law Firms and Others

We also thank the foundations, institutional contractors and law firms whose financial contributions have been indispensable building blocks. The NLADA/CLASP Project for the Future of Equal Justice provided essential early support; Stern Family Fund named MCJ President Martha Bergmark its 2003 Public Interest Pioneer, an honor that came with significant funding; and Southern Poverty Law Center generously provided staff and funds for work on juvenile justice reform.

FOUNDATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTRACTORS

2002-2004

AARP
Enterprise Corporation of the Delta
Equal Justice Works
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
NAACP, MS State Conference
NLADA/CLASP Project for the Future of Equal Justice
Open Society Institute
Racial Justice Collaborative
Southern Echo
Southern Poverty Law Center
Stern Family Fund

LAW FIRMS AND CORPORATIONS

2002-2004

Adams and Reese LLP
Andalman & Flynn, P.C.
Arnold & Porter LLP
Baach Robinson & Lewis PLLC
Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC
Baria, Fyke, Hawkins, & Stracener, PLLC
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Louisiana State Bar Association
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Mississippi Families as Allies for Children's Mental Health
Mississippi Move
Mississippi Trial Lawyers Association
NLADA Service Corporation
Parents United Together
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The Shepard Broad Foundation, Inc.
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Jack & Nelda Woodward
William Wright

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

FOR THE YEARS ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2004, 2003 AND 2002

	2004	2003	2002
SUPPORT AND REVENUES			
Contributions	\$167,169	\$162,094	\$352,626
Grants	536,341	131,500	—
Interest and dividends	1,161	1,552	333
Miscellaneous	331	4,723	—
Net assets released from restrictions	—	—	—
TOTAL SUPPORT AND REVENUES	705,002	299,869	352,959
EXPENSES			
Program Services	434,017	176,233	—
Management and general	50,774	68,706	3,300
Fundraising	120,447	98,992	—
TOTAL EXPENSES	605,238	343,931	3,300
INCREASE (DECREASE) IN NET ASSETS	99,764	(44,062)	349,659
NET ASSETS AT BEGINNING OF YEAR	305,597	349,659	—
NET ASSETS AT END OF YEAR	\$405,361	\$305,597	\$349,659

MCJ's Statements of Activities and Financial Position presented here for 2002, 2003 and 2004 have been audited by the Jackson, Mississippi, accounting firm of Matthews Cutrer & Lindsay, P.A.

Complete financial statements may be obtained by contacting MCJ.

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

FOR THE YEARS ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2004, 2003 AND 2002

ASSETS	2004	2003	2002
CURRENT ASSETS			
Cash	\$83,848	\$139,433	\$352,459
Investments	—	20,373	—
Receivables	324,290	104,252	—
Prepaid expenses	—	17,333	—
	408,138	281,391	352,459
PROPERTY AND EQUIPMENT, net	163,130	165,385	—
OTHER ASSETS			
Deposits	406	406	—
	\$571,674	\$447,182	\$352,459
LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS			
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Accounts payable	\$21,949	\$2,301	\$2,800
Accrued expenses	14,114	1,451	—
Payroll liabilities	7,983	6,833	—
Notes payable, current portion	8,733	8,733	—
	\$2,779	19,318	2,800
NOTES PAYABLE, net of current portion	113,534	122,267	—
NET ASSETS			
Unrestricted	103,888	270,581	349,659
Temporarily restricted	301,473	35,016	—
	405,361	305,597	349,659
	\$571,674	\$447,182	\$352,459



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Writer Joanne Edgar, photographer Mike Lang and designer Chris Lester generously donated their talent and time to make this report possible. We are very grateful to them for fitting this project into their demanding schedules and for so compellingly and artfully giving voice to our story.

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