

Mississippi Policy Priorities

Historically, children's issues have received lukewarm support in the Mississippi legislature. The state lags behind in funding for public education, early education and child welfare and ranks at or near the bottom of many health care indices. The Southern Regional Office maintains a lobbyist in Jackson to promote policies that would improve life for Mississippi's vulnerable children and works with groups across the state to advocate for them. Our priorities in 2008 include:



Increased Education Funding for K-12 and at Risk Students

The CDF-SRO has worked diligently to ensure that the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) is fully funded. MAEP is the formula by which the state of Mississippi ensures that every school in every district has adequate resources for educating students in kindergarten through 12th grade regardless of where they live or the wealth of their community. The legislature fully funded MAEP in 2003 and 2007, responding to the support CDF-SRO and its partner generated. Full funding represented an increase of more than \$260 million for schools over the prior years' funding, and we continue working to ensure that MAEP is fully funded every year.

CDF-SRO also works with legislative leaders to secure additional funding for the state's "at risk" students, defined as those receiving a reduced price or free lunch. The January 2006 Report of the Commission on Restructuring the Mississippi Adequate Education Program, presented to the Mississippi legislature, recommended that the state's at risk funding be substantially increased. Currently, Mississippi provides an additional five percent funding for these students. It cost more money to educate children who come from economically disadvantaged communities.

Implementation of Early Childhood Education Programs

Mississippi does not provide a state funded early education program. High quality pre-kindergarten programs are a good investment of state resources. CDF-SRO supports state investment in quality early education programs that work in partnership with early childhood education providers, parents and communities to increase academic success for vulnerable children. This partnership would create a seamless transition from early learning centers into school for vulnerable children.

Because of CDF efforts -- legislative hearings, town hall meetings and strenuous advocacy -- investment in early education programs is now on the radar screen of legislators. Several bills have been introduced to fund pilot programs and to create a study committee.

Improved Access to Quality Health Care

In addition to building support for the national Healthy Child Campaign (www.childrensdefense.org/healthychild), CDF-SRO has been at the forefront of improving access to quality health care for the children of Mississippi. CDF-SRO and its partners increased the number of children enrolled in SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Program) from less than 700 to more than 60,000 in four years. This SCHIP outreach also saw a surge in the number of children enrolled in Medicaid. These efforts have been eroded by a Division of Medicaid's administrative policy requiring face-to-face interviews for certification and recertification. More than 65,000 of Mississippi's children lost their Medicaid or SCHIP health care coverage since this policy was instituted in January 2005. CDF-SRO has helped more than 2,000 of these children get re-enrolled since then.

Mississippi is the only state that requires face to face interviews, and CDF is working with legislators to eliminate this barrier. In 2008, CDF-SRO was instrumental in getting legislative support for an amendment to the Division of Medicaid's Appropriation bill to require the Division of Medicaid to rescind this policy.

Tax Reform

CDF-SRO supports creating a more progressive tax system that includes eliminating or decreasing the tax on groceries, increasing the tax on cigarettes and creating a fair and equitable personal income tax system.

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CDF-SRO is a leader in the Save Lives/Save Money campaign to increase the cigarette tax by \$1.00. A \$1.00 increase in the cigarette tax is the minimum required to achieve maximum health and financial benefits. Mississippi's current tax of 18 cents per pack is one of the lowest in the country and has not been raised since 1985. Studies show that every ten percent increase in the price of cigarettes produces a three to five percent reduction in overall cigarette consumption. An increase of \$1.00 would generate \$971 million in long-term health care savings -- 42,800 children would never smoke, 23,400 adults would quit smoking and \$163 million in additional revenue would go to the state.



Children's Defense Fund

During the 2006 legislative session, two bills passed both the Senate and House that would increase the tax on cigarettes while decreasing the tax on groceries. Both bills were vetoed by Governor Haley Barbour. In 2007 Governor Barbour used the power of his office to ensure that a cigarette tax bill died in committee.

Mississippi has one of the most regressive tax systems in the country because of its strong emphasis on the sales tax. It is one of only two states that fully taxes groceries without offsets. At seven percent, the tax on groceries is one of the highest in the nation. People earning less than \$19,000 pay 20 percent of the taxes in this state in large part because of the high grocery tax. Mississippi's income tax is flat—A family of four earning less than \$30,000 pays the same marginal tax rate as a family earning \$250,000. People who live below the federal poverty line pay state income taxes.

Child Welfare (Foster Care) Reform

For over a decade, the State of Mississippi has failed in its obligation to protect abused and neglected children. The state's child welfare system has collapsed under years of gross mismanagement and severe under funding. Many people involved in the child welfare system have said that it is so broken that there is virtually no child welfare system in Mississippi. Both Republican and Democrat administrations have refused to undertake the reforms required to protect the health and welfare of Mississippi's most vulnerable children.

CDF-SRO supports the development, implementation and funding of a comprehensive reform plan for the child welfare system and is also engaged in private efforts to help the state develop a system for protecting abused and neglected children. CDF-SRO monitors the implementation of the Olivia Y consent decree, the result of a lawsuit against the state, and reports the findings to key members of the legislature.

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