

Mayors' Commissions on Human Rights

Access to Power and Decision Making

"SRBWI is responsible for my being the Mayor of Hayneville. You invited me to Georgia for a regional convening and talked about our responsibility as women to change our communities. The meeting so inspired me that I came home and told my husband, I am going to run for Mayor. Of course, I want a Mayor's Commission on Human Rights. There is so much to be done."

-- Mayor Helenor Bell, Hayneville, Alabama*



Children's Defense Fund

From the beginning, SRBWI has recognized that advocacy focused on human rights is a powerful approach in achieving economic and social justice for southern rural black women. Exposing the glaring gap between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and daily lives of black women and children in the rural south ties these women to the international human rights movement in a way that is inspiring and unprecedented.

The Mayor's Commissions on Human Rights serve as the vehicle for organizing and involving SRBWI women of all ages in taking responsibility for the well-being of their communities in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi. The Commissions are led by black women elected officials and are made up of local women. They meet regularly and receive training in public policy advocacy to change the debilitating conditions in their communities – homelessness, inadequate education, lack of gainful employment and health care – that trap them and their children in poverty.

Strategic objectives are:

- Ensure access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making
- Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership

The six existing Commissions are located in:

- **Alabama** (Hayneville)
- **Georgia** (Douglas and Wilcox Counties)
- **Mississippi** (Anguilla, Leland and Metcalfe)

Additional Commissions are being formed in Shorter, Alabama and Camillia, Georgia.

In 2006, the Commissions gathered information on the status of women in their communities using a survey developed by SRBWI. The results were published in 2007 in a report: *The Rain Don't Fall to the Ground Down Here: The Status of Human Rights for Southern Rural Black Women*. This report, which illuminates the women's lives and points of view, is available at www.srbwi.org.

The mayors presented their findings in a workshop at a gathering of thousands of women from around the world, the U.S. Social Forum, in Atlanta, Georgia in June, 2007. They issued a Call to Action to address denials of basic human rights, and networked with others involved in national and international women's human rights work.

The data collected in the survey will serve as a baseline for SRBWI's annual tracking and reporting on whether quality of life conditions have improved, deteriorated, or remained stagnant. Based on the survey, too, the Mayor's Commissions now are developing and implementing a regional SRBWI action plan for the next 12 months with local and state advocacy agendas.

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*Hayneville, Alabama is the county seat of Lowndes County, where the Black Panther Party was founded and SNCC's Stokeley Carmichael and Bob Mants were field secretaries. Jonathan Daniels was murdered in the courthouse square steps away from City Hall, where Mayor Bell has her office.

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