



Political Brief

Issue 200-1233-02 January 2008

WHAT ARE WE KNOWN FOR? Two Days in August 2007

by Lydia Quarles, J.D.
Senior Policy Analyst

What are we known for? During two days in August 2007, national and local news outlets recognized characteristics of Mississippi society repeatedly. It wasn't the kind of publicity we would have asked for. The state's notoriety during those two days is not something that should make us proud, but each headline points up a fact about which we should be cognizant. Consider these headlines in August 28-29, 2007:

Clarion Ledger, August 28, 2007: Cases of syphilis in Mississippi have skyrocketed 130% from 2006. Cases of gonorrhea and chlamydia are also on the increase in the state, as are cases of whooping cough.

Associated Press, August 28, 2007: The Trust for America's Health, a research group that focuses on disease prevention, says Mississippi is the first state in the nation in which more than 30% of all adults are considered morbidly obese. It is the "fattest state in the nation."

U.S. Bureau of Census, August 28, 2007: Mississippi ranks second worst in the nation in the U. S. Department of Agriculture's "food insecurity" measure with an average of 16.5% of all Mississippi households being food insecure during the 2003-2005 period. [The measure ranks states on the basis of three-year rolling averages.] Only New Mexico exceeded Mississippi in percentage of households that find themselves food insecure; New Mexico's rate was 16.8%. During the 1999-2001 data period, Mississippi's food insecurity rate reached only 13.1% of households.

Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, August 29, 2007: Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the nation with 21.1% of residents living at or below the nationally established poverty level, a rise of 1.2% since 2000. At the same time, the nation's poverty rate registered its first major dip since 2000.

Clarion Ledger, August 29, 2007: Three inmates in Parchman's Unit 32, reserved for "the worst of the worst", have been murdered by other inmates within the last 90 days. Unit 32, subject of two consent decrees obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union (2002 and 2006) to improve "inhumane" living conditions, housed Earnest Lee Hargon, Boris Harper and Donald Reed, each of whom were killed during the summer of 2007 by homemade knives and spears fashioned by their fellows.

U.S. Bureau of Census, August 29, 2007: Mississippi is the nation's poorest state as measured by median annual household income (\$34,473).

These headlines appeared in just two consecutive days this past summer. Other Mississippi characterizations that surfaced last year include the following:

- Mississippi led the nation in high school dropouts with 21.1% of adults 25 and older reporting that they have not graduated from high school. U.S. Bureau of Census, September 11, 2007.
- Mississippi is tied for the third-highest rate of adults who smoke, with 25.1% of adults between the ages of 18-35 admitting being smokers. Center for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, September 28, 2007.
- Infant mortality in Mississippi stands at a rate of 11.4%. The national average is around 7%. Infant mortality is defined as deaths by the age of 1 year per thousand live births. The New York Times, April 22, 2007.

It is no wonder our state and its citizens are often the butt of late-night talk show jokes.

Mississippi is a state of limited resources and limited economic opportunities. However, the last two decades have brought economic stimuli to the state, principally in the form of casinos and associated revenue sources on the coast and the river, the Nissan plant and its support industries in Canton, and manufacturing plants such as SeverCorr and Eurocopter in the Highway 45 North corridor. The Toyota plant in northeast Mississippi, with its suppliers, should only enhance our economic posture.

What about our limited resources? Our leaders must make the hard decisions in order to make optimum use of our limited resources, just as our leaders have made the hard decisions which have brought economic stimuli to our state. While few would dispute that Mississippi's most important resource is our people, recent headlines demonstrate that our people are limited by poverty, bad habits, and poor education.

Most sociologists agree that education is the key to solving our most destructive problems. While Dr. Hank Bounds, State Department of Education, is concentrating his efforts on the drop-out rate, the fact is that educational improvement at all levels is fundamental to remove the characterizations of our society that make us the butt of jokes.

Educational improvement does begin with funding. *But it does not end with funding.* Funding is only one aspect of educational improvement. A critical feature of educational improvement that is not so easily denominated, and is perhaps much harder to effectuate than substantial funding, is an across the board commitment to educate the unschooled. Educational improvement will not occur in Mississippi on a grand scale until our society acknowledges its deficits and commits to bring appropriate education to each of our citizens, through pre-K, elementary, middle and high schools, trade schools, community colleges and higher education. But this is not enough. Educational improvement must be acknowledged as a life-time quest; non-traditional educational opportunities must occur in every community and for every age group. We must commit to educate the unschooled. Educational improvement in all quarters is the only way to capitalize on Mississippi's greatest resource – its citizens.

We encourage Mississippi's leaders to adequately fund education at all levels. But we encourage Mississippi's leaders to consider non-traditional educational opportunities specifically targeted to reach those not enrolled in public or private educational institutions within the state. Education must reach our citizens where they are – in their communities, and must provide relevant and practical information while at the same time capturing the imagination and stimulating in that citizen a quest for additional knowledge.

Is this too much to ask? Hopefully not. But without funding for non-traditional educational opportunities at the community level, the evolution of Mississippi from the "bottom of the list" to the "top of the pile" will

be incremental at best. Mississippi's citizens don't have that kind of time. We are dying of obesity, cancer, and ignorance.

When we think of community education, we think of libraries. So we began to formulate a community education initiative that could be pursued at the local level – through community libraries. In researching this concept, we identified the library's position as a viable tool to encourage citizen involvement in their communities while providing education and opportunity to influence the social fabric. We've located a model worthy of consideration. In a community education and involvement pilot project developed by the United Kingdom's Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC), the following community benefits were quantified:

- Community cohesion through involvement
- Increased feeling of interest in, ownership and control over community services
- Increased skills levels among community members
- Wider understanding of community, community services and obligations to community
- Appreciation of services that can be tailored to meet particular community needs
- Strengthening of community services through improved partnerships with community volunteers and community organizations
- Increased engagement in social and political processes
- Enhanced community dialog on topics of community interest
- Development of healthy, vibrant communities.

The benefits to the community members were identified as follows:

- Increased confidence
- Increased knowledge
- Stimulated quest for knowledge as quantified by an increase in reading and involvement in community discourse
- Broadened experiences
- Influenced career choices
- Opportunity to develop interest-based friendships.

On a more personal note, community volunteers who participated in the pilot project indicated the following improvements which they attribute to community engagement:

- 47% realized improvement in physical health and fitness
- 13% realized that they took fewer sick days from work
- 48% realized they felt less depressed
- 72% realized they felt less stressed.

Imagine that such results could evolve from a program with a modicum of funding from the government level! The Institute would urge the legislature to consider a funded pilot for Delta community libraries based on the MLAC model. It is a first step and its positive results can be evaluated and, if significant, replicated not only in the Delta but in other areas of the state. Let's engage and educate our people where we find them – not only in schools, but in communities.

We welcome 2008 and this legislative session with hope, faith, and the belief that Mississippi's leaders can change the answer to the question: What are we known for?

The Institute will revisit this idea with a technical brief later in the session which will be devoted to a model project for Mississippi's community libraries as community engagement vehicles.

About the Author

LYDIA QUARLES, J.D.

Lydia Quarles is a Senior Policy Analyst at the John C. Stennis Institute of Government, Mississippi State University. She received her Juris Doctorate in 1975 from Cumberland School of Law, Samford University, and her MA and BA from Mississippi University for Women, in 1972 and 1971 respectively, in political science and communication. After over a dozen years in the private practice of law in Alabama and Mississippi, she joined the Mississippi Workers' Compensation Commission as an Administrative Judge in 1993. Eight years later, in 2001, she was appointed Commissioner of the agency. In 2006, she resigned to join the Stennis Institute of Government.

Quarles remains active in bar work, and currently chairs the Women in the Profession Committee, a standing committee of the Mississippi Bar. She also serves as co-chair of the Mississippi Supreme Court's "Gender Fairness Implementation Study Committee" and acts as the Chief Operating Officer of the Workers' Compensation Section of the Mississippi Bar. She is a fellow of the Mississippi Bar Foundation, a recipient of the Mississippi Bar's Distinguished Service Award, a member of the Mississippi School for Math and Science Foundation Board and a member of the MUW Alumni Board. Quarles was recently honored by the American Bar Association's Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice Section, receiving the Mary C. Lawton Award for lasting contributions to the Mississippi Workers' Compensation Commission in the areas of alternative dispute resolution and access for Hispanic workers.

In 2004, Quarles was named one of Mississippi's 50 Leading Business Women by the Mississippi Business Journal; the Journal recognized her service to the State as a Commissioner as well as entrepreneurial skills developed in her property management business in Starkville, Spruill Property Management, LLC.



Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.

About the Institute



Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

The John C. Stennis Institute of Government *at Mississippi State University*