

The background of the entire page is a collage of three aerial night photographs of the Mississippi State Capitol building and the surrounding city of Jackson. The images are arranged in a triangular pattern, with the largest one in the center. The Capitol building is illuminated, and its dome is a prominent feature. The city lights are visible in the background, creating a vibrant urban scene.

One
Voice

2023

Legislative Priorities:

Raising Collective Power by Building Strong Communities

Every year, the Mississippi Legislature convenes to make important decisions that affect the quality of life of the state's 2.9 million residents and its diverse communities. These decisions, such as the amount of state revenue that should be budgeted for public schools, whether the state accepts federal funding to help provide affordable healthcare coverage to residents, the creation of new policies to help reduce mass incarceration, or whether the state can adequately fund key services and programs after tax cuts are enacted, determine the strength of our communities. Therefore, these decisions should be people-centered and community-focused.

For instance, the decision-making process begins with people through the election of representatives and continues beyond. Once the people elect representatives, those elected officials should consult residents and consider their input about the issues impacting their community. Then, elected officials should engage and inform their constituents about the decisions made during the legislative session—always keeping people and their communities in mind.

But far too often, we see policymakers make—or prohibit laws from passing—that go against the will and better interest of the people and communities they serve. Last year alone, the state passed the largest tax cut for the wealthy in the state’s history, failed to extend postpartum Medicaid coverage to mothers, continued to dilute black voter strength by not redrawing legislative districts representative of the state’s population, and more. This is on top of the years of legislative actions that have stripped key resources from communities, sustained poverty, widened wealth, race, and gender disparities, and neglected the needs of working families across the state.

One Voice believes that by building community awareness and increasing the capacity of communities, local organizations and leaders are empowered and provided opportunities to engage in the formation of public policy that affects their lives. Accordingly, this guide provides policy recommendations and context—always keeping in mind progress towards equity and poverty reduction—that will help local communities assess One Voice’s legislative priorities and connect local community action to policy, thereby raising collective consciousness through community power. Overall, to ensure communities thrive, One Voice’s legislative priorities include the following:

Tax and Budget

Improving the state’s budget and tax systems to help strengthen local communities

⬇ Legislative priorities:

- Improve the state’s budget process
- Strengthen the state’s income tax system
- Enact refundable state tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit
- Tackle the state’s grocery tax
- Support equitable, revenue-raising tax policies

Education

Advancing educational opportunities that ensure every child in Mississippi thrives, regardless of where they grow up

⬇ Legislative priorities:

- Fully fund and invest in education
- End practices that push students out of educational opportunity

Criminal Justice

Reforming the state’s criminal justice to reduce disparities and help support safe communities.

⬇ Legislative priorities:

- Reduce mass incarceration
- Improve prison conditions
- Support re-entry measures that reduce collateral consequences, improve public safety, and reduce recidivism

Voting Rights

Ensuring that all voters have an equal opportunity to participate in the political process

⬇ Legislative priorities:

- Secure the restoration of voting rights for disenfranchised individuals with felony convictions through the state’s suffrage process
- Expand voting rights
- Restore and amend the state’s ballot initiative process

Working Families Support

Improving the lives of working families

⬇ Legislative priorities:

- Expand Medicaid
- Expand postpartum coverage to mothers
- Improve the state’s TANF program
- Improve climate justice
- Secure a livable wage
- Enact state paid family and medical leave
- Improve the state’s equal pay law

Table of Contents

01

Tax and Budget

Improving the state's budget and tax systems to help strengthen local communities

05

Education

Advancing educational opportunities that ensure every child in Mississippi thrives, regardless of where they grow up

08

Criminal Justice

Reforming the state's criminal justice system to reduce disparities and help support safe

12

Voting Rights

Ensuring that all voters have an equal opportunity to participate in the political process

15

Working Families Support

Improving the lives of Mississippi's working families

17

Conclusion

2023 Legislative Priorities:

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Tax and Budget

Improving the state's budget and tax systems to help strengthen local communities

Legislative priorities:

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- Strengthen the state's income tax system
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- Tackle the state's grocery tax
- Support equitable, revenue-raising tax policies

Background

Improving the state's budget and tax systems will help strengthen local communities. State budget and tax decisions directly influence the quality of education that our children receive, the condition of the roads that we travel, the safety of our communities, and the level of trust we can place in professionals such as doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and nurses.

Our state needs strong fiscal systems to ensure that the necessary funds are available to cover the costs of the services—education, road maintenance, and public health and safety—that all Mississippi residents depend on every day. And since the state gets its money from the people and is responsible for providing services with that money, the state should be accountable to the people.

Specifically, a more open, inclusive state budget process is needed to guide state lawmakers in making spending decisions that account for all of the state's 2.9 residents—regardless of race, gender, or zip code—and ensure that every state agency has the funds it needs to provide services and pay its workers.

In addition, Mississippi's tax policies should promote revenue growth to help fund current government services and programs and make investments in Mississippi's future. State taxes make up the second largest source of funds—behind funds from the federal government—used to pay for the programs and services we all use and want, like funding for quality schools, affordable healthcare, safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, safe roads and bridges, and water.

Tax policies should also be equitable. An equitable tax system is important because it ensures everyone pays their fair share of taxes to fund the state's services and programs, contributes to a more stable economy by relying on the collection of taxes from those most able to pay, and promotes income, race, and gender equity throughout the state.

However, as the result of its high reliance on sales, property, and other taxes levied on goods and services like fuel, tobacco, and alcohol, Mississippi's tax system is largely regressive. The state's largely regressive tax system causes the state's lower- and middle-income families to pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes than higher-income families. Far from advancing equity, Mississippi's tax system is also driving a larger wedge not only between high- and low-income families but also between white families and Black and Hispanic families. As a result of disparities in tax rates by income level, Black and Hispanic families face the highest effective tax rates in the state while also having among the lowest average incomes.

In all, policymakers can generate wealth, racial, and gender equity and promote economic growth for the state and its residents with better decisions about the state's budget and tax systems.

Policy Recommendations

Improve the state's budget-making process to include open, inclusive budgeting

Every year, through the budget appropriation process, the Mississippi State Legislature passes a collection of laws that determine how to spend revenue from the federal government, state tax collections, and other sources in order to provide services and programs for the state's 2.9 million residents. There are many stages in the state budgeting process, many players that affect the outcome of budget decisions, and many sources of revenue, but over the years, Mississippi's budget process has become shorter and less transparent.¹ For example, state budget hearings that used to last about a month now take place in less than a day.² Also, during the 2022 Legislative Session, a small number of state lawmakers made spending decisions about a state budget of more than \$7 billion in just a two-day period.³

There are also implications of racial inequities within the state's budget system. For instance, tax cuts that reduce state revenue and inequitable spending decisions widen existing disparities in education, health, criminal justice, and economic outcomes in underserved communities throughout the state.

To improve the state's budget process, state lawmakers enact participatory budgeting practices that provide Mississippians, particularly marginalized communities, greater access to information about the cost and impact of government programs before budget decisions are made. A more inclusive, transparent budgeting process will ensure that the state's budget reflects the priorities, wishes, and needs of all Mississippi families

Strengthen, not weaken, the state's income tax system

The income tax is the only tax in Mississippi that makes the wealthy pay a larger share than the poor. Getting rid of it or reducing it would make our tax code less fair— while robbing our state of the resources it needs to fund our future. One Voice will continue to oppose the full elimination of the state individual income tax and support the strengthening of the state's income tax system.

During the 2022 Legislative Session, Mississippi enacted the state's largest tax cuts for the. Under the state's new tax plan, Mississippi adopted a 4% "flat tax" on incomes over \$10,000 starting in 2026.⁴ The final impact of the bill will result in a \$6,700 tax cut for the top 1% of Mississippians, or those earning \$485,000, on average.⁵ In comparison, middle-income earners in the state will receive \$240 in savings, on average.⁶ The state's lowest-income earners, or those earning \$19,000, on average, will receive an average savings of \$14—the cost of one adult movie ticket.⁷ In fact, less than 20% of all tax cut dollars will go towards families making less than \$50,000.⁸

Meanwhile, the tax cut will cost the state approximately \$535 million annually once fully phased in.⁹ This lost revenue would add to the more than 50 tax cuts totaling \$577 million since 2012 that have mostly benefited Mississippi's wealthiest individuals and corporations.¹⁰

Altogether, the state's tax plan widens racial and gender income and wealth disparities by providing large tax cuts to the wealthy and minimal savings to everyone else. It reduces the state's ability to meet the needs of working families and to invest in communities – white, Black, or brown, and rural and urban alike – that our state historically excluded from opportunity. It also strips critical resources from services we rely on daily, like schools, affordable health care, and roads and bridges, undermining our economy both today and down the road.

Even as lawmakers passed the largest tax cut in the state's history for wealthy Mississippians, many state lawmakers continue to push for full elimination of the state income tax. We know that further cuts to Mississippi's income tax system will be worse for the state. As such, state lawmakers should seek to strengthen, not weaken the state's individual income tax system. One way to strengthen the state's income tax system is to stop the bleeding. Under the current tax plan, income tax cuts will be

phased in over four years. In year one of the tax cuts, Mississippi will eliminate the state's four percent tax bracket and keep the five percent flat tax on incomes over \$10,000.¹¹ This will cost the state approximately \$200,000.¹² If the state were to keep the five percent tax bracket without further cutting the tax, the state could prevent further revenue losses and deepening income and race disparities.

Along with keeping the state's 5% income tax bracket, state policymakers could also enact more bold, more progressive measures. For instance, the state could create a new 6% income tax bracket at \$100,000.¹³ By increasing and strengthening the state's income tax, Mississippi would gain, not lose, revenue, and it would have no impact on the bottom 80% of income earners in the state.¹⁴

Enact a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

EITCs are tax credits that benefit low-to-moderate-income working families by reducing personal income tax liability based on a certain percentage of the family's earnings. The tax credit benefits individuals who earn income through low-wage jobs. The credit provides a much-needed boost for working families who are raising children. EITCs also are particularly helpful for women, Black, and other workers of color—groups that historically and disproportionately work in low-wage jobs. Eligibility for the tax credit depends on the family's or individual's income, including salaries and wages, filing status (married, single, etc.) and number of qualifying children.

Since its enactment in 1975, the federal EITC has provided a much-needed boost to working families and has played an active role in reducing poverty.¹⁵ According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2018, the federal EITC lifted about 5.6 million people, including about 3 million children, out of poverty.¹⁶ It also reduced the severity of poverty for another 15.6 million people, including 6.1 million children.¹⁷ As of December 2020, 359,000 Mississippi families filed federal EITC claims for a combined total EITC amount of \$1 billion.¹⁸ The average EITC amount for the state totaled \$2,903. This amount is higher than any other state in the nation.¹⁹

Mississippi should join the thirty-one states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico that have boosted opportunity for workers through a state EITC. State EITCs are easy to administer, cost less than 2% of the state tax revenues each year, and they are specifically targeted to low-and moderate-income workers. If implemented, a state EITC should be refundable. Refundable credits allow taxpayers to receive a refund for the portion of the credit that exceeds their income tax bill.

A state EITC in Mississippi set to 10% of the federal credit and made refundable, would benefit nearly 400,000 Mississippi households, and would put an average of \$288 back in the hands of Mississippi working families.²⁰ The lowest 20%, or Mississippians earning \$23,000 on average, of income earners in the state would receive the most benefit from a 10% refundable state EITC, and Mississippians would receive a total of \$112 million in benefits.²¹

Enact a Child Tax Credit (CTC)

Along with the EITC, Mississippi lawmakers should consider enacting a child tax credit. The United States Congress enacted the federal CTC in 1997. According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, the CTCs expansion in 2021, as a result of the American Rescue Plan, was the single most effective policy for reducing child poverty in 2021.²² Along with providing relief for working families with children, the federal CTC helps families make ends meet, help children thrive now and in the future and boost local and state economies.²³ The federal CTC provides up to \$2,000 per eligible child (under age 17 at the end of the tax year) and includes a \$500 nonrefundable credit for families with qualifying non-child dependents.²⁴ Currently, nine states have enacted a CTC.²⁵ If Mississippi were to enact a CTC, it should be refundable, meaning that families should receive a tax refund even if the credit exceeds the amount of their tax bill. A Mississippi CTC should also be extended per child, including a young child bonus, and be eligible for all residents. It should be indexed so it does not erode over time and should be potentially advanceable/monthly. Given that Mississippi has the highest child poverty rate in the nation, state lawmakers should seriously consider enacting a state CTC to help build on the benefits of the federal credit.

Tackle the state's high grocery tax

Recently, state lawmakers have expressed renewed interest in reducing the state's grocery tax. Across the country, there are thirteen states that impose a sales tax on groceries.²⁶ Mississippi, Alabama, and South Dakota are the only states of the thirteen to tax groceries at the full state sales tax rate. Mississippi's current sales tax rate of 7.0% results in the state having the highest sales tax rate on food purchases in the nation.²⁷ State lawmakers should consider providing much-needed relief to Mississippi families with low incomes that are most impacted by the tax and who are disproportionately Black and other Mississippians of color and women.

For example, if state policymakers were to cut the state's grocery tax in half, from 7% to 3.5%, it would provide grocery tax cuts to all income groups in the state and cost the state approximately \$200 million annually—much less than the 2022 tax cuts.²⁸ Even more, as a reference, if Mississippi would stop the bleeding from its current tax plan and keep the 4% income tax bracket, state lawmakers could almost eliminate the state's grocery tax by reducing it from 7% to 1% for much less than the cost of this year's income tax cuts.²⁹ Another option would be for state lawmakers to enact a refundable grocery tax credit, targeted to lower-and middle-income families, to give money back to families who are struggling with the rising cost of food.³⁰

Enact revenue-raising tax policies

State lawmakers have approved over \$1 billion in tax cuts since 2012.³¹ Not only have these tax cuts mainly benefited the wealthy and corporations, they have inhibited the state's ability to fully fund public schools, rural healthcare centers, roads, bridges, and more.³²

Therefore, state lawmakers should not consider any one tax policy in isolation. Tax plans—even those that are equitable and that would provide tax relief for low-and middle-income earners— should include policies that increase state revenue to help fully fund critical state programs and services and support much-needed state investments like Medicaid expansion, tax credits, and infrastructure.

For example, state lawmakers should consider strengthening the state's income tax by stopping further reductions to the tax and considering enacting a higher income tax bracket. For example, with a higher income tax bracket at 6% for Mississippians earning \$100,000 and more, state lawmakers could cut the grocery tax in half for a fourth of the cost of the current tax cut plan.³³ They should also consider other revenue raising tax policies like eliminating retirement income tax exemptions for the wealthy, reinstating higher corporate franchise taxes, restoring the state inheritance and estate tax, and expanding the state's sale tax base to include additional services. Altogether, higher state revenue means that state lawmakers would have the resources to meet the immediate needs of Mississippi families and invest in our future.

Education

Advancing educational opportunities that ensure every child in Mississippi thrives, regardless of where they grow up

Legislative priorities:

- Fully fund and invest in education
- End practices that push students out of educational opportunity

Background

Education is often thought of as the great equalizer in society. However, in many cases, lack of infrastructure and critical investments into schools and the communities in which they serve leads to more persistent inequities. In recent years, we have seen an attack on public schools through the passage of legislation that diverts funds away from public schools, creates unnecessary barriers to the teaching of Mississippi history, expands the ability of charter schools to open, consolidates school districts, and moves control of local school districts from communities in which they reside to the state, for example.

At One Voice, one of our goals is to find and resource equitable education opportunities for children and families across the state of Mississippi. In all, we believe that every student should have access to schools with the resources, opportunities, and support that make academic success possible and that create strong ties among families, students, schools, and communities. In order to dramatically improve the future of its students and their communities and expand the skills and diversity of its workforce, state lawmakers must strengthen taxation of wealth and high incomes to increase education funding and end practices that push students out of educational opportunity.

Policy Recommendations

Fully fund education

Mississippi's children deserve well-funded public schools for career and college readiness. Creating an equitable structure for economic mobility is key to addressing persistent poverty and ensuring better opportunities for Mississippi's future adults. To ensure that all Mississippi students thrive, state lawmakers should consider the following:

1. Expand state-funded, quality early pre-k programs: Critical investments begin as early as birth. After their basic needs are met, children then need access to well-funded wrap-around 3-year-old and 4-year-old Pre-k programs. These programs improve emotional and cognitive development and learning to form relationships outside the home. To our state's credit, Mississippi is one of only five states that meets all ten of the benchmarks set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for minimum quality standards in state-funded pre-k programs.³⁴ While quality standards are high, lack of state funding prevents many districts from implementing high-quality pre-k programs. State-funded, public pre-k serve only 7% of the state's four-year-olds due to lack of funding.³⁵ For 2020-2021, NIEER ranked Mississippi 38th in providing access to state-funded pre-k programs.³⁶ Our state would benefit and maximize equitable opportunities when we expand opportunity if we invest in the front end of the educational system.

2. Fully fund the Mississippi Adequate Education Program: The Mississippi State Legislature should fully fund the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) making it possible for school districts throughout the state to provide high-quality public school education for Mississippi’s children. In 1997, the Mississippi State Legislature passed the MAEP, a funding formula set by state law to determine the amount of funding the state should provide each public school district in order to meet academic standards established by the Mississippi State Board of Education.¹⁴ Since its inception, MAEP has only been fully funded twice.¹⁵ The state last fully funded education during the 2007- 2008 school year.¹⁶ Since its inception, Mississippi’s public schools have been underfunded by over \$3.3 billion.¹⁷ For the 2022-2023 school year, Mississippi’s public schools are underfunded by over \$279 million.¹⁸ We know adequate school funding yields better student achievement based on past results. For example, following full funding of the MAEP in 2008 and near-full funding in 2009, Mississippi students had the highest gains in fourth-grade reading in the nation. The evidence is clear. When we fully invest in our children, they are able to achieve higher levels of academic success.

3. Expand community school models that help families and kids thrive: Student success is impacted both by factors outside of school and by what happens in school. The benefits of community schools are that they expand educational equity by addressing systemic barriers that limit opportunities for students and families—often based on race and class—thereby ensuring fair access to the supports that will prepare students for future success.³⁷ This is because community schools pay particular attention to challenges children face—such as lack of stable housing, inadequate medical and dental care, and hunger.³⁸ They also coordinate the delivery of services to avoid duplication and maximize student support.³⁹ State lawmakers can expand community schools practices by:

- a. Funding policies and resources across state agencies such as health and human services, workforce development, and parks and recreation to advance community schools; and
- b. Leveraging federal funding from the Every Student Succeeds Act, the main public education law in the country, which provides more flexibility for states and districts to approach education in a way that best suits the needs of their district and the families they serve.

4. Increase meaningful access and affordability in our higher education system: Nationally and statewide, the cost of higher education tuition has skyrocketed over the last decade. Altogether, there are eight public institutions of higher learning and fifteen community colleges in Mississippi that comprise the state’s “higher-ed” programs. In 2022, all of Mississippi’s publicly funded universities, with the exception of Jackson State University, increased their tuition.¹⁹ However, families cannot keep pace with the rising cost of tuition plus room and board. As a result, the in-state pathway and pipeline to career and economic advancement is becoming more and more out of reach for Mississippi students.

Even more, while the state offers financial aid, some qualifications, such as a 29 ACT score, often disproportionately benefits white, wealthier students from well-resourced school districts with access to ACT preparation, which further widens the racial wealth gap and harms Black families and other families of color.

Overall, Mississippians are much more likely to be in debt from student loans. The average student loan debt in Mississippi is higher than the nationwide average.⁴⁰ And because these families rely on loans to fund their education, the state is creating an entrenched system of debt rather than a pathway to prosperity.

To help increase access and affordability to Mississippi's higher-ed programs, state lawmakers should consider increasing funding to higher-ed, increasing state financial aid, and targeting more aid to students in need.

End practices that push students out of educational opportunity

Kids are treated and punished differently within the schools they attend. Despite similar levels of misbehavior, Black children are disciplined at higher rates than white children, even for the exact same behavior. These racial disparities in discipline create a school-to-prison pipeline that pushes students out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

One Voice supports the abolishment of corporal punishment which is a discipline method in which a supervising adult deliberately inflicts pain upon a child in response to a child's unacceptable behavior. These practices include spanking, paddling, confinement in small spaces, excessive exercise, and fixed postures for long periods of time. Thirty-one states have already abolished state-sanctioned corporal punishment. During the 2017-2018 school year, Mississippi had the highest number of reported incidents of corporal punishment (20,309) in the nation.⁴¹ Corporal punishment disproportionately impacts Black children in the state.⁴² During the 2017-2018 school year, of all Black children receiving corporal punishment, 50% were in Mississippi.⁴³ No other state comes close to this highest share of all corporal punishment incidents involving Black children. As a state, we must ensure that all of our children have safe equitable school environments to thrive and are not disproportionately impacted by early touches with the criminal justice system by abolishing corporal punishment.

Criminal Justice

Reforming the state's criminal justice system to reduce disparities and help support safe

Legislative priorities:

- Reduce mass incarceration
- Improve prison conditions
- Reform the state's bail practices
- Reduce collateral consequences, decrease recidivism, and increase access to reentry

Background

One Voice is working in communities throughout Mississippi to support criminal justice reform by reducing disparities within the state's criminal justice system, reducing the excessive rate of incarceration in our state, improving conditions in adult and juvenile facilities, reducing the inequitable financial and social costs of incarceration caused by collateral consequences to incarceration, and supporting re-entry services.

Mississippi leads the world with the highest incarceration rate—incarcerating more people per capita than any state in the United States or across the world, including China, Russia, and Iran.⁴⁴ In 2021, Mississippi incarcerated over 18,000 individuals. Not only is Mississippi's high incarceration rate a sign of the failure of the state's criminal justice system, but it is also extremely costly. Continued increases in the state's incarceration rate could cost Mississippi taxpayers upwards of \$100 million a year by the end of 2023.⁴⁵

In addition, the state's high incarceration rate intersects with many other matters. For instance, the large number of Mississippians incarcerated have caused overcrowding in jails and prisons throughout the state. Overcrowding has exacerbated the problem of poor prison and jail conditions. Mass incarceration has impacted Mississippi's youth as far too many are pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system. It also impacts voting rights, including the permanent stripping of voting rights for Mississippians with certain felony convictions, and economic justice, including the numerous economic barriers faced by individuals with contacts with the system, including excessive fines and fee collections and barriers to employment for people with criminal records.

Reforming the state's criminal justice system will benefit all of Mississippi.

Policy Recommendations

Reduce mass incarceration

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world.⁴⁶ And as of August 2022, Mississippi became number one in mass incarceration—incarcerating more people than any other state in the country.⁴⁷ There are many factors that contribute to mass incarceration. For instance, over-policing and over-criminalization, or the excessive misuse of laws and regulations deemed criminal, have put tens of thousands of Mississippians behind bars, sometimes for an excessive number of years.⁴⁸ Also, harsh and excessive sentencing laws, particularly for minor, non-violent drug offenses have contributed to high incarceration rates in the state.⁴⁹

Even more, nationwide and in Mississippi, mass incarceration has disproportionately impacted Black people and other people of color, immigrants, and people experiencing poverty.⁵⁰ In Mississippi, over 60% of those incarcerated are Black, despite Black people representing less than 40% of the state's population.⁵¹

Criminal justice reform by state leaders has, in the past, largely centered around early releases, including probation and parole reform, increased access to drug courts, lessened penalties for individuals who committed nonviolent offenses, and reentry planning, including providing individuals incarcerated with driver's licenses before returning to the community.⁵² Despite previous attempts at reform, the state's jail population is nearly as high as ever.

The impact of mass incarceration is far-reaching. It impacts not only those individuals incarcerated, but it impacts families and communities, even years after a person incarcerated is released.⁵³ To reduce mass incarceration state lawmakers should, at least, consider policies that --focus on the following:

- Addressing sentencing laws to set lower penalties for low-level, non-violent offenses, particularly drug offenses.
- Eliminate the state's habitual offender law that adds years to an individual's sentence because they have been previously convicted of crimes and allow for greater judicial discretion in sentencing.
- Increase alternatives to incarcerations for Mississippians suffering from mental health and drug abuse.
- Expanding probation and parole reforms to allow alternatives to incarceration, provide a method of earlier release from incarceration, and provide alternatives to incarceration for those with technical parole and probation violations.

Improve prison conditions

Prison conditions that include overcrowding, violence, poor medical care, and lack of access to treatment education, or rehabilitation are a direct result of mass incarceration. Criminal justice reform efforts that seek to improve prison conditions seek to protect individuals incarcerated and create increased success of reentry into their community.

Poor prison conditions in Mississippi have led to scrutiny from the federal government. For example, earlier this year, the United States Department of Justice uncovered unconstitutional conditions at Parchman, the Mississippi State Penitentiary. The Department found that the Mississippi Department of Corrections failed to protect incarcerated persons from violence from other incarcerated persons, failed to meet the mental health needs of incarcerated persons, failed to take adequate suicide prevention measures, and used prolonged restrictive housing practices that placed incarcerated persons at risk of "serious harm from psychological deterioration."⁵⁴ In addition, after additional investigations by the Department of Justice, Mississippi's Department of Corrections installed air conditioners at the facility—the first time in 121 years.⁵⁵ Prior to the installation, temperatures inside the facility reached up to 145 degrees and jeopardized the health of those incarcerated as well as staff.⁵⁶

These poor prison conditions are not unique to Parchman. In October 2022, a federal judge lifted a ten-year consent decree on the Henley-Young Patton Juvenile Justice Center, a facility that provides short-term care and custody for youth between 12-17 years of age that have been accused of misdemeanor or felony offenses.⁵⁷

Under that consent decree, the federal government ordered the jail to improve conditions at the facility including improvements to the jail's practices of "regularly isolating children in small cells for 20-23 hours a day and subjecting them to sensory deprivation," lack of continued access to educational and counseling services, and denial of serious mental health services.⁵⁸

To ensure that our state's criminal justice system complies with constitutional standards, to promote public safety, and to ensure the rights of all Mississippians, state lawmakers should tackle mass incarceration to help reduce overcrowding and help ensure that the state's facilities comply with constitutional prohibitions against cruel and unusual punishment.

Reform the state's bail practices

According to the Bail Project, more than half of the Mississippians in jail have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial.²⁰ This issue is even more concerning for Mississippians who cannot afford to pay cash bail. Throughout the state, justice, and municipal court judges improperly impose cash bail and fees as a condition for the defendants' release, and cash bail is used heavily in felony cases.²¹ Because of the state's high poverty rate, many defendants are unable to pay the bail required in order to be released from incarceration as they await trial.

Challenges with cash bail create concerns with the state's bail industry as a whole. The bail industry in Mississippi is largely run by private companies that operate with no oversight.²² According to a report conducted by the Marshall Project, in 2018, Mississippi had 193 bail companies that collected \$43 million in fees in 18 months.²³

The wealth that accumulates across the state on the backs of indigent criminal defendants, who are presumed innocent under the law, as a result of the state's rules around cash bail is another stain on the state's criminal justice system. Subsequent reforms and a series of legal challenges have drawn tighter scrutiny over the bail industry and greater concern about indigent defendants, particularly those accused of low-level offenses, unable to make cash bail to secure their release and prolonged pretrial detention. But these changes are not enough.

State lawmakers can enact more meaningful reforms to ensure that people are not incarcerated simply because they cannot afford their release. For instance, state lawmakers should consider ending money bail entirely, while simultaneously enacting legislation to tackle onerous pretrial conditions except where necessary to prevent imminent violence or willful flight.²⁴

Reduce collateral consequences, decrease recidivism, and increase access to reentry

Once an individual is released from the custody and supervision of the Mississippi Department of Corrections, that individual is likely to face consequences from their interaction with the criminal justice system—no matter how brief that interaction is. Collateral consequences from an interaction with the criminal justice system may include the inability to get a driver's license, a permanent criminal record, the permanent loss of voting rights, ineligibility for housing, the revocation of a business or professional license, and more.⁵⁹ Some collateral consequences are related to a legitimate public safety reason such as the revocation of a firearm license and some may be directly related to a particular crime such as sex offender registration.⁶⁰ But for far too many individuals, these collateral consequences impact the individual's ability to secure employment and stable housing, reestablish familial connections, and integrate themselves back into their community.

Creating policies to reduce collateral consequences will help reduce recidivism rates and ensure that individuals are not rearrested, reconvicted, and do not return to our jails and prisons. In Mississippi, the three-year recidivism rate is approximately 33%. Mississippi's five-year recidivism rate is more than 77%.

Creating policies to reduce collateral consequences, decrease recidivism rates will improve public safety, help support individuals' successful reentry into society, and help reduce the state's high incarceration rate. As a result, state lawmakers should consider investing in and increasing access to human services or public assistance programs related to education, housing, employment, and health to help individuals obtain the help they need to get on their feet and promote stability. State law-

makers should also consider reducing state and local reliance on fines and fees as a means of revenue collection throughout the entirety of the criminal legal process so that incarcerated individuals experiencing poverty do not face even greater financial burdens upon their release from incarceration.

Voting Rights

Ensuring that all voters have an equal opportunity to participate in the political process

Legislative priorities:

- Secure the restoration of voting rights for disenfranchised individuals with felony convictions by forming a more clear, effective suffrage procedure and reforming the state's disenfranchisement laws
- Expand voting rights
- Restore the state's ballot initiative process

Background

The power to vote and elect qualified representatives is a clear and objective path to acquiring freedom. However, that right has long been denied or restricted to far too many people. And many obstacles lie in the way of electoral freedom, such as voter I.D. laws, voter purging, voter suppression, polling place closures and consolidations, gerrymandering, and disenfranchisement, just to name a few. One Voice's aim is to ensure that all people have an equal opportunity to participate in the political process. We work to secure voting rights for all residents, prevent voter intimidation and suppression, elevate underserved voices, and seek opportunities to widen political participation. In all, our interests lie in restoration, advocacy, redistricting, and the mobilization of voters.

Policy Recommendations

Secure the restoration of voting rights for disenfranchised individuals with felony convictions by forming a more clear, effective suffrage procedure and reforming the state's disenfranchisement laws. Mississippi is one of twelve states in which individuals may be disenfranchised, or restricted from voting, while incarcerated, under criminal justice supervision outside of prison, or permanently in many cases. Currently, the state permanently restricts voting after completion of sentence from those convicted of the following twenty-three offenses: voter fraud, armed robbery, arson, bigamy, bribery, carjacking, embezzlement, extortion, felony bad check, felony shoplifting, forgery, larceny, murder, obtaining money or goods under false pretense, perjury, rape, receiving stolen goods, robbery, statutory rape, theft, timber larceny and unlawful taking of a vehicle.⁶¹

Mississippi ranks highest in the nation in the percentage of disenfranchised individuals with felony convictions as of 2020.⁶² Nearly eleven percent of the state's voting-age population are disenfranchised.⁶³ And nearly sixteen percent— twice the national average for African Americans—of the state's black voting age population are disenfranchised.⁶⁴ Persons seeking to regain the right to vote can attempt to do so in three different ways: they can apply for a pardon from the Governor; they can apply for an Executive Order Restoring Civil Rights from the Governor; or they can seek to have the Mississippi State Legislature pass a Bill of Suffrage on their behalf, which must pass with a two-thirds majority.⁶⁵

As it stands, the state's suffrage procedure is ambiguous and subjective. Individuals eligible for the restoration of their voting rights must first submit a form detailing either conviction and date of arrest to their state representative or state senator to introduce legislation on their behalf that grants them suffrage. This information is then submitted to a Suffrage Subcommittee under the Judiciary B Subcommittee. A legislative assistant sends this information to the Department of Corrections where a thorough background check is performed. The chair of the Judiciary Committee selects the applications that are allowed to be voted on by the full committee. Additionally, as mentioned above, this procedure is an ineffective method for actually restoring voting rights to those disenfranchised. One Voice's proposal to establish a process for individuals to request suffrage through the legislative process is outlined below.

- Applications for suffrage are accepted to Judiciary committees of both houses from a member of the district represented.
- Applications are reviewed by Judiciary administrative staff. This review includes the following criteria:
- Verification of identity established by verification of driver's license or photo ID and Social Security number
- Verification of conviction(s) and completion of sentence/terms of conviction; fines, restitution, etc.
- Applicants may submit a one-page letter describing status of employment, education, and rehabilitation. and proof of citizenship.
- Applicants may also submit up to three (3) letters of support for restoration of suffrage from employer, family member or community member.
- Once application documents are compiled, they will be submitted to Judiciary subcommittees for review. Judiciary subcommittees will submit recommendations to full committee.
- Suffrage applicants will be notified of the decision of the committee before the end of the Legislative session.

Expand voting rights

Mississippi's voting laws are some of the most restrictive in the nation.⁶⁶ For instance, Mississippi is one of only three states to permanently restrict people convicted of certain felonies from voting.⁶⁷ Mississippi also requires a photo ID to cast a ballot in person at the polls or by absentee ballot in the circuit or municipal clerk's office, does not provide no-excuse absentee voting, does not allow early voting, and does not allow mail-in voting, with the exception of a few categories of absentee voting.⁶⁸

To ensure the expansion of voter rights and access, protect election integrity through voter registration and machinery, and secure the restoration of voting rights for disenfranchised individuals state lawmakers should consider the following:

- Eliminate voter purging policies
- Prohibit strict voter ID laws
- Reform voter registration procedures to allow for automatic, online, and same day voter registration, as well as extended voting hours
- Address language barriers to voting
- Allow for no-excuse early voting and mail-in voting
- Extended polling hours and locations

Restore the state's ballot initiative process

Mississippi's initiative law was a process by which voters could place constitutional amendments directly on the ballot when the Legislature refuses to act on issues important to them.⁶⁹ In 2021, the Mississippi Supreme Court struck down an initiative legalizing medical marijuana and ruled that the process for gathering signatures for an initiative to be placed on a ballot was unconstitutional.⁷⁰ At the time of the ruling, there were six pending ballot initiatives, including initiatives to expand Medicaid, allow early voting, and approve recreational marijuana use.⁷¹ Prior to the Supreme Court's ruling, Mississippi voters changed the state flag through the initiative process.

The ruling made Mississippi the only state in recent history to overturn its initiative process.⁷² And because the Legislature could not agree on a plan to restore the initiative process during the 2022 Legislative Session, state government is now even less accountable to the people. Restoring the state's initiative process will require two-thirds votes of the members of each chamber in the Legislature.⁷³ It will also require state leaders to create a process in which Mississippians regain a pathway for ensuring their voices are heard that may be important to them but are less popular with state leadership. State lawmakers should restore the state's ballot initiative process by creating legislation that reduces complexities with the process, such as requirements that make it extremely difficult to gather the required number of signatures to place an initiative on the ballot, and ensure that the will of Mississippians become law.

Working Families Support

Improving the lives of Mississippi's working families

Legislative priorities:

- Expand Medicaid
- Expand postpartum coverage for mothers
- Improve the state's TANF program
- Improve climate justice
- Secure a livable wage
- Enact state paid family and medical leave
- Improve the state's equal pay law

Background

In addition to One Voice's policy priorities for Mississippi's 2023 Legislative Session, our organization supports a number of policies that seek to improve the lives of the state's working families.

Policy Recommendations

Expand Medicaid

Currently, there are over 100,000 uninsured adults in Mississippi with incomes below the poverty line who are caught in the Medicaid "coverage gap" and who would be eligible for Medicaid if the state were to expand its Medicaid program. However, Mississippi is one of twelve states that has not yet expanded Medicaid.

By expanding Medicaid, Mississippi could not only increase access to healthcare for those with low incomes, it could also help reduce health-related disparities, support financial stability among low-income families, and improve the stability of health systems, including rural hospitals and community health centers. In addition, Medicaid coverage provides long-term benefits for children. Children with Medicaid do better in school and miss fewer school days due to illness or injury, research shows. They are also more likely to finish high school, attend college, and graduate from college; they earn more as adults; and they experience fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations. Even more, expanding Medicaid will greatly benefit the state economy. According to a 2021 report from state economists, Mississippi would save approximately \$206 million to \$227 million annually between 2022 and 2027 if it expanded the program.⁷⁴

Mississippi cannot truly address the issue of access to affordable healthcare and ensure a healthier future community and economy for all Mississippians without expanding Medicaid.

Extend postpartum coverage to mothers from three to twelve months

During the 2022 Legislative Session, a bill to extend postpartum care for mothers who already qualify for Medicaid from sixty days to twelve months died. State lawmakers should reconsider the policy. Medicaid is a critical source of coverage for maternal care in Mississippi and covers the greatest portion of births each year as well as the most women at risk of negative outcomes.⁷⁵ In Mississippi, 60% of births are covered by Medicaid.⁷⁶ Forty percent of maternal deaths in Mississippi occur more than six postpartum.⁷⁷ And pregnancy-related complications affect Black women in Mississippi at alarming rates. Black

women in Mississippi are three times likelier to die of pregnancy-related complications than white women.⁷⁸ Uninterrupted access to services through continued health coverage allows women who are at the greatest risk to access timely care which saves lives. States, too, could benefit through reduced costs for complicated care. To ensure the needs of women, children, and families in the state are met, state lawmakers should do everything possible to keep women alive and healthy, especially during the critical postpartum months.

Improve the state's TANF program

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a cash assistance program that combines federal and state funding to provide much-needed support to working families experiencing poverty. As a critical tool of our nation's economic support system and critical support for some families experiencing a crisis or change of circumstances, across the nation, and especially in Mississippi, TANF falls short of what it should be.

Across the nation, TANF provides inadequate cash assistance and reaches few families in need.⁷⁸ In Mississippi, the TANF Program does even less. Low caseloads, low benefits, restrictive eligibility requirements, and a growing welfare scandal significantly reduces TANF's intended goals. The harmful, racist legacy of cash assistance programs—shaped by false narratives about work ethic and deservingness—has been particularly harmful for Mississippi's Black families and other families of color.⁷⁹ Also, state control that imposes eligibility restrictions to make it hard for families to apply and enroll in TANF and to take benefits away from people who do not meet various requirements plays a significant role in making TANF a weak program for all families.⁸⁰

Improving the TANF program requires both federal and state action.⁸¹ But Mississippi lawmakers can take immediate steps towards ensuring Mississippians get much-needed cash support. Improving TANF in Mississippi requires that state lawmakers increase basic assistance spending to raise benefits and caseloads, restrict TANF funds to people at or below 200 percent of the poverty level, and end behavioral control and restrictions to assessing assistance.⁸²

Improve climate justice

One Voice works to equip local communities to engage in energy policy and ensure that community economic development policies and practices stemming from energy improvements provide Black Mississippians, other Mississippians of color, and Mississippians with low-income revenue generation opportunities in the new energy economy.

Through One Voice's Electric Cooperative Leadership Institute, the organization is actively empowering electric cooperative communities to better direct policy decisions affecting their community's economic development and growth by providing member-owners with their rights, roles, and responsibilities to understand the practices of their cooperative boards.

In addition to this work, One Voice will continue to support energy policies that reduce harmful emissions, particularly greenhouse gases, and favor the increased use of renewable energy sources. The organization also supports the advancement of energy efficiency and clean energy, an increase in programs to help mitigate the effects of flooding for weather events, and additional protections for people facing utility disconnections.

To achieve these goals, state lawmakers should consider direct investments in the development of infrastructure to improve energy efficiency, move the state toward renewable energy sources, and fund utility assistance programs. State lawmakers should also consider holding corporations responsible and accountable to help pay for energy-efficient infrastructure and to help in the collaboration between state policymakers, the general public, and advocacy organizations to move Mississippi towards a more sustainable, healthier future.

Ensure a liveable wage

A livable wage ensures that more low-wage workers are paid enough to cover basic living expenses. A livable wage will be

a great benefit to women, particularly Black women and other women of color.⁸³ Forty-three states have a state minimum wage.⁸⁴ Twenty-nine states have a minimum wage above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.⁸⁵ Five states—Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee—have not adopted a state minimum wage.⁸⁶ And two states—Georgia and Wyoming—have a minimum wage below the federal minimum wage.⁸⁷

As one of the five states without a minimum wage, Mississippi applies the federal minimum wage of \$7.25.⁸⁸ The federal minimum wage has not changed since 2009, and if the minimum wage had been raised at the same pace as productivity growth since the late 1960s, it would be over \$20 an hour today.⁸⁹

Along with adopting a state minimum wage, Mississippi lawmakers should consider gradually raising the minimum wage to \$15 to help women and families adequately cover basic needs.⁹⁰ Providing a livable wage to Mississippians would help reduce poverty, improve income inequality, and ensure a better quality of life for the state's women, children, and families.

Enact paid family and medical leave

Under the federal Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), an employee can receive up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave to care for a newborn, adopted or foster child, or to care for a family member, or to attend to the employee's own serious medical health condition during twelve months.⁹¹ Eleven states have now offered state paid family leave programs to offer these same benefits to their employees; sixteen states require paid sick leave; three states offer paid parental leave for state employees; several states offer school leave for parents to attend school-related events and activities for their children.⁹²

Given Mississippi's status with poor health outcomes for women and children and Mississippi women's importance in our economy, Mississippi should consider adopting family leave laws such as paid family leave and paid sick leave. Adapting these laws will help contribute to healthy development, improve maternal health, reduce financial insecurity, and improve retention and productivity in the labor force.⁹³

Improve state equal pay protections

In 2022, Mississippi became the last state in the nation to implement legislation on pay equity or sex-based employment discrimination. Passing a state equal pay was a big deal for us. But there is still much more to be done to ensure that working women have access to fair wages to support their families and their economic security.

Currently, the state's equal pay law allows employers to use salary history as a basis for pay, which forces women to carry pay discrimination from job to job which perpetuates wage gaps.⁹⁴ The law leaves women with fewer rights because it requires a woman to waive her federal rights if she brings a state claim against her employer. It lacks protections for women of color, who have the largest wage gaps in the state, and who often experience pay discrimination based on their race and sex combined.⁹⁵ To ensure that Mississippi women are not left with fewer rights than were available before the state's equal pay bill passed, state lawmakers should consider legislation that strengthens the current law and truly improves women's lives, Mississippi businesses, and the state economy.

Conclusion

Raising collective consciousness through community power is essential to building a better Mississippi. The legislative priorities and policy recommendations included in this guide provide one tool that communities can use to become more aware of and engaged in important public policy issues in the state.

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One
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2023 Legislative Priorities:

Raising Collective Power by Building Strong Communities