



### **Policy Campaigns: Opening Doors to Opportunity in the Mississippi Delta**

Since its inception, Mississippi Center for Justice has held the belief that in order to advance racial and economic justice statewide, a sustained presence in the Mississippi Delta is a priority. With a \$2 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Center is expanding its access to education and healthcare programs to the Mississippi Delta by opening an office in the region. The managing attorney and a Skadden Legal Fellow are already on the ground working in Indianola.

Though rich in history and culture, the region of the Mississippi Delta is among the most economically depressed in the United States. The Delta's total population is nearly 60 percent African American, compared to 37 percent of the total state population. Combined with high poverty rates, this population is particularly vulnerable to the racial and economic disparities facing Mississippi and the nation. Mississippi Center for Justice is opening doors to change the landscape of access to opportunity for the Delta's residents.

"We have been working for the past several years to serve the needs of residents in the Mississippi Delta through our access to justice programs," said Martha Bergmark, Mississippi Center for Justice founding president and CEO. "We have used this time to learn more about the needs and culture of the area. We have been diligent in our efforts to serve those needs but extremely mindful of not opening an office until we could financially sustain it. Funding from Kellogg makes this vision a reality."

The need for a legal advocacy capacity embedded in the Delta community is urgent and clear. "A Portrait of Mississippi: The Mississippi Human Development Report 2009," published by Mississippi State Conference NAACP, the American Human Development Project and Oxfam America, highlighted startling perspectives about educational and health disparities that African-American Mississippians, particularly those in the Mississippi Delta, face. According to that report, an African-American boy born in Mississippi today can expect a shorter lifespan than the average American did in 1960. African American men die at higher rates than white men from the leading causes of death—heart disease, cancer, stroke—but also from other factors, including homicide and HIV/AIDS.

Access to quality education is equally inadequate. The same report confirms that Mississippi has some of the worst scores in the nation on most measures of K-12 educational quality. It further reports that about one-third of African-American men in Mississippi over the age of 25 do not have high school diplomas. Still greater numbers of African-American boys are leaving high school without graduating. Counties within the Delta have the worst level of educational attainment in the state. Almost one in three adults in those counties has not finished high school.

As with all of its campaigns, the Center realizes that coordination to maximize resources is a key to successfully advancing these serious, systemic issues. Through its Delta office, the Center will provide a legal capacity to address the needs of special education students and school discipline policy, as well as access to healthcare with a particular focus on the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and discrimination incurred by the HIV/AIDS population.

"We believe this office will enhance and support the work of the numerous community partners with whom we already collaborate," Bergmark added. "We will continue to work statewide, including in the Mississippi Delta, on issues such as fair lending, access to affordable childcare and affordable housing."

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, established in 1930, supports children, families and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society. Grants are concentrated in the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, and southern Africa.

