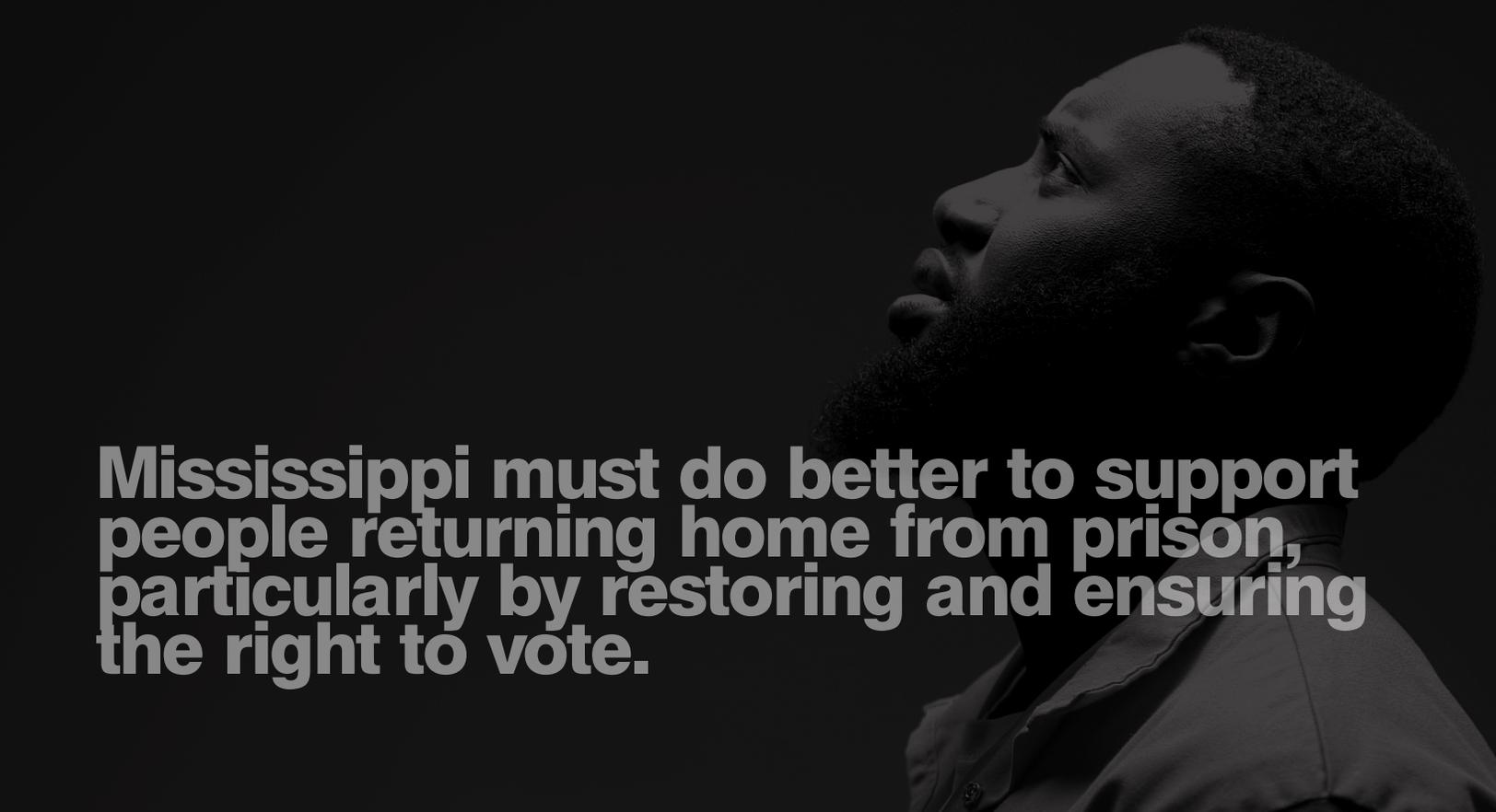




OVOW

# Our Voices, Our Votes:

Felony Disenfranchisement and Reentry in Mississippi



**Mississippi must do better to support people returning home from prison, particularly by restoring and ensuring the right to vote.**

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# About This Report



This report - *Our Voices, Our Votes: Felony Disenfranchisement and Reentry in Mississippi* - was collaboratively developed by Advancement Project National Office, One Voice and Mississippi Votes.

**Advancement Project** is a next generation, multi-racial civil rights organization. Rooted in the great human rights struggles for equality and justice, we exist to fulfill the promise of a caring, inclusive and just democracy. We use innovative tools and strategies to strengthen social movements and achieve high impact policy change. From its national office, Advancement Project uses the same high-quality legal analysis and public education campaigns that produced the landmark civil rights victories of earlier eras. We work in deep partnership with organized communities of color to develop community-based solutions to racial justice issues and to dismantle and reform the unjust and inequitable policies that undermine the promise of democracy.

**One Voice** works toward achieving a progressive civic infrastructure in the American South by supporting local and state policy development through training and collaboration across issue areas and geography. One Voice grew out of the work undertaken by the Mississippi State Conference NAACP in response to housing, education, civil rights and other related policy advocacy needs facing historically disadvantaged communities in the wake of the 2005 hurricanes. That work revealed significant needs within the non-profit sector. One such need was access to current and relevant data required to do effective policy analysis. Another need was one of connections between trained and networked community leadership and non-partisan, community-based structures through which broad public involvement could be organized and sustained. One Voice, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, was formed to address these needs.

**Mississippi Votes** is an organization of intergenerational synergy centering and led by young people invested in the progression of Mississippi. We do this through our programming and outreach strategies that empowers young people, encourages civic engagement and educates communities on voting rights through place-based grassroots organizing. Our organizational mission is to cultivate a culture of civic engagement throughout the state of Mississippi. Since its inception, Mississippi Votes has evolved and grown by intentionally incorporating research and evaluation and by deeply listening to the people of Mississippi. We have strengthened our leadership and outreach across the state, tested, updated and deepened our organizing model, and incorporated programming that best reflects the people of Mississippi. We aim to empower people across the state, especially those who are most often unheard.

# Acknowledgements

We are extraordinarily grateful to all of the returning citizens quoted and featured in this report: Kimberly Biggs, Denise “Nissi” Coleman, Jarvis Hibbler, Welton Hodges, Cortray Pearson, Pauline Rogers, Kartrell Terry, Michael Vardaman, Jermaine Wellington and Anthony West. Thank you for sharing your personal stories and insight with us. It is our honor to share these pages with you and advocate in solidarity with returning citizens.

We offer sincere gratitude to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition and Voice of the Experienced for their support and offering of time and intellectual resources. The movement for rights restoration around the country, led by directly impacted people, drives our work.

Advancement Project National Office, Mississippi Votes and One Voice rely on each other’s commitment to co-create and uplift this report. Thank you to those who authored this report – Alex Jordan, Marina Golan-Vilella, and Sharion Scott, Esq. – and the staff from each organization that edited, organized, publicized, and otherwise supported this report and the work behind it: Jarrius Adams, Jeralyn Cave, Velvet Johnson, Ayana Kinnel, Catoya Roberts, Esperanza Segarra, Hannah Williams, Ashley Wilson and Timothy Young.

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# A Letter from Mississippi Leaders

The effects of felony convictions cut deep in Mississippi. Every step—from arrest to trial, incarceration and release—shapes the lives of hundreds of thousands of Mississippians and our communities across the state.

What's more, the denial of the right to vote to Mississippians based on felony charges reverberates deeply through every layer of government. People convicted of twenty-two different felony offenses in the state are banned from voting - for life. This report addresses issues of reentry and voting jointly because they are inextricably connected: felony disenfranchisement is one of too many punishments Mississippi imposes on people with convictions in their past, and it restricts people from making changes through democracy.

We hope to shed light on what Mississippians leaving prison are up against. Their stories, featured in this report, make it clear: our state has erected systemic hurdles to progress for its own people, making it harder for formerly incarcerated Mississippians to gain employment, find housing, vote, or acquire essential resources and services like food or counseling.

But convictions and prison time don't just create material challenges. They can disrupt relationships with families, friends and other community members that returning citizens rely on. Being deemed guilty takes a toll on mental health, being institutionalized often impacts physical health, and being denied the vote threatens civic life.

Our community members face all of these challenges with resilience—and their day-to-day interactions with this brutal system have given them incredible insights into how our society works, and ought to work, for others in their circumstances. This report centers their stories because we believe no one is better suited to speak to the realities of Mississippi's criminal legal system—and the changes we must make to it—than the people who know it best, the people whose lives have been profoundly impacted by it.

Mississippians with felony convictions in their past deserve the vote and are distinctly qualified to shape our political future. This report spotlights disenfranchisement, or the loss of the right to vote, because of its roots and current role in upholding racial injustice in Mississippi, and because of our commitment to an inclusive democracy. Our criminal legal system disproportionately targets Black Mississippians for arrest and incarceration, and then strips them of the political power needed to change this racist system.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Mississippi has an opportunity to build a better future for our state by reversing our high rates of mass incarceration and voter disenfranchisement. As this report makes clear, people with criminal convictions make our democracy and our communities stronger. Many formerly incarcerated people are actively involved in building this better future, serving as mentors, starting reentry organizations, or seeking their fresh start. The policy recommendations included in this report—from restoring the vote to strengthening reentry services—will allow people with convictions in their history to move forward with their lives.

To anyone personally affected by the criminal legal system - people who've been behind bars or on supervision; parents, grandparents, children and loved ones - you are not alone. You are not powerless. You matter. Read our report to learn more about the ongoing movement to win voting rights for returning citizens in Mississippi and consider joining our effort to win real change for our communities.



Nsombi Lambright  
Executive Director  
One Voice



Arekia Bennett  
Executive Director  
Mississippi Votes

# Incarceration By the Numbers

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**235,152**

people are disenfranchised in Mississippi, nearly **11%** of the state's population.

**130,501**

of those disenfranchised are Black, making up **16%** of Mississippi's Black population.

In 2018, Mississippi had **the 3rd highest** incarceration rate in the country, including prisons, jails, immigration detention and juvenile justice facilities.

**53,674**

people are incarcerated, on parole, or on probation in Mississippi.

**56%**

of people incarcerated, on parole, or on probation in Mississippi are Black.

# MASS INCARCERATION & DISENFRANCHISEMENT IN MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi has some of the highest incarceration and disenfranchisement rates in the nation. But this dubious distinction is nothing new for our state; Mississippi has a long history of over-incarcerating and disenfranchising its residents, especially Black and Brown people.

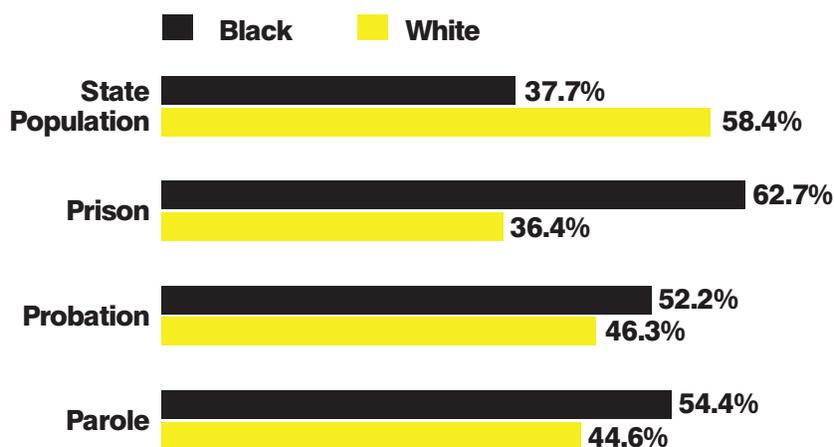
To foster justice and equity in Mississippi, we need to recognize the devastating scope of incarceration and disenfranchisement in our state and acknowledge that this is the result of Jim Crow-era racist policies, many of which are still in place today.

## Mass Incarceration in 2021

In 2018, Mississippi had the third-highest incarceration rate in America, with 1,039 out of every 100,000 Mississippians locked away in jails or prisons.<sup>1</sup> As of January 4, 2021, 19,117 people in Mississippi were incarcerated in facilities and 34,557 more people were on parole and probation.<sup>2</sup>

Black men and women are disproportionately overrepresented in these numbers; Black people make up 62% of the prison population despite comprising only 38% of the state's population.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, white people make up only 36% of the prison population while comprising over 58% of the state's population.

## Racial Disparities in Mississippi's Criminal Legal System



## A History of Silencing Voices

Felony disenfranchisement, or the denial of a person's right to vote based on a felony conviction, dates back to the founding of our nation. During Reconstruction, many southern states passed laws with the explicit intent of preventing Black men from voting. Mississippi created a list of crimes that, upon a person's conviction, would revoke their ability to vote. Legislators specifically included on the list crimes they associated with Blacks while omitting crimes they associated with whites. For example, Mississippi initially only disenfranchised people for offenses such as timber theft and receiving stolen property, but not for robbery or murder-- crimes not considered "black" at the time.

Today, Mississippi has broadly expanded its disenfranchisement practice, with an estimated 235,152 people having lost their right to vote as of 2020, or about 10.55% of the state's population.<sup>4</sup> Ninety-one percent (91%) of those disenfranchised live in Mississippi communities (whether on probation or parole or after their criminal sentence), while only 9% are incarcerated.<sup>5</sup> Disenfranchisement disproportionately affects Black Mississippians. In 2020, 130,501 Black residents were disenfranchised in Mississippi-- nearly 16% of the Black electorate - **twice the national average.**<sup>6</sup>



## Limits of the Rights Restoration Process

Thousands of disenfranchised Mississippians face a difficult path in restoring their voting rights. For the average Mississippian without political connections or personal wealth, this process is incredibly technical, burdensome, nebulous and ineffective. The overwhelming majority of disenfranchised Mississippians who attempt to regain their voting rights are unsuccessful. And by design, successfully regaining the right to vote is virtually impossible.

People who wish to regain their right to vote can either apply for an Executive Order Restoring Civil Rights from the Governor or lobby the Mississippi State Legislature to pass a Bill of Suffrage on their behalf. In order to have their voting rights restored by the legislature, a person must have completed all probation, parole, and other supervision and paid in full all legal financial obligations (fines, fees, court costs and restitution).

## Individual Bills of Suffrage: Current Process

- 1** Individuals eligible for voting rights restoration must first submit a form detailing their conviction and date of arrest to either their state representative or state senator to introduce legislation on their behalf that grants them suffrage.
- 2** This information is then submitted to a Suffrage Subcommittee under the Judiciary B Subcommittee.
- 3** A legislative assistant sends this information to the Department of Corrections, where a thorough background check is performed.
- 4** The Chair of the Judiciary Committee selects the applications that are allowed to be voted on by the full committee.
- 5** There is no criteria determining who gets put up for a vote.
- 6** The entire chamber (House or Senate) in which the bill was filed must pass the legislation when it leaves committee, followed by the other chamber, for the individual to gain suffrage.
- 7** No one involved in this process provides any transparency to applicants or the public on which applicants are put up for a vote or voted against.
- 8** The applicants who are denied receive zero notice.



Mississippi's rights restoration process is obscure and incredibly subjective. While there are 22 crimes that result in permanent disenfranchisement in Mississippi, there are few clear, consistent criteria for evaluating a person's application for restoration. Currently, no one involved in this process provides any transparency to applicants or the public on the reasons why certain applications are put up for a vote or voted against.

Only a handful of people successfully make it through the process each year.<sup>7</sup> From 2000-2015, only 335 of the 166,494 people who completed their sentence had their voting rights restored. From 2007-2017, the legislature considered just 128 applications for bills of suffrage; only 45 people had their rights restored. The process of regaining the right to vote makes it clear that the act of disenfranchising certain Mississippians, residents who are disproportionately Black and Brown, is meant to be permanent.

### **The Future of Rights Restoration**

In 2017, advocates introduced legislation that would automatically restore voting rights to Mississippi residents with felony convictions after a 3-year waiting period. This legislation failed to advance to a vote. Several organizations have also filed lawsuits to challenge Mississippi's practice of disenfranchising some people for life based on their crimes and requiring others to complete the arbitrary legislative process that results in an extremely small number of people having their rights restored.

The Jim Crow-era policies that harm Black and Brown Mississippians remain enshrined in law today. People continue to face insurmountable barriers to participation in the political process, and the only way their voices will be heard is if we recognize the injustice of our current system and force a necessary shift—away from policies that rob Mississippians of their rights and opportunities, and toward an agenda of restoring the people's power.



## **Key Issues and Voices of Returning Citizens**

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The following quotes and context reflect the hurdles facing people with felony convictions and the changes they are seeking. While they are divided by topic based on the top issues that emerged in interviews with the community members we quote, the sections are inherently interconnected and speak to each other.

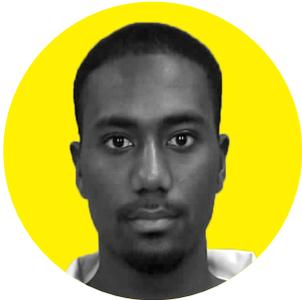
# Reentry

Reentry, or returning back to the community after incarceration, can be extraordinarily difficult. People often face an uphill battle, exiting the broken criminal legal system to find little to no support from a broken social service system.

When someone reenters, they may need to find housing or a job, reconnect with family, or seek medical and mental health care. They must also have to adjust to various changes that may have happened during their time behind bars and work to build stability in their living situation—regardless of whether they had such stability before incarceration.

License revocation exemplifies the challenges posed by incarceration and reentry. One of the primary reasons currently and formerly incarcerated people lose their driver's licenses is unpaid child support. The Mississippi Department of Human Services (MS DHS) begins the license suspension process—which may also apply to occupation or business licenses—after a non-custodial parent falls two months behind on payments. If you experience incarceration and fall behind on child support, MS DHS may take away your transportation or work license while you are incarcerated, limiting your ability to find work and meet basic needs once you reenter.<sup>8</sup>

## THE VOICES



“The system did not prepare me for coming home. The system is not designed for people to come back. A person is in there so long and gets adapted to that environment so by the time you are released, the world has changed.”

— **Jarvis Hibbler**



“Reentry was just as traumatic as going in. They give you \$25 and send you out - nothing else. There is no support system coming out of the prison.” [On issues facing women that she supports in the Wendy Hatcher Transitional Home]: “Housing, transportation, jobs. Their children end up in foster care simply because there is no one to take them. The basic human needs of women cost more.”

— **Pauline Rogers**

“The system does not rehabilitate a person. There is not enough education or trade programs in there. I think there should be a gateway from prison to release. There also should be a place that helps people find jobs once being released.”

— **Welton Howard**

## THE VOICES



“When I was released, I went through a hard time with my marriage. I lost custody of my children and lost my home. I didn’t have any support. Mississippi offered me nothing on reentry except homeless shelters that were already over capacity and in poor condition. It was so hard that I stopped speaking for eight months. It took over 15 months to find the mental health services that would work for me. It just took me a while to find the right resources and figure out what would help me get over the bridge and get me to the next level.”

— **Kimberly Biggs**



“They don’t give you pre-release to get ready for the world. They let you out and many people don’t have a home to go back to and will be lost without a family. Lots of people judge you for a felony and don’t want to deal with you. They are scared. What would help is hiring or setting up a rooming house, where you go out and work until you get on your feet. I don’t think they do that anywhere in Mississippi. A driver’s license is also one of the most important things people need when they get out. I had one before I got incarcerated.”

— **Anthony West**

## Employment

Finding employment upon reentry can be extraordinarily difficult in Mississippi. The unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people in Mississippi is 27%, about five times higher than the state rate.<sup>9</sup>

In 2009, researchers found that an applicant is 50-63% less likely to get a callback or job offer if they have a criminal record. That effect was shown to be even worse for Black men.<sup>10</sup> This reality is in stark contrast with how we discuss incarceration: that once you have served your time, you have paid your debt and you deserve an opportunity to build a better life outside.

In Mississippi, a conviction can impact your prospects in the job market for the rest of your life.<sup>11</sup> Twelve states in the U.S. have passed laws limiting how far a background check can go in order to protect against this harmful practice—but Mississippi is not one of them. While few judges would likely explicitly sentence someone to unemployment upon conviction, that is effectively one of the many punishments that is being unfairly tacked onto people’s sentences in our state.

## THE VOICES



“Finding employment has been the worst thing for me. I have had jobs that I have worked and once my background check came in, I was released from my job. I just don’t understand why the charge that I caught in 2009 and it is 2020 and the work industry is still holding that against me. So, nine out of ten people are going to go back to prison because they are going to do the same thing that landed them in prison in the first place.”

— **Jermaine Wellington**



“The system would make it easier for people to be released if they offered vocational training so that people can be released and get better jobs. The system has made it very difficult for me to find employment.”

— **Cortray Pearson**

## Criminal Legal Issues

The policies that govern the criminal legal system—from policing, to incarceration, to release—shape the difficult experience of reentry for justice-involved individuals. How people are targeted by law enforcement, what they are punished for and how long they are incarcerated (and under what conditions) have a lasting impact on individuals reentering Mississippi communities.

### Criminalization

Policing and incarceration often fail because they are the wrong solution to a personal or community issue. Criminal punishment is one of the few tools that Mississippi’s government consistently funds and uses. As the saying goes, when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

A lack of services or alternatives to the criminal legal system perpetuates cyclical effects. We deprive individuals and communities of needed resources, then turn around and criminalize poverty and their various means of survival. We then remove individuals from their community to the detriment of the families, friends, neighborhoods and businesses that rely on them. We then subject them to a criminal legal process that robs them of opportunity and dignity—and begin the cycle again with under-resourced reentry.

Over five million children nationwide have at least one parent incarcerated during their childhood. Parental incarceration harms their wellbeing and stability, making them six times more likely to become justice-involved themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Incarceration also feeds a harmful cycle of homelessness. Formerly incarcerated people experience homelessness at a rate 10 times higher than the general public. Homelessness increases a formerly incarcerated person’s risk of re-arrest and re-incarceration due to policing and law enforcement policies that criminalize essential behaviors like sleeping in public places.<sup>13</sup>

**“** We over-criminalize and penalize for everything. I was not a criminal, I was a victim in that I experienced a killing by a family member on another family member as a child. I was stuck in that place of trauma while life went on for everyone else. I was a church girl. My grandma instilled in me that I had to care for younger siblings. It was my duty as the oldest. When siblings needed something shoplifting became my rescue.”  
— **Pauline Rogers**

## Sentencing & Alternatives

Harsh sentencing policies further entrench the racial injustice of Mississippi’s criminal legal system. Despite the fact that Black and Brown Mississippians commit crimes at similar rates as white people, they are more likely to be arrested or charged and face stiffer punishments as a result of having been targeted by the criminal legal system before.

Mississippi state law mandates strict punishment for “habitual offenders,” or people who have been sentenced twice or more times for separate offenses (for prison terms of one year or more). Judges are required to sentence these defendants to the maximum prison term in the statute with no suspensions, reductions, parole, or probation.<sup>15</sup>

Sentencing mandates like these are cruel and ineffective. They require our criminal legal system to ignore all context in pursuit of punishment and reinforce racial inequalities in policing and prosecution.

**“** I would like to change the way people are cheated when it comes to sentencing. More Black and Hispanic people get harder sentencing than white people. I would also change the drug court and the way it is set up with officers being able to come to your house at any time, day or night.”  
— **Welton Howard**

**“** They don’t offer people of color the same kind of arraignments, sentencing and options as others. No one told me about the first-offenders program, but they offered it to other people. There’s racial injustice. In rural areas, if you try to challenge it by talking to the judge or DA, then they get mad and try to come at you. But we have to fight against this. I’m calling the elected people. I’m going to make them figure things out.”  
— **Kimberly Biggs**

## Probation

Probation is a period of court surveillance in the community that follows incarceration. It requires people to follow a set of strict, sometimes impossible conditions and pay burdensome costs to the court. As of 2018, the average length of probation in Mississippi was 34 months—and this number has only increased over the years.<sup>15</sup> This means that for nearly three years after an average Mississippian leaves incarceration, they have to face reentry, avoid new criminal charges and walk a tightrope of onerous probation obligations. People on probation can be re-incarcerated for probation violations including missing a meeting with a probation officer or relapsing in substance use.



*“I would like to get rid of probation because some people go back to jail for things that they did not do. A person could be in the car with the wrong person. A person could be riding with a gun and you didn’t know, and then you’re back in jail.”*

**— Michael Vardaman**

## Expungement

Expungement is one tool returning citizens can use to move forward from felony convictions. Expunging a charge deletes it from the public record, allowing people to seek jobs and housing without discrimination by background checks. Under state law, following a bill passed in 2019, many offenses are eligible for expungement but there are exceptions prohibiting certain felony charges, and all applicants must wait five years before applying.<sup>16</sup> These disqualified offenses are not to be confused with the 22 disenfranchising crimes that result in a lifetime voting ban.

*“There isn’t a system in place that helps a person get your felony expunged after so many years. No matter the offense, it is difficult to get your felony expunged. It lingers on and on to the point where a lot of jobs do not want to give a person a fair chance of gaining employment. I have had challenges with finding a home at one point. A lot of places are doing background checks and they do have the question on the applications about you being a felon.”*

**— Cortray Pearson**



## Voting

5.2 million people are unable to vote in America because of a felony conviction.<sup>17</sup> In Mississippi, one out of every thirteen people is disenfranchised.<sup>18</sup> For African Americans, the number is even worse: one out of every seven African Americans in Mississippi are disenfranchised because of a felony conviction.<sup>19</sup>

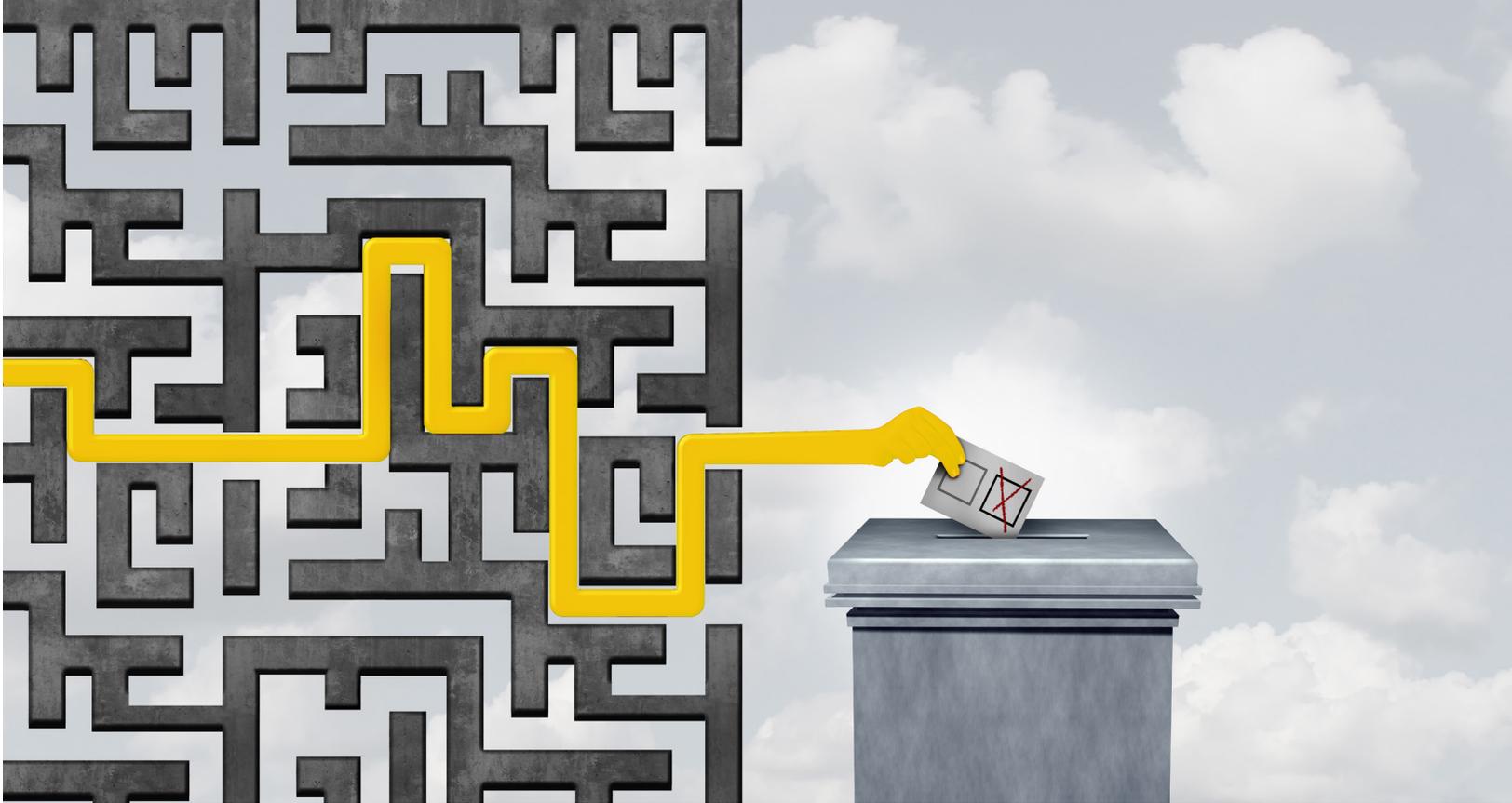
The numbers alone belie the emotional and civic impacts of disenfranchisement. When we take away someone's right to vote, we silence their voice and devalue their worth as a resident of our state and our country. When we incarcerate and take the vote from disproportionately Black Mississipians, we continue deferring a fundamental promise of freedom in this country: the ability to shape one's own future and the future of one's community by exercising fundamental democratic rights.

We face serious political ramifications for disenfranchisement. People with disenfranchising felony convictions cannot choose the elected representatives that will advocate on issues that matter to them, vote on policies that may affect their community, or support reforms that could transform the criminal legal system. Their very stake in seeing real changes in mass incarceration and reentry is limited by the stripping of their right to vote.

Restoring the vote to all people with felony convictions would create huge positive impacts for new voters and for the system that formerly disenfranchised them. There is a positive correlation between a person's ability to participate in democratic processes and their rate of recidivism.<sup>20</sup> Studies show that when individuals are given the power and opportunity to fully participate in our society, they feel more ownership of the issues that impact them and what happens in their community.

Disenfranchisement makes all of us lose out on our ideal of a true representative democracy and on the lived expertise of people who have been through the criminal legal system -- envision the alternative. Who better to vote for a District Attorney than someone who has seen one eye to eye? Who better to vote for a Governor than someone who has faced the parole board that they appoint?

Our community members who have had their vote taken or threatened found little information from the state but deeply value the franchise. Like people outside the system, many have been told their vote doesn't matter yet they hold firm in the conviction that it does. It is through their persistence to apply for suffrage, organize, and share their experiences that we have a hope for change.



## Lack of Notice

"I am currently registered to vote. I was not an active voter before I was incarcerated; I was 16 years of age at that time. I knew that at the age of 18 I could vote, but once I was released from prison there was nothing shared with me about my voting rights." - **Michael Vardaman**

"Before I was incarcerated, I was a voter. When I was convicted, I did not know about my voting rights. I only found out about my voting rights when I was released. I feel that voting is the best thing because you can make a change." - **Kartrell Terry**

"Before I was incarcerated, I was an active voter. Once I was locked up, I was not shared any information about my voting rights. I thought that I could not vote, but I still could have and even when I was released, there was nothing shared with me about my rights to vote. I only found out that I could vote by talking to one of the employees that works for the county." - **Jermaine Wellington**

## Importance of Their Vote

"Voting is really important. One thing of which you can be sure: all votes count. If all of us would get out and vote, the society and world would be a better place. They've got a lot of us thinking our votes don't matter, but they do — a lot. Makes me feel like I'm a part of something. It gives you confidence. Confidence gives you consistency and consistency brings success." - **Anthony West**

"I would like for the system to give people that have a felony the opportunity to become a part of voting...I feel like once a person has served their time they should be able to participate in voting no matter what their crimes were. I feel that my vote matters and it counts." - **Cortray Pearson**

## How Voting Empowers the Community

"Before November 3, I was at every community meeting, canvassing, phone banking. We did it all. I can't vote but I encourage it. I support it. I ask people to vote for me. We give rides to the polls. There are people really concerned and I've seen more people going to the polls than ever before. I've seen my people helping each other: giving rides to each other, calling each other up and really stepping up to get there. Voting is so important. My parents, who were NAACP activists, would tell me that voting would improve my life. Voting is why we as a people have more power." - **Denise "Nissi" Coleman**.

# Community

Beyond changing the criminal legal system and its lifetime repercussions, successful reentry also requires supporting the communities into which people reenter. This entails both meeting basic needs, like shelter and sustenance, and funding new endeavors determined by directly impacted people. This investment functions in the opposite way of the cycle of criminalization: more resources for programs, organized by and with returning citizens, create more economic and recreational opportunities that help neighbors thrive and stay in communities.

Returning citizens are leading the way on extending empathy to youth, other reentering people and the community at large. They understand from lived experience the community resources outside of the criminal legal system that neighborhoods need, and work to build programs into reality. Philanthropic and government leaders would do well to listen and support them.

“My vision for a stronger and better [community] is providing more activities, afterschool learning, more reading services and more motivation. The community needs to come together and voice their opinions. The community’s opinions need to be heard and taken into consideration. The system needs to build and create things that will help benefit our communities such as mentorship programs, things that would help support the children.”

— **Jarvis Hibbler**

“You just have to work at changing things to make a difference. If you can visualize it, you can realize it. Start small with people figuring out what they need first. Look at what they need in the first 3 months of getting out. Let’s get them a place to stay. Maybe have an apprenticeship program come do trainings. We need to give people different resources and alternatives. We need to give our people more options.”

— **Kimberly Biggs**

“When the child has nothing to do of course they are going to turn to the streets. The more activities for the kids, the less problems you will have in the system. Before the pandemic, I was helping out with the youth football and baseball team. I would like to do this more and I don’t mind doing it for free because it is helping the children grow and develop.”

— **Jermaine Wellington**



“I feel very connected to my community because I can relate to my people and I know what the kids are going through. I started the movement called Guns Down Hands Up. The goal is to get the community to stop shooting and start boxing; This will give people something to do. I want to keep giving back to my community by opening up a gym so the kids can have somewhere to go.”

— **Jamel Wolf**

# Spotlight: Denise “Nissi” Coleman



Reentry is hard because it's a different ball game on the other side of that fence, and they don't prepare you for any of it. They don't give you any resources.

I was sentenced to two life sentences and served 38 years.

I struggled and strived to do everything I was supposed to do during that time. But it still took a lot from me—this system takes a lot from everyone. They cage us like animals and throw away the key. They tell us we're not going anywhere; they make us live in horrible conditions. When you get treated like you're worth nothing, day after day, you can start to believe it.

But every person inside has a history and a story. Some people may not have had parents, some had to raise their brothers and sisters. Some have mental health issues, some battle addiction, some have medical issues. The system doesn't seem to care, but every life has meaning.

I had a very hard time with reentry. My daughter passed away while I was in prison, and I didn't have any family, siblings, or friends left to help me. They didn't prepare me at all for release—no official ID, no social security card, no birth certificate. All you get is a Department of Corrections ID and \$20—and you can't do anything with \$20. You can't stay at a shelter—you need those documents the prison doesn't give you. You don't even get transportation away from the prison. How are you supposed to find a roof to put over your head? How are you supposed to survive and stay free?

I'm sharing my story because the whole criminal justice system needs to change from top to bottom. People deserve a chance when they get out. We all deserve a second chance at life. And they aren't going to get it unless we put new policies into place. To make real change, lawmakers need to understand our experiences; they need to listen to what we've been through.

Formerly incarcerated people need to be at the table with legislators, governors, local politicians, attorneys, organizers, Our voices need to be in the conversation. Who knows this system better than the people who have been inside? The people who have faced reentry, who have had to check that box when they're trying to find a job, who have struggled to rebuild their lives when they've lost so much inside—we know better than anybody what needs to change.

That's why I'm fighting for our voting rights, too. Voting is important—it's how we help each other. It's how we build a whole new life, how we demand change. When we vote, our community is coming together to decide what matters to us.

***The system tells us that we don't matter. But I am Black.***

***I am beautiful***

***I am strong.***

***I am courageous.***

***I will not let anyone define me or confine me.***

I often think of Harriet Tubman, who said, "Keep going. Don't stop. When you hear the dogs in the woods, keep going. When you see the light, keep going." We have to keep going because right now, there are women inside in Mississippi, women just like me, who need our help. They need the (in)justice system to change. I know that I deserved better than what I got. They deserve better, too.

# Policy Recommendations

The stories from Mississippi's formerly incarcerated community highlight the need for serious systemic change. Mississippi must do better to support people returning home from prison, particularly by restoring and ensuring the right to vote. We advocate for the following state policy proposals, rooted in the lived experience of incarceration and its life-long impacts.

## **Restore voting rights to everyone who has completed their prison term.**

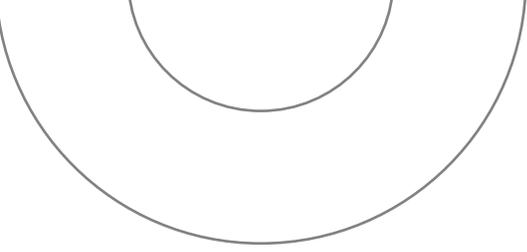
There is no justification to keep the current lifelong voting ban against people with 22 disenfranchising felony convictions. As previously covered in the section Mass Incarceration and Disenfranchisement, we incarcerate and silence Mississippians under 150-year-old laws that continue to target African Americans. Our communities demand that we welcome all formerly incarcerated people to participate in our democracy. State lawmakers should introduce legislation ending the law that disenfranchises individuals convicted of twenty-two disenfranchising offenses. This restoration of voting rights should extend to all residents on probation, parole, or supervision, regardless of outstanding fines, fees, restitution or other court-imposed costs, immediately after release.

## **In the short term, Mississippi must establish a clear process and inclusive criteria for approving suffrage applications.**

The current legislative suffrage process outlined in the section Mass Incarceration and Disenfranchisement is opaque and subjective. It does not provide applicants a meaningful opportunity; legislators approve at most a handful per year. While we fight to end felony disenfranchisement, the state must immediately rectify issues with the individual suffrage process.

To ensure a clear and transparent means for restoring voting rights through the legislature, we recommend the implementation of the following process:

- 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 only 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. Outstanding fines, restitution, supervision, or other court-imposed costs should not count against an applicant.
- Applicants may submit a one-page letter in support of their restoration of suffrage which may include but is not limited to their status of employment, education and rehabilitation.
- Applicants may also submit up to three (3) letters of support for restoration of suffrage from employers, family members or community members.
- Once application documents are compiled, they will be submitted to Judiciary subcommittees for review. All applicants must be considered. Judiciary subcommittees will submit recommendations to the full committee, which will decide whether to pass the legislation through committee. The subcommittee and committee should not deny an applicant simply on the basis of their original offense or punishment.
- The committee must notify the suffrage applicant of the date and time of their hearings, and permit public attendance.
- Suffrage applicants will be notified of the result of their suffrage petition (including, if unsuccessful, the stage in which it was denied) before the end of the Legislative session. Denied applicants will be provided a written explanation of the reason for their denial.
- Applicants are welcome to submit additional applications for suffrage in following years. There is no limit on the number of applications a person may submit.



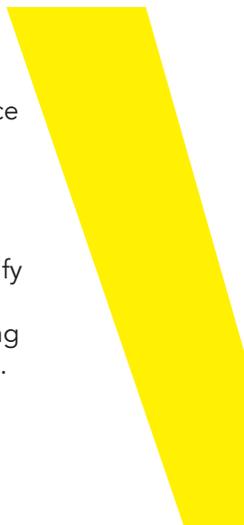
## **Limit the harms of the criminal legal system to better support reentry from prison.**

The returning citizens quoted in these pages offered a look into their challenges and successes moving forward with a felony conviction. Now, we must act to broaden opportunities after incarceration and bring communities together. The lack of resources and wall of restrictions after incarceration hinders returning citizens from connecting with loved ones and finding housing and jobs. Legislators should introduce the following common-sense reforms:

- Fully fund robust employment, housing, transportation and ongoing treatment programs for returning citizens.
- Provide a reentry guide to each incarcerated individual 3 months prior to release and upon completion of probation, parole, or supervision sentence. We recommend that the DOC also provide an in-person session with an independent counselor in the month before release from prison.
- Hold the Mississippi Department of Corrections accountable for full compliance with the requirement established in 2014 that the DOC ensure everyone leaving prison has a driver's license or state ID card.<sup>21</sup>
- Expand parole habitation guidelines to enable more options for transitional housing upon release.
- Eliminate barriers to employment and professional licensures that impact individuals with criminal convictions.
- Eliminate language on job applications that requests information about applicants' non-violent felony convictions. Under this proposal, employers would be permitted only to request information about murder or sexual offense charges.

## **Modernize the state's voter registration and election administration to reduce barriers to voting.**

For voters, regardless of prior incarceration, becoming eligible to vote is just one step towards actually casting a ballot. State legislators should address challenges to registering and finding polling places through the following proposals:

- Institute Online Voter Registration (OVR) to allow citizens to register to vote online. Forty-one (41) states already have OVR, including Alabama, Louisiana and Tennessee. Online Voter Registration provides a secure electronic option for registration that will improve accuracy (verified by the Department of Public Safety) and reduce the administrative burden on county registrars.
    - Electronic Absentee Ballot Requests and Delivery should be made available for eligible voters, including college students. Through these tools, voters would be able to request a ballot through the online voter portal, have the option to receive the blank ballot electronically, and return their completed ballot by mail.
  - Limit polling place changes and require voter notification. Returning citizens and their communities, disproportionately in Black and Brown neighborhoods, face higher polling place closure rate and last-minute location changes. These closures and location changes are frequently made without timely public notification or with inaccurate mailers. Other states including Florida and Virginia have addressed these issues by prohibiting polling place changes 30 or 60 days before an election. Mississippi legislation should require election commissioners to finalize all polling locations 30 days prior to an election and accurately notify voters whose polling locations have changed. At minimum, public notification should be: mailed to voters, posted on the Secretary of State's website, signage posted at the old polling location indicating the new polling site, and newspaper and social media notices where available.
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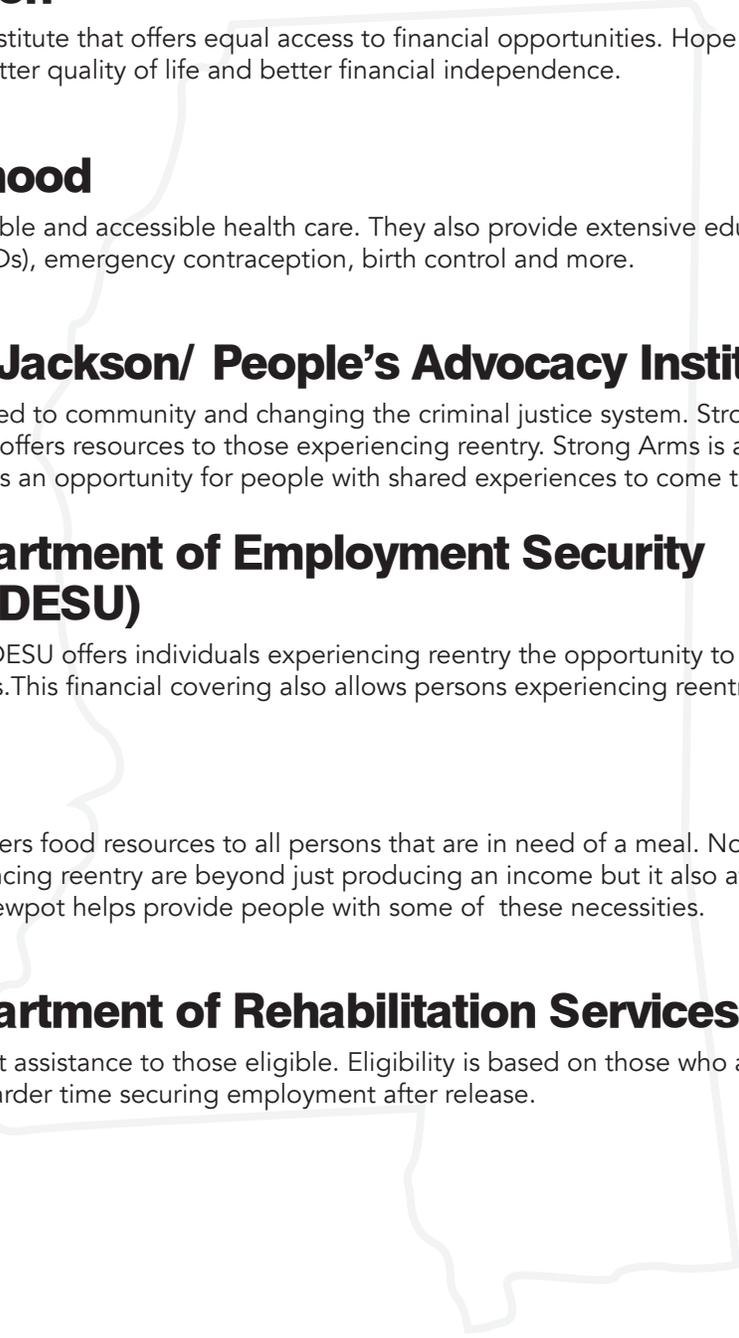
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# Reentry Resource Guide

Resource	Website	Brief Description
Hope Credit Union <sup>1</sup>	<a href="https://hopecu.org">https://hopecu.org</a>	Financial institution
Planned Parenthood <sup>2</sup>	<a href="https://www.plannedparenthood.org">https://www.plannedparenthood.org</a>	Health care services for women
Strong Arms of Jackson/ People's Advocacy Institute <sup>3</sup>	<a href="https://www.peoplesadvocacyinstitute.com">https://www.peoplesadvocacyinstitute.com</a>	Community organizing hub working to end mass incarceration and support communities
Mississippi Department of Employment Security Unemployment <sup>4</sup>	<a href="https://mdes.ms.gov">mdes.ms.gov</a>	Provides individuals with wage replacement until they can find new employment
Stewpot <sup>5</sup>	<a href="https://stewpot.org">https://stewpot.org</a>	Access to food
Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services <sup>6</sup>	<a href="http://www.mdrs.ms.gov/Pages/default.aspx">http://www.mdrs.ms.gov/Pages/default.aspx</a>	Provides job opportunities to eligible persons
MS Reentry Guide <sup>7</sup>	<a href="http://www.msreentryguide.com/statewide-resources">http://www.msreentryguide.com/statewide-resources</a>	Statewide list of resources for those experiencing reentry
Empower Mississippi <sup>8</sup>	<a href="https://empowerms.org/about/">https://empowerms.org/about/</a>	Job resources to persons experiencing reentry
New Way Mississippi <sup>9</sup>	<a href="https://newwaymississippi.org">https://newwaymississippi.org</a>	Housing assistance for those experiencing reentry
Paroled2Pride <sup>10</sup>	<a href="https://www.paroled2pride.org/">https://www.paroled2pride.org/</a>	Accredited job training curriculums for non-violent offenders
United Way <sup>11</sup>	<a href="https://www.myunitedway.com">https://www.myunitedway.com</a>	Provides childcare, educational opportunities, access to financial tools
Matt's House <sup>12</sup>	<a href="http://stewpot.org/tag/matts-house-emergency-shelter-for-women-and-children/">http://stewpot.org/tag/matts-house-emergency-shelter-for-women-and-children/</a>	Emergency sheltering for women and children
Perkins Center <sup>13</sup>	<a href="https://www.jvmpf.org">https://www.jvmpf.org</a>	Teaches & promotes the principles of Christian community development and racial reconciliation

# Reentry Resource Guide



## 1. Hope Credit Union

Hope Credit Union is a financial institute that offers equal access to financial opportunities. Hope also offers low wealth communities tools to achieve a better quality of life and better financial independence.

## 2. Planned Parenthood

Planned Parenthood offers affordable and accessible health care. They also provide extensive education on sex and wellness, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), emergency contraception, birth control and more.

## 3. Strong Arms of Jackson/ People's Advocacy Institute (PAI)

The PAI is an organization dedicated to community and changing the criminal justice system. Strong Arms of Jackson is under the PAI umbrella of programs and offers resources to those experiencing reentry. Strong Arms is also made up of formerly incarcerated individuals and acts as an opportunity for people with shared experiences to come together.

## 4. Mississippi Department of Employment Security Unemployment (MDESU)

For those who are eligible, the MDESU offers individuals experiencing reentry the opportunity to have wage replacement while looking for other job opportunities. This financial covering also allows persons experiencing reentry the ability to pay fines and fees to meet requirements.

## 5. Stewpot

Stewpot is an organization that offers food resources to all persons that are in need of a meal. Noting that lack of job opportunities for persons experiencing reentry are beyond just producing an income but it also affects access to other things like food, housing and daily basics. Stewpot helps provide people with some of these necessities.

## 6. Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS)

The MDRS provides job placement assistance to those eligible. Eligibility is based on those who are experiencing issues with mental health and might have a harder time securing employment after release.

# Reentry Resource Guide



## 7. Mississippi Reentry Guide

The Mississippi Reentry Guide is a previously established database with multiple organizations listed that feature everything from mental health, childcare and domestic violence support. The MS Reentry Guide could be helpful to those looking for a very specific state department as well as organizations that serve a certain demographic of returning citizens.

## 8. Empower Mississippi

Empower Mississippi is an organization that focuses on job resources for returning citizens. Empowered Mississippi focuses on providing employment security and information. Empowered Mississippi also offers its own reentry guide with a plethora of resources available to persons who are experiencing reentry.

## 9. New Way Mississippi

New Way Mississippi is a nonprofit organization that offers housing programs to those experiencing reentry. They also offer other programs and opportunities to provide returning citizens with tools and resources to successfully integrate back into society.

## 10. Paroled2Pride

Paroled2Pride assists returning citizens in starting a new life through employment. The organization bridges the gap between corporate America, the judicial system and returning citizens by using an accredited job training curriculum geared towards successfully transitioning people back to their families communities and society. The organization's services include life skills, job training, transportation, relapse prevention, financial management and treatment areas (mental health).

## 11. United Way

United Way has many locations throughout the state of Mississippi and provides unique experiences with its different programs. United Way has many child care and educational opportunities for school age children. It also has an initiative to promote economic literacy while also providing help to those that qualify for assistance programs

# Reentry Resource Guide



## 12. Matt's House

Matt's House serves as a branch of the Stewpot organization and is an emergency shelter for women and children. Residents receive two meals, while also having a safe place to stay overnight. Matt's House does require a social security card and ID for adults and a social security card or birth certificate for children.

## 13. Perkins Center

The Perkins Center is an organization that teaches important lessons through Christian values. The Perkins Center offers various programs and camps for children throughout the year as well as a community garden. The Perkins Center also takes part in mission trips and offers internships.

## 14. Nollie Jenkins Family Center

The Nollie Jenkins Family Center seeks to build grassroots leaders to better help move local communities forward. Children play a large part in the center's operation, giving them organizing experience and educational opportunities.

## 15. Mississippi Center for Justice

The Mississippi Center for Justice provides limited resources in the areas of educational opportunity, consumer rights, access to healthcare and affordable housing.

## 16. Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund

The Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund offers women in need of abortions the financial assistance it may take to get one. It also offers comprehensive sex education and emergency contraception.

## 17. American Job Centers

American Job Centers can help you look for work and offer job search workshops, free computer access and more. The Centers can help you find a job, get unemployment help and explore careers, education and training.

## 18. The Workforce Network (WIN)

Wherever you live in Mississippi, there is a WIN Job Center to serve you. WIN Job Centers are service centers that offer programs and resources geared toward your job search.

# Reentry Resource Guide



## 19. Community Health Insurance Program

The Community Health Insurance Program understands that individuals coming out of incarceration face a wide variety of challenges and getting health insurance should not be one of them. The program is specifically designed to help the formerly incarcerated, regardless of age and circumstance. They can guide and assist you.

## 20. Mental Health Association of South Mississippi

The Mental Health Association of South Mississippi has been working to support and empower people who suffer from mental illness since 1963. In response to the presence of stress and mental illness, The Mental Health Association of South Mississippi provides resources and support services to those seeking mental wellness and recovery within our community. This includes mental health, intellectual disability disorder, substance abuse and homelessness issues. Each year the organization serves over 3,900 meals, provides assistance to 250 people experiencing homelessness, provides supportive housing for fifteen chronically homeless individuals and provides wellness information to several hundred people.

## 21. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

The families and members of NAMI Mississippi are here to help. They offer understanding to anyone concerned about mental illnesses and the treatment of mental illness. They are dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with mental illness and their families through support, education and advocacy.

## 22. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The VA's Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) program is designed to prevent homelessness and promote success among veterans returning home after incarceration. HCRV services include: outreach and pre-release assessments services for veterans in prison and referrals and linkages to medical, mental health and social services, including employment services and short-term case management assistance upon release.

## 23. Mississippi Legal Services

Mississippi Legal Services' website provides free education resources in the areas of consumer issues, taxes, disability, housing, disaster resources, education, health, family and juvenile justice, employment discrimination, wills & estates, public benefits and medicare. North Mississippi Rural Legal Services and The Mississippi Center for Legal Services offer free legal services in these areas for low-income and elderly citizens.

