



# A Time of Reckoning

Testing the Will for Change in the Mississippi Delta

JUNE 2009

COVER: Sharecropper, Greenwood, Mississippi, 2006; PHOTO BY: DL Anderson

MDC's mission is to help organizations and communities close the gaps that separate people from opportunity. We have been working to create positive change in disadvantaged communities for 40 years – by conducting research and demonstrating effective programs at the community level. We focus on three areas: education, economic and workforce development, and asset building and strategic philanthropy.

We are a private, nonprofit organization located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and supported by grants and contracts from foundation; federal, state, and local governments; and the private sector.

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## A LETTER FROM CHAIRMAN ROBERT G. CLARK

April 2009

Dear Delta Citizens:

The Mississippi Legislature created the Special Task Force for Revitalization of the Mississippi Delta Region through House Bill 1034 in 2006. Our state leaders recognized that the Delta Region needed a comprehensive and coordinated plan to revitalize the region and improve the well-being of its people. I was appointed to the special task force by the Lt. Governor and Speaker of the House of Representatives and was elected its chairman at its first meeting on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

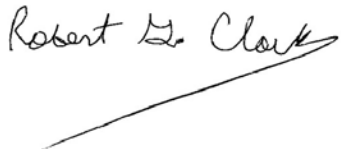
I am no stranger to the Delta Region, having been born, raised and still residing in Holmes County. I am keenly aware of the generational needs of the region. As task force chairman, I have given you my best effort to bring together exceptional people and resources to develop a plan to reverse decades of neglect and decline in the region.

Following the directions of the enabling legislation, the task force has worked hard to develop a plan to revitalize the Delta Region. This document is that plan. I ask that you use it as a guide or roadmap to begin a systematic and continuous effort to raise the quality of life in the region and bring about attitude changes.

But a plan without action is no more effective than words written and never read. Citizens as well as the many organizations of the Delta must individually and collectively take actions that will revitalize the Delta.

According to the enabling legislation, the task force will disband effective June 30, 2009. But I and many others in the Delta will continue to work for improvements in the economic and social conditions of the region. Please join us in this effort by looking for ways to get involved while offering new, creative ideas and strategies. Above all, keep the needs of the Mississippi Delta on the minds of state leaders. Avoid complacency. With persistence, something worth while is always achieved.

Sincerely,



Robert G. Clark, Chairman  
Special Task Force for Revitalization of the Mississippi Delta Region

## TASK FORCE FOR REVITALIZATION OF THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA REGION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### STATE OF THE DELTA

The Mississippi Delta has the reputation of being resistant to change. Over the past 40 years government and private philanthropy have invested heavily in the region, with little documented effect. In 2009 much of the Delta is still characterized by the same issues that existed in 1969—a lack of good jobs, underperforming schools, racial division, and low levels of human development. And the effects carry over to the rest of Mississippi, resulting in the state often occupying the lowest rung of national rankings. Current data paints a picture of a region in distress with no end in sight:

- ▶ Unemployment rates in the Delta region from 2001 to 2007 fluctuated between 8% and 10%, consistently exceeding those of Mississippi and of the nation. In December 2008 most Delta counties registered unemployment rates between 10 and 17%. The unemployment rate among blacks in the Delta is over 3 times higher than the unemployment rate for whites.
- ▶ Most of the jobs that exist in the Delta cluster around the \$10 - \$13 range, close to poverty levels. The largest growth rate is occurring in low-paying service occupations with average earnings less than \$10 per hour.
- ▶ Educational attainment in the Delta is low. Almost 18% of the adult population has less than 9<sup>th</sup> grade education. The Delta is also well below the national average for college attainment, resulting in 20,000 fewer individuals with an associate's degree or above.
- ▶ Great income disparities persist. In 2007, the median household income for whites in the Delta was \$44,055, which is only slightly less than the state average for whites of \$44,955. In contrast, the median household income for blacks in the Delta was \$21,165, which is 23% less than the state median household income for blacks.

Divided communities and regions do not develop. Capital does not flow and transaction costs are too high. In order to break out of a cycle of low returns, the Delta needs an approach that addresses underlying human conditions while responding to real market opportunities.

### THREE CONDITIONS OF PROGRESS

Without fairness and equity it is impossible to create economic growth. For example, attention must be paid to disconnected populations in order to increase the number of workers with college degrees. Addressing equity is often beyond the purview of traditional economic development. Yet for the Mississippi Delta region the ability to address disparities will be critical. In short, the Delta region must find the interventions that matter and the people courageous enough to make them happen. The following elements form the “three legs” of the stool that must be in place to overcome long-standing division and economic stagnation:

1. Bold ideas with a promise of social and economic return on investment. Philanthropic investors and far-sighted corporations are investing in innovative approaches to education and workforce development as high leverage strategies for addressing poverty and competitiveness. These prototypes are urgently needed in the Delta and if successfully implemented, could be transferable to other parts of the state. The Delta should be “ground zero” for innovation in education and workforce development in Mississippi.
2. Institutional capacity to execute skillfully with attention to public accountability and measurable results. Large community institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities will be required to work differently. Key employers and support agencies will also need to demonstrate significant returns. If institutions can produce in a reliable way the region will become more attractive for economic development.
3. Public will, especially among leaders of influence, to make reducing distress a priority for public and private investment. Engaged leadership at the state and local level must create the pre-conditions for economic development. Is there a will to level ground that is uneven?





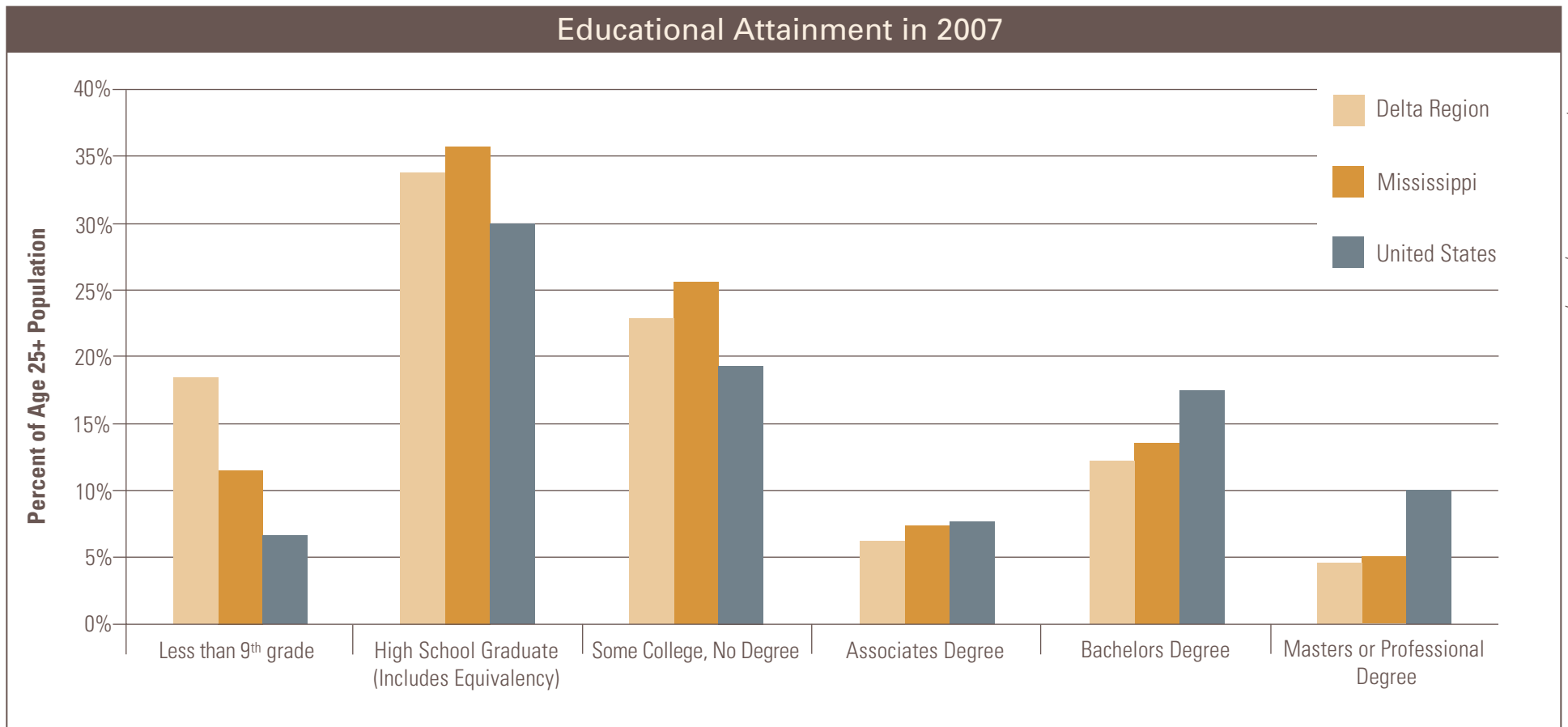
## DELTA REVITALIZATION PLAN

**Leadership structure: The Delta Strategic Compact.** The purpose of the Compact will be to address structural problems of equity and competitiveness. Leadership will direct strategic investments towards activities that demonstrate visible results. Incorporators will include decision-makers such as college presidents, superintendents, business executives, and agency heads. The Compact will be capitalized by a combination of public and private sources.

<b>GOALS</b>	<b>DOUBLE POST-SECONDARY ATTAINMENT</b>	<b>CONNECT JOB SEEKERS TO LIVING WAGE CAREERS</b>	<b>REMOVE HEALTH DISPARITIES</b>	<b>ESTABLISH THE DELTA AS A NATIONAL CENTER FOR CREATIVE ARTS</b>
<b>METRICS</b>	Percent of 26-year olds that obtain at least an Associate's degree or credential.	One year retention rate for job seekers placed in employment with clear advancement ladders.	Percent of national rates for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.	Number of people employed in creative economy industries.
<b>IMMEDIATE STRATEGY</b>	Bridge transition to college and promote successful completion.	Sequence training and advancement support along career pathways.	Promote disease prevention and wellness for at-risk or vulnerable populations.	Expand benefits of heritage tourism through entrepreneurship training, support, and networking for local business ventures.
<b>LONG-TERM STRATEGY MODELS</b>	Redesign education into a PreK-16 system and increase performance.	Use sector development strategies to support key growth industries and provide a pipeline of trained workers.	Establish community-wide healthy living practices.	Stimulate growth in the arts sector including instruction, production, and support services.
<b>MODELS</b>	Learn and Earn Schools; Center for Working Families; Achieving the Dream; Early College and P-16 Councils	Southern Good Faith Fund; Benefit Bank; National Fund for Workforce Solutions	NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund; Rapides Foundation; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	Handmade in America; Enterprise Corporation of the Delta; Arkansas Creative Industry Cluster

## STATE OF THE DELTA

The following economic development indicators demonstrate that the Mississippi Delta is falling behind. A low educational profile, with many high school dropouts and relatively few college degree holders, leads to high levels of unemployment. These conditions translate into low-wage job growth and low levels of income. Without assets, individuals and communities of the Delta are unable to generate the public and private revenue needed for growth.

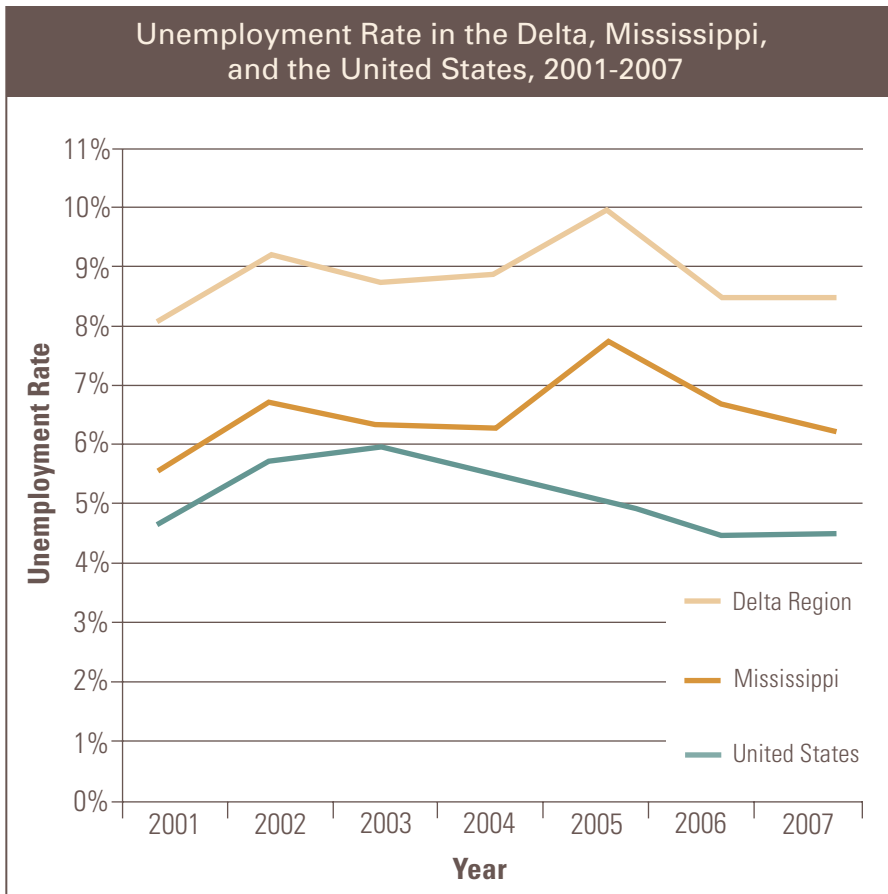


**CHART 1: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

Educational attainment in the Delta is below that of the state and the nation for an associate's degree and above. If the Delta region achieved the same average as the state, there would be roughly 6,000 more individuals with an

associate's degree or above; if the Delta achieved the national average, roughly 20,000 more individuals would have an associate's degree or above.





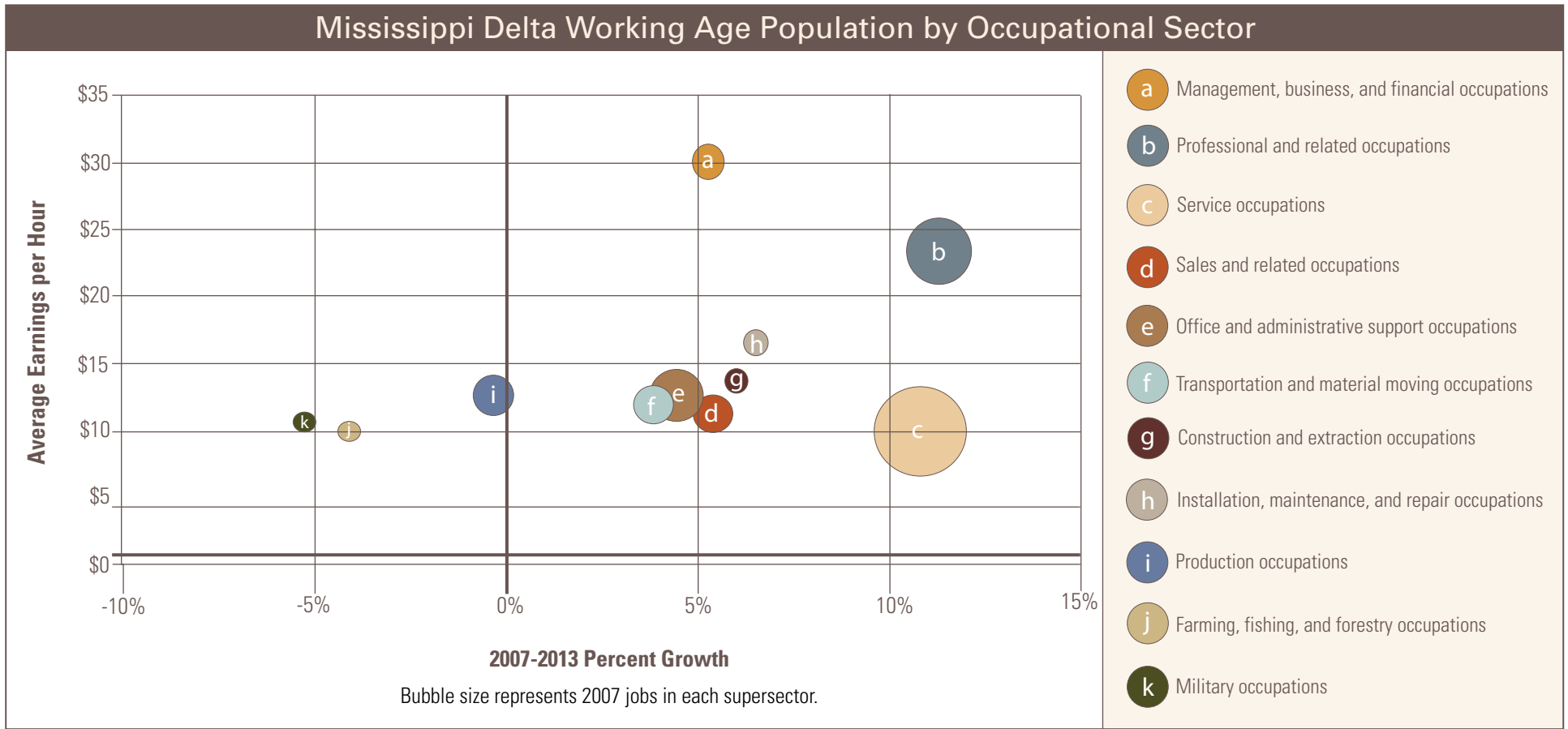
Source: MIDES LMI, 2001-2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Annual Average Unemployment Rate, Civilian Labor Force 16 years and over"

#### CHART 2: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

The unemployment rates in the Delta region consistently exceed those of Mississippi and of the nation. The graph above also suggests that unemployment in the Delta region has a dragging effect on the unemployment rate of the state as a whole. While the United States experienced a decline in the unemployment rate between 2003 and 2005, the unemployment rate increased in both the Delta and in Mississippi during the same period.



Carpenter Gary Gist at work outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi., 2007; PHOTO BY: DL Anderson



### CHART 3: INDUSTRY GROWTH

The chart above indicates where industry growth is occurring in the Delta economy. The greatest job growth in the Delta is occurring in low-paying service occupations with average earnings less than \$10 per hour. Most of the jobs in the Delta cluster around the \$10 - \$13 range, close to poverty levels. Production jobs are projected to slightly decrease, while remaining farming and military occupations lose more significant ground.

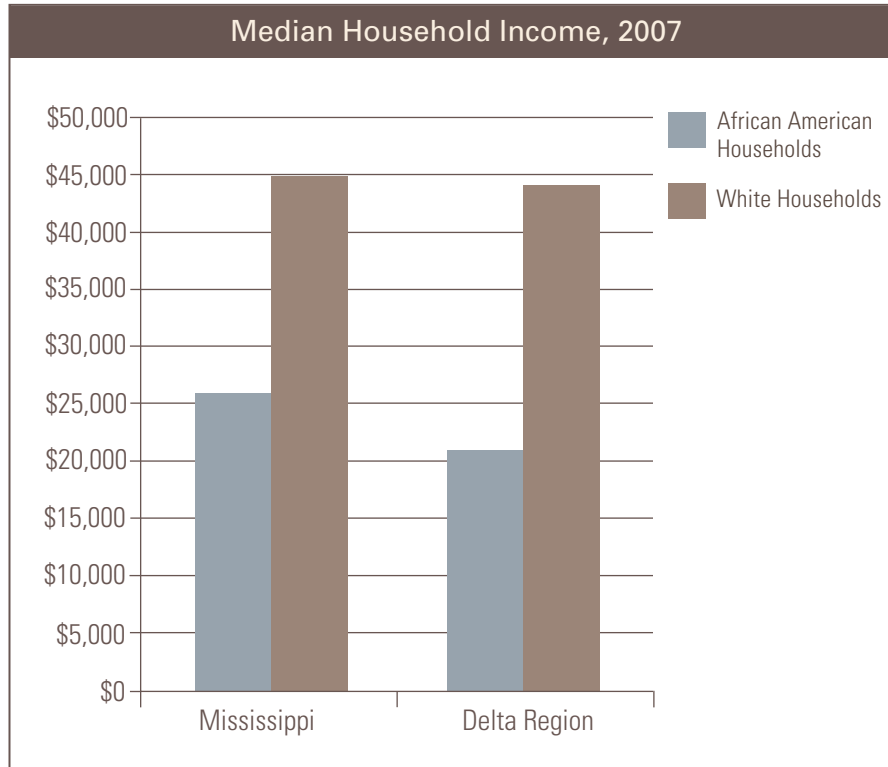
Perhaps the greatest opportunity is the significant number of professional occupations that are expected to grow, with relatively high average earnings.

Management, business, and finance occupations pay the highest wages, but employ fewer people and are growing at a slower rate.

The Delta region will need to focus on growth sectors in the economy that will be hiring future workers at living wages. These growth industries will require higher skills from new employees and career advancement support for incumbent workers.

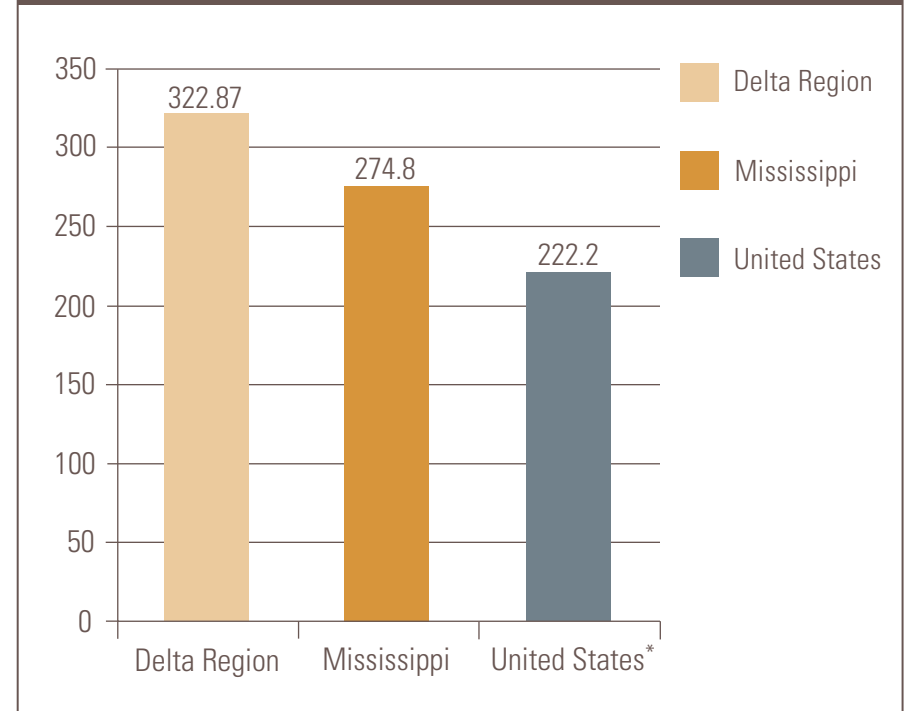
#### CHART 4: MEDIAN INCOME

In the Delta region, the median household income for African Americans is below half that of whites. In addition, in 2007 the median household income for whites in the Delta was \$44,055, which is only slightly less than the state average of \$44,955. In contrast, the median household income for African Americans in the Delta was \$21,165, which is 23% less than the state median household income for African Americans. The extreme income disparities in the Delta region are an important factor to be considered in revitalization efforts.



Source: Claritas, American Community Survey 2005-2007

#### Death Rate per 100,000 population from Heart Disease, 2007



\*United States data reflects latest Center for Disease Control figures for 2004

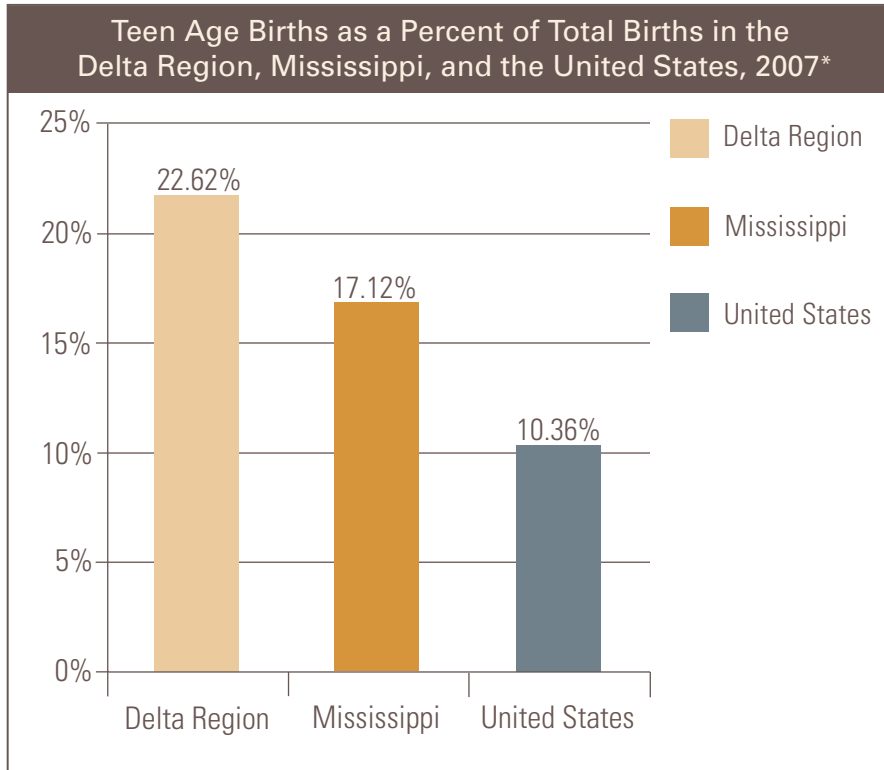
Source: Mississippi Department of Health and the Center for Disease Control

#### CHART 5: HEALTH INDICATORS

In 2007, the rate of those dying from heart disease in the Delta was 17.5% higher than the Mississippi average and 31.2% higher than the nation as a whole. In the Delta region, higher levels of heart disease are a symptom of high levels of obesity. In addition, 7 out of the 10 Mississippi counties with the highest prevalence of diabetes are located in the Delta region.

## CHART 6: TEEN AGE BIRTHS

The majority of counties in the Mississippi Delta have a teen pregnancy rate above 20% with 3 counties above 25%. The Mississippi State Department of Health reports that 88% of teen mothers are unmarried. The consequences for the Delta Region are a cause for concern as teen mothers are more likely to drop out, live in poverty, and require long-term financial support.



Source: Mississippi State Department of Health, 2007

\* The latest data for the United States teen-age birth rates is from the Center for Disease Control's 2006 dataset.





Ms. Katherine Clark leads children under her care in a lesson about color at the New Covenant House Christian Daycare Center in Clarksdale, Mississippi, May 15, 2007; PHOTO BY: DL Anderson

## CONDITIONS OF PROGRESS

**Without fairness and equity it is impossible to create economic growth.**

For example, attention must be paid to disconnected populations in order to increase the number of workers with college degrees. Addressing equity is often beyond the purview of traditional economic development. Yet for the Mississippi

Delta region the ability to address disparities will be critical. In short, the Delta region must find the interventions that matter and the people courageous enough to make them happen.



Moving the Delta region towards parity with the state of Mississippi and the nation will require action directed to the people and communities most often left behind. At the same time, addressing inequity will require more comprehensive and structural work than has occurred in the past. In order to overcome long-standing division and economic stagnation the supports listed below must be in place.

What would a plan based on these three principles look like? The following goals and strategies are directed towards establishing a foundation that creates a thriving Delta region for all people. First, the plan identifies bold ideas and innovative models that have a track record of success. Second, the plan presents roles and recommendations for building the capacity of key institutions. Finally, the plan outlines a leadership structure that will organize people and resources from within the Delta region that can make change happen.

1

Bold ideas with a promise of social and economic return on investment. Philanthropic investors and far-sighted corporations are investing in innovative approaches to education and workforce development as high leverage strategies for addressing poverty and competitiveness. These prototypes are urgently needed in the Delta and if successfully implemented, could be transferable to other parts of the state. The Delta should be “ground zero” for innovation in education and workforce development in Mississippi.

2

Institutional capacity to execute skillfully with attention to public accountability and measurable results. Large community institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities will be required to work differently. Key employers and support agencies will also need to demonstrate significant returns. If institutions can produce in a reliable way the region will become more attractive for economic development.

3

Public will, especially among leaders of influence, to make reducing distress a priority for public and private investment. Engaged leadership at the state and local level must create the pre-conditions for economic development.



Detail of the lower part of photo on opposite page; PHOTO BY: DL Anderson



Lacking a public pool in Clarksdale, Mississippi, a group of children improvise in the middle of 11<sup>th</sup> Street, from left, Kendrika James, 13, Jonathan Lidd, 6, and Naimani Hopper, 8, on May 23, 2007; PHOTO BY: DL Anderson

## LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

### The Delta Strategic Compact

A crucial factor in any improvements will be visionary leadership from the Mississippi Delta itself. Local leaders will need to find innovative solutions as they address longer-term development goals. But ideas are not enough. Leaders will also need a source of venture capital to build infrastructure and test new strategies. MDC considers philanthropy to be “society’s passing gear.”

Investment-oriented philanthropy can go beyond charitable giving and address structural problems of equity and competitiveness. A regional investment fund can act as a catalyst by leading private markets and public policy in thorny areas where long-term returns are difficult to calculate. Leadership of the Compact will seek resources and focus attention on difficult problems and build social trust and cooperation.

The Delta Strategic Compact would accomplish the following:

- ▶ Convene leaders in the Delta to redefine the conversation on the region’s development, allowing the sharing of strategies and collaborative planning for the region’s future.
- ▶ Cultivate trust and foster dialogue across racial boundaries;
- ▶ Use data and research to identify priorities for development.
- ▶ Promote policies which address these gaps, while funding innovation through grant-making and increasing the capacity of local organizations.
- ▶ Coordinate external funding streams, making sure funds are being used as effectively as possible on objectives identified by data.
- ▶ Provide a vision for the region that directs investments into transformative change rather than charity.

The following examples are institutions that have developed over time. The Delta Strategic Compact would work towards similar principles and investment practices.

**EXAMPLE:** The **Danville Regional Foundation** was founded in 2005 to increase the health, economic well-being, and education of the residents of the Dan River region in southern Virginia and northern North Carolina. The foundation supports initiatives that promote healthy people in healthy communities, better education, economic transformation and community engagement. The foundation convenes local leadership for common causes, bringing together a group of core leaders to work on multiple initiatives in an effort to change the conversation about the region from immediate needs to long-term solutions. The Danville Regional Foundation’s strategy is to focus on philanthropy, not charity: after assessing need, the foundation looks for opportunities to make systemic impact. Recent grant-making activity include investments in training Trade Act students at local community colleges, an expansion of the Southside Business Technology Center, a performance agreement with Com.40 to locate in the City of Danville, and financial literacy for low-income families.

**EXAMPLE:** The **CREATE Foundation** in northeast Mississippi was founded 37 years ago to spur change in what was once the poorest region of the state. Since that time, it has worked to expand the philanthropic resources available to organizations in the area, and focuses on creative, collaborative solutions to regional problems. CREATE guides development efforts through targeted grants and brings together leaders from around the region through the Commission on the Future of Northeast Mississippi. The foundation also publishes a State of the Region report which helps to set annual goals and measure the successes of communities in achieving these goals.

# GOAL 1

## DOUBLE POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

**METRIC: Percent of 26 year-olds that obtain at least an Associate's degree or credential.**

Economic data make clear that higher wage jobs increasingly require education and training beyond the twelfth grade. To facilitate more students' transition to post-secondary education, the Delta needs a strong concentration of schools based on models proven to promote post-secondary success.

**IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Leverage the strength of the community colleges by using an early college approach to transition high school students to postsecondary education.**

Early College is an approach that is open to all students, but also provides supportive environments for historically under-served students that are underrepresented in college. Early College programs seek to encourage a more highly-trained workforce and provide incentives for students to stay in school.

### a. Model

**Learn and Earn** high schools in North Carolina allow students to jump-start a college education and gain career skills. Learn and Earn students attend a high school located on a local college campus and can earn a high school diploma and an associate degree in five years – for free. Currently there are sixty Learn and Earn high schools across the state. In addition, Learn and Earn Online allows North Carolina public high school students at any school in the state to earn college credits by taking a variety of online college-credit courses at no cost.

### b. Supportive State Policy

The **North Carolina New Schools Project** (NCNSP) is a nonprofit organization that was created in 2003 by the Office of the Governor and the Education Cabinet with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The NCNSP promotes innovation in secondary schools across the state so that “every high school in North Carolina graduates every student ready for college, careers and life in the society and economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” The Learn and Earn program is a key part of the governor's New Schools project, with a mandate to build partnerships with colleges and universities, state and local government and supporters in the private and philanthropic sectors. ([newschoolsproject.org](http://newschoolsproject.org))

**IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Provide financial services and support that increase college retention rates.**

Lack of access to financial education, services and supports can dramatically hinder students' chances of earning a post-secondary degree or credential. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to help families make critical changes in their lives through comprehensive workforce development training. Helping students to realize their educational and career goals enable families to begin the process of also reaching their financial goals.

### a. Model

The **Center for Working Families** (CWF) model seeks to help low-income families and students reach financial stability and move up the economic ladder. Pioneered by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and now supported by other major funders, CWF offers an innovative framework for how families and students can increase their earnings and income (“Earn It”), reduce their financial transaction costs (“Keep It”), and build wealth for themselves and their communities (“Grow It”). The CWF approach bundles access to a full range of essential economic supports in a convenient location to help families build self-sufficiency, stabilize their finances, and move ahead. A CWF site housed at Central New Mexico Community College in Albuquerque has shown particular success at using the “Earn It, Keep It, Grow It” model, increasing term retention rates to 90%.

### b. Supportive State Policy

New Mexico encourages savings through state-matched Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). In 2006, the state legislature passed Think New Mexico's Family Opportunity Accounts Act, providing \$1.5 million to support asset-building opportunities for low-income New Mexicans. The savings program encourages families to save for education, home-ownership, and starting micro-enterprises. In order to receive the matching funds, IDA account holders complete financial literacy classes, where they learn how to reduce debt, budget, manage a checking account, and obtain lower-rate financial services. ([thinknewmexico.org](http://thinknewmexico.org)) The Mississippi IDA Partnership (MIDAP) has funded pilot programs and worked to create similar legislation in Mississippi.

**IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Use data to guide strategies for educational retention and success.**

Currently fewer than half of community college students nationwide meet their educational goals. Efforts to improve educational outcomes will need to be sustained and reinforced by changes in public policy at the state level, including a rigorous commitment to data-driven assessment and accountability.

**a. Model**

**Achieving the Dream**, a nationwide initiative funded by the Lumina Foundation, encourages colleges to use data to increase student success and diminish the number of students who leave community colleges without reaching their educational goals—and to narrow achievement gaps for low-income students. Over eighty colleges in fifteen states participate in the initiative. With the help of specialized “data facilitators” these colleges are creating systems that track information as a way of identifying problems and measuring results.

**b. Supportive State Policy**

The Achieving the Dream initiative includes a state policy component that promotes state-level priorities, regulation, and resource allocation that make it easier for colleges to institutionalize improvements. Such policies include integrated K-12 and higher education data systems, equitable performance reporting measures, alignment transfer and articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions, and financial aid policies that support student persistence.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGY: Create a high-performing, integrated PreK-16 system. Invest in people by building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century educational system.**

Delta residents must have the skills to compete in the rapidly expanding international economy. For residents of the Delta to acquire these skills, the education system of the Delta needs to be comprehensive and efficient.

**a. Model**

P-16 or P-20 approaches seek to create an integrated pipeline from preschool to postsecondary education. Many states have adopted local and regional **P-16 Councils**, usually made up of educational institutions, community organizations, and businesses, to be vehicles for creating change. Progress under P-16 councils has been uneven, often dependent on leadership and level of state support. Louisiana has achieved success by focusing on high leverage issues, such as teacher education programs and an ongoing commission on teacher quality. Georgia maintains a P-16 Department in their University System and is working with early college models for students and a Leadership Institute for School Improvement for educators.

**b. Supportive State Policy**

Evaluators of P-16 approaches conclude that it is not sufficient to simply attempt to align curriculum. Rethinking of educational structures is required along with the ability to make substantive changes. Actions that Mississippi should consider as it reconstitutes its own P-20 effort include supporting local and regional councils by providing a statewide vision, technical assistance, data consultation, and funding. **Direct participation from the Governor’s office and the legislature is critical to success.**



# GOAL 2

## CONNECT JOBSEEKERS TO CAREER PATHWAYS

### **METRIC: One year retention rate for job seekers placed in employment with clear advancement ladders.**

In the past, workforce development has focused on job attachment – simply placing people into any available employment. The result in the Mississippi Delta is that many individuals are working in low-wage occupations without the skills and opportunities they need to move up.

#### **IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Develop career pathways programs that connect lower-skilled workers with training and career advancement.**

A career pathways approach strategically focuses on industries where demand is high and moving up is possible. Jobs seekers are provided with training and support that extend beyond initial job placement.

#### **a. Model**

The **Southern Good Faith Fund** (SGFF), located in Arkansas, operates a network of career pathways programs through partnership with community colleges. SGFF works with students and job seekers to develop individual career paths with goals and benchmarks. The community colleges provide training in growth fields in their region, such as nursing, health technology, and manufacturing. SGFF supports students as they advance along their career paths by providing coaching and connections to community resources. Over 1,000 individuals have graduated from SGFF's Career Pathways program, with an 88% job placement and advancement rate.

**Holmes Community College's Workforce Academy** recruits young individuals with less than high school education and helps them gain job skills. The Workforce Academy offers an 8 week training program that provides career readiness training, technology instruction, and employability skills. These young adults often fall outside of the traditional educational system. Holmes Community College is able to create new opportunities and a first step into further training by focusing on dropouts and providing specialized mentoring and counseling.

#### **b. Supportive State Policy**

After Southern Good Faith Fund piloted the original career pathways program in 2003, the Governor's Office provided state funding to replicate the program at colleges throughout Arkansas. Named Arkansas Career Pathways, the program is now a \$12 million per year initiative of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education with 25 colleges and technical institutes participating. Funding is provided through an innovative use of TANF grants from the Arkansas Transitional Employment Assistance Board.

#### **IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Create access to benefits that support the workforce.**

Work supports (such as tax credits, medical benefits, and related assistance) are proven to increase employment and boost economic activity. Yet millions of dollars in work supports are unclaimed by Delta residents each year. Public-private partnerships that provide counseling and application assistance can connect households with new resources that help individuals stay in jobs and move ahead.

#### **a. Model**

The **Benefit Bank** is a program developed by Solutions for Progress, Inc. and currently operational in six states including Mississippi. The Benefit Bank uses a technology platform that allows individuals one-stop access to tax credits, child care subsidies, home energy assistance, student financial aid, and health care insurance. New additions include a foreclosure prevention module, disaster assistance, and access to veterans' benefits.

#### **b. Supportive State Policy**

In Ohio the Benefit Bank program is operated as a public-private partnership between the Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks, and a network of private sector and nonprofit partners. Governor Ted Strickland advocates for the Ohio Benefit Bank and provides state support for the public-private partnership through the State



budget. The Ohio Benefit Bank has helped over 50,000 individuals access more than \$80 million in previously unclaimed tax credits and other work supports.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGY: Use sector development strategies to support key growth industries and provide a pipeline of trained workers.**

Sector strategies are employer-focused and seek to help workers advance over time through educational and work experiences. Because they require broad institutional coordination, sector projects are led by partnerships. Businesses, community colleges, the public workforce system, and community agencies combine their efforts to meet the needs of expanding industry.

#### **a. Model**

The **National Fund for Workforce Solutions** (NFWS) is a current initiative that promotes regional sector projects. Led by national funders such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Hitachi Foundation, the NFWS invests in local funding collaboratives and challenges them to invest in innovative workforce projects. The Delta region should learn more about the support and technical assistance available from the NFWS, and the particular strategies that they are pursuing in rural regions.

#### **b. Supportive State Policy**

States such as Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and North Carolina are using Workforce Investment Act resources and the state 15 percent discretionary funds to promote sector strategies in regional areas. Collaboratives in the National Fund for Workforce Solutions are also supporting new sector efforts through expanded use of Trade Adjustment Act assistance, bond financing, and program-related investments as a line of credit for match funding such as the Food Stamp Employment and Training reimbursement program.

# GOAL 3 REMOVE HEALTH DISPARITIES

## **METRIC: Percent of national rates for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.**

Poor health conditions severely limit worker productivity and overall business development. The Mississippi Delta region must address existing gaps in access to care, health education, and risk behaviors.

### **IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Promote Disease Prevention In Schools**

School-based health programs that introduce children and parents to the need for healthy eating and physical activity are a step towards preventing problems like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

#### **a. Models**

The **CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health)** Program in Texas implements a three-sided strategy of proper nutrition in elementary school cafeterias, communicating proper nutrition and activity concepts through classroom curriculum and physical education, and encouraging behavior change at the family level through website instruction.

**The Poplarville Special Municipal Separate School District** in Mississippi pooled funding from the Lower Pearl River Valley Foundation and the Roberts Wood Johnson Foundation to incorporate a healthy lifestyle curriculum into each year of the K-12 curriculum of three rural school districts. The program helps students devise plans with wellness trainers and to trains 600 teachers and educational support staff to serve as fitness role-models.

#### **b. Supportive State Policy**

In 2001, the Texas state legislature passed Senate bill 19/1357 which required each elementary school in Texas to incorporate a school health program approved by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The school health programs approved by the TEA are to have three components: physical activity curriculum lasting 135 minutes per week, a School Health Advisory Council to direct implementation of programs, and coordinated programs to address and prevent childhood obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

The Mississippi Department of Education's **Office of Healthy Schools** (OHS) is charged with providing a comprehensive system of healthy lifestyle services to K-12 schools across the state. OHS efforts are supported by the 2007 Mississippi Healthy Students Act which mandates that schools offer and market healthy food choices and encourage communities to make choosing healthy food choices in school the norm.

### **IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Promote Wellness for At Risk or Vulnerable populations**

**Special attention must be paid to youth and low-income communities.**

#### **a. Models**

The **Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of North Carolina** is a networking center where concerned professionals convene to create programs that reduce the teen birth rate. The center reaches out to the Hispanic community, holds a month-long summit called "Let's Talk" addressing the role of parents in teen behavior, and conducts a male mentoring program to inform teenage boys of the consequences of sexual behavior.

The **Rapides Foundation** in Louisiana distributes grants to organizations that focus on developing healthy communities, healthy individuals, and increasing educational attainment. In 2005, the foundation funded the North Louisiana Regional Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, which offers teen pregnancy support, pregnancy and options counseling, a hotline, and prenatal vitamins among other services.

#### **b. Supportive State Policy**

The Mississippi State Department of Health offers a "Care for Yourself" program for women aged 13-44 in which women may receive medical exams, limited lab services, education and birth control methods free of charge at community health centers across the state. The State Department of Health capitalizes on Medicaid reimbursements for Family Planning to make these services possible.

## **LONG-TERM STRATEGY: Promote Community Healthy Living Initiatives**

In order to reach people who are not associated with public schools, community outreach and workplace wellness programs are effective methods for teaching individuals and families the importance of proper nutrition and physical activity in preventing disease.

### **a. Models**

The **NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund** “Fit Community” program awards grants of up to \$60,000 for a two year period to community alliances that pledge to increase physical activity and healthy eating strategies for target populations. Community alliances may be composed of community leaders, professionals, and citizens with experience and involvement in parks and recreation, health, planning, and transportation.

The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** funds The United Way of Central Louisiana to operate a Workplace Wellness Initiative to combat heart disease and stroke incidence in rural and regional businesses in central Louisiana. The initiative increases employee programs for physical activity, proper nutrition and healthy behaviors.

### **b. Supportive State Policy**

The North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund is a commission established by the North Carolina General Assembly in 2001 with the Governor serving as the chair of the commission. The Trust Fund directs money towards projects concerning fitness in communities, disparities in health care access, affordability of prescriptions, tobacco addiction, and preventative healthcare initiatives.

In Louisiana, the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports published guidelines for businesses helping them outline how to provide low-budget health improvement opportunities for their employees. The Governor’s council also organizes the “Governor’s Games,” a series of amateur sports games in the spring that aims to promote fit lifestyles through workshops, conferences, and participation in competitive sports leading up to the games.

# GOAL 4

## ESTABLISH THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA AS A NATIONAL CENTER FOR CREATIVE ARTS

### **METRIC: Number of people employed in creative economy industries.**

The Mississippi Delta Blues is an unduplicated asset with an international reach. Blues heritage can be leveraged to create a broader creative economy sector that brings new jobs to the region.

**IMMEDIATE STRATEGY: Expand benefits of heritage tourism through entrepreneurship training, support, and networking for local business ventures.**

Blues music and blues culture bring significant numbers of tourists to the Mississippi Delta. Related developments, such as museums, music venues, restaurants, lodging, and tour stops are located in the larger towns and largely bypass the surrounding communities and neighborhoods where the blues were created. Promoting heritage businesses on a broader scale will increase attractions in the region and provide real employment opportunities to people and places that are the true centers of blues culture.

#### **a. Model**

The **Enterprise Corporation of the Delta** (ECD) is a Community Development Financial Institution that provides financial products and services to Delta counties in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Through small business lending and entrepreneurial training programs, ECD has assisted over 2,500 business ventures. ECD understands financing issues for working families and low-wealth Mississippians and can broker connections to specialized business development assistance.

**North Carolina Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning** (NC REAL) provides education and supports for individuals in rural communities who want to start a small business. NC REAL has trained over 12,000 rural entrepreneurs in life skills, developing a business plan, legal requirements, marketing, operations, and financial management. NC REAL also mobilizes successful entrepreneurs, bankers, accountants and other professionals to assist new participants through Community Support Teams.

#### **b. Supportive State Policy**

The Rural Policy Research Institute concludes that at the state level entrepreneurship development often takes a back seat to industrial recruitment and retention. For states to have an impact they must create a focus on entrepreneurship as a development strategy. The Kansas Economic Growth Act of 2004 went beyond traditional policies by creating a one-stop resource clearinghouse for entrepreneurs, a Kansas Community Entrepreneurship Fund that provides seed capital to entrepreneurs, an Angel Investor Network Tax Credit for qualified investors in start-ups, and an Agri-Tourism Initiative.

In 1987 the North Carolina State Legislature established the Rural Economic Development Center (REDC) as a nonprofit entity to serve the state's rural counties. One offshoot of REDC research in 2003 was the creation of the Institute for Rural Entrepreneurship. Over the past five years the Institute for Rural Entrepreneurship has partnered with the State Department of Commerce, the State Community College System, and the State Workforce Commission to fund demonstration projects, business incubators, entrepreneurship training for dislocated workers, and high speed internet and business services in disadvantaged counties. The Institute has also attracted national philanthropic investment and Community Development Block Grant funds.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGY: Stimulate growth in the arts sector including instruction, production, and support services.**

A creative arts cluster strategy builds on heritage tourism to generate additional supportive industries such as arts instruction, recording studios, marketing networks, intellectual property services, and production development.

#### **a. Model**

**HandMade in America** is a nationally-recognized institution that leverages the skills of local craftspeople to promote the economic revitalization of Western North Carolina. The organization acts as a support system for the craft industry by building relationships between artists and the academic and professional resources that they need to develop their ideas and products. HandMade in

America pursues a communications plan to establish Western North Carolina the center for handmade objects in the country.

The **Arkansas Creative Economy Project** is a multi-year effort to enhance the state's creative economy. An initial study by Regional Technology Strategies, Inc. found that 35,000 Arkansans were employed as artists or with institutions or businesses that produce creative goods and services, bring those goods to the market, or depend on creative design talent for competitive advantage. Further efforts included providing seed grants for regional projects that demonstrate how creative assets can be turned into economic benefits.

### **b. Supportive State Policy**

The Iowa Arts Council and 18 other state agencies support a Governor's Great Places initiative that focuses state resources on culture, innovation, and entrepreneurship in small communities. The Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs also established a program to certify Cultural and Entertainment Districts, using state incentives to stimulate economic development in places with a high concentration of arts and cultural organizations. Since 2005, the Iowa State Legislature has allocated over \$8 million to sixteen designated Great Places through a competitive grant process. The Legislature also earmarks 40% of Historic Tax Credits to Great Places and Cultural and Entertainment Districts.

In Louisiana, the Lieutenant Governor and the State Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism developed a Cultural Economy Initiative (CEI) to support the state's artistic assets. After hurricane Katrina the CEI was used as a tool for rebuilding and led to the creation of the Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation and a Louisiana Rebirth Scorecard to track progress. The CEI also commissioned "Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business," a report that was released at their annual Cultural Economy Summit.



## EPILOGUE

Mississippi and the Delta region are at a critical juncture in time. As the global economy moves forward, many rural areas will be left behind. Places that carry the weight of racial and economic division will need deliberate efforts to overcome barriers and capitalize on their advantages. The work at hand requires more than the social programs of the past. Our prescription begins with organizing the will of the public, state, and local leadership for change. As these leaders adopt responsive and accountable strategies they will strengthen local institutions and position the region for economic growth for all people. The Delta region could expect to see significant short-term outcomes and the following long-term results:

- ▶ Increased high school graduation rates that meet and exceed the national average;
- ▶ A doubling of the numbers of young adults with a college degree or credential;
- ▶ A more streamlined and efficient employment system;
- ▶ Partnerships between industry and service providers that help workers move up career ladders;
- ▶ A robust creative economy sector with many new jobs not only in tourism, but also related production, marketing, and support businesses;
- ▶ A healthy population with a strong community health network;
- ▶ Teenagers that perceive and pursue economic opportunities;
- ▶ A high quality of life that keeps more talent at home and attracts new employers.

This vision for the Mississippi Delta may appear to be far distant from present realities. The models and strategies described in this report, however, are examples of what can be accomplished. Communities across the country, many facing similar challenges, are finding the will to adapt and engage in the hard work of change. The Delta region can do the same.

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OPPOSITE: T-Model Ford plays for a packed house at Red's Lounge in Clarksdale, Mississippi, 2007; PHOTO BY: DL Anderson



