

MISSISSIPPI DELTA

At The Crossroads

**Special Task Force
for the Revitalization of the
Delta Region**

Action Plan - Phase 1

**Recommendations
to the Mississippi
Legislature
2007**

Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Mississippi Delta Region 2006

The Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Mississippi Delta was created by the Legislature (H.B. #1034) and appointed by the Governor, legislative leadership and other organizations as prescribed by law.

The mission of the Special Task Force is to develop a “plan of action” to strategically revitalize the Delta Region and improve the quality of life for residents. The plan is to be systematically implemented. The law further requires the State of Mississippi, through the work of the Special Task Force, to provide a policy, vision and framework to encourage an environment conducive to the revitalization of the Delta Region.

Task Force Members:

Mr. Robert G. Clark

Task Force Chairman
Speaker Pro Tempore, Retired
Pickens, MS

Mr. John Osborne

Task Force Vice Chairman
VP of Operations and General
Manager- Hollywood Casino
Tunica, MS

Mr. Robert Avant

President, Panola County Board of
Supervisors
Crenshaw, MS

Ms Clara Burnett

State Representative
District #9

Mr. Eugene “Buck” Clarke

State Senator
District #22

Mr. Bill Crump

Director of Governmental Affairs
Viking Range
Greenwood, MS

Mr. Walton Gresham, III

President, Gresham Petroleum
Indianola, MS

Mr. Tommy Goodwin

County Administrator-
Humphreys County
Greenville, MS

Dr. Rosetta Howard

Academic Dean, Coahoma CC
Clarksdale, MS

Mr. Ray Humphreys

CEO, Delta Regional Medical Center
Greenville, MS

Ms Helen Hunter

Purchasing Clerk, Jefferson County
Board of Supervisors
Fayette, MS

Mr. John Hines

State Representative
District # 50

Mr. Robert L. Jackson

State Senator
District # 11

Mr. Clifton Johnson

County Administrator
Tunica County
Tunica, MS

Mr. Larry Johnson

Leflore County Board of Supervisors
Greenwood, MS

Mr. David Jordan

State Senator
District # 24

Mr. Laurence Leyens

Mayor- Vicksburg, Ms

Mr. John Mayo

State Representative
District #25

Mr. Willie Perkins

State Representative
District # 32

Dr. Judy Phillips

Civic Capacity Development
Coordinator, Stennis Institute
Mississippi State University

Mr. Bern Prewitt

Bolivar County
Board of Supervisors
Boyle, MS

Ms Clara Reed

CEO, Mid-Delta
Home Health & Hospice
Belzoni, MS

Mr. Leland Speed

Executive Director

Mr. Henry Cote

Associate Manager Senior - Finance
MS Development Authority

Mr. MacArthur Straughter

Mayor, Yazoo City, MS

Dr. Myrtis Tabb

Delta State University -Senior
Administrator for Special Projects
Cleveland, MS

Mr. George Walker

Retired President – Delta Wire
Clarksdale, MS

Mr. Johnnie Walls

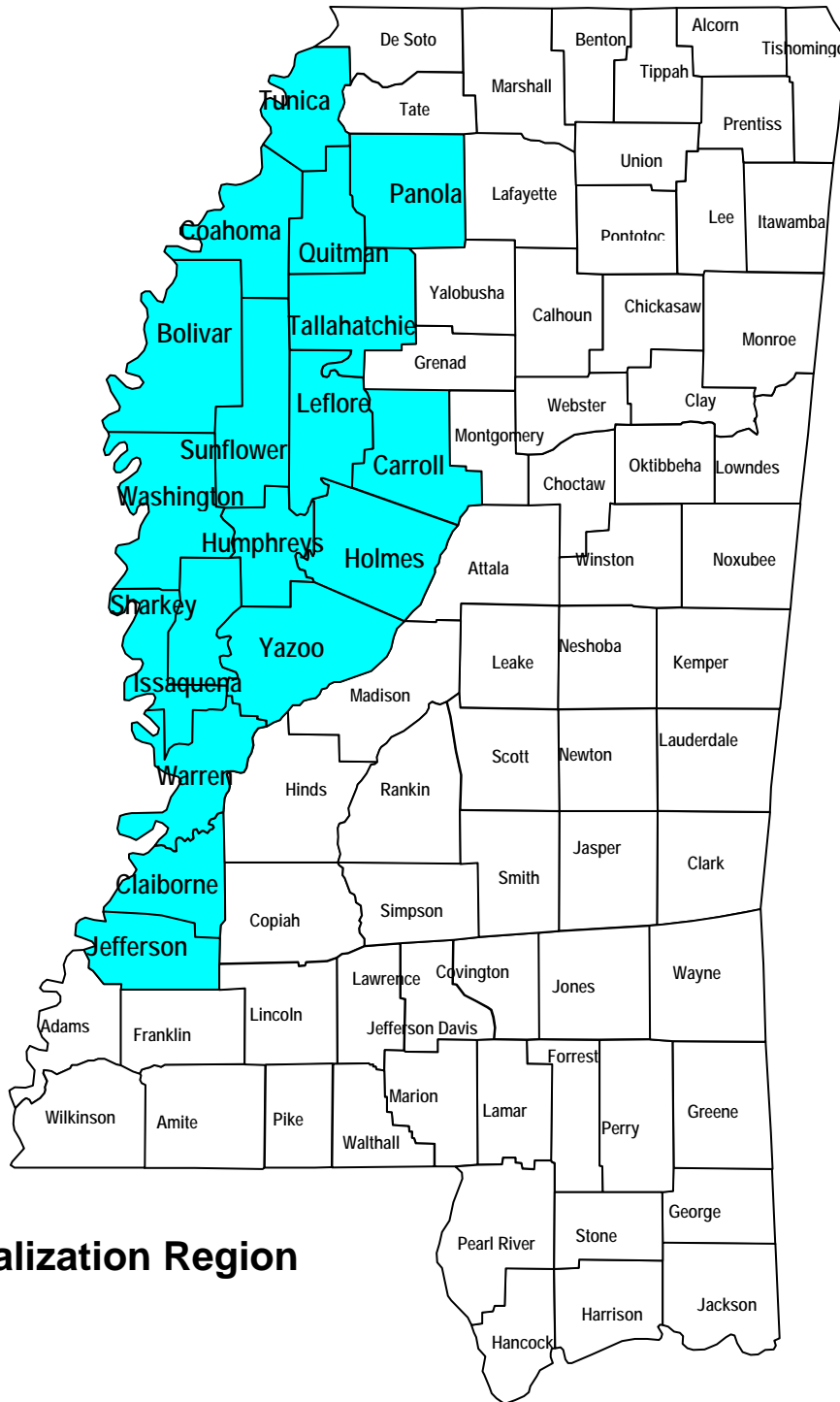
State Senator
District # 12

Staff Support –

MS IHL University Research Center-
Bureau for Long Range Planning

Debra Anderson

Pete Walley



**Delta Revitalization Region
HB 1034**

Letter from the Chairman

December 2006

Dear Fellow Mississippians:

For the past six months, the 27 member Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta, created by the Mississippi Delta Revitalization Act of 2006, has been busy researching ways to address the numerous and complex issues that have historically prevented the Mississippi Delta region from experiencing the quality of life and economic growth and development enjoyed by other regions of the state.

During our deliberations, we have tried to accommodate your views and have revisited your expressed and written concerns and suggestions on what needs to be done to revitalize the Delta. We appreciate your support and participation.

The main purpose of the Special Task Force is develop a "plan of action" by making recommendations to the legislature to use as a road map in creating policies and laws that would begin a movement to transform the Delta from stagnation to vitality. This document contains specific legislative recommendations that we believe, once implemented, will begin to systematically improve the quality of life for Delta residents and redirect the vision and attitudes of all Mississippians toward the Delta.

The work of the Task Force is a process; not a one time event. The Special Task Force is asking for a long term commitment from the State of Mississippi to the process as it moves ahead, step by step. Delta problems are the result of decades upon decades of neglect and shortsightedness. Delta problems will not be solved overnight. We must stay the course and systematically address the issues that have held the Delta back, once and for all. The Mississippi Delta's time has finally come and it is long overdue.

As chairman of the Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta, and on behalf of the 27 members, I am pleased to present to the policy-makers of the great State of Mississippi, our findings for a new beginning in the Mississippi Delta.

Sincerely,
Robert G. Clark

INTRODUCTION

The mention of the words, "*Mississippi Delta*" evokes many images, including a region of the State rich in natural resources and physical attributes; the epitome of southern culture, plantations, *Blues*, cotton and catfish. The Mississippi Delta has been described time and time again as one of the most fertile agricultural areas in the United States. Yet one inescapable image also comes to mind – that of extreme poverty in the Deep South; one of the poorest regions in the United States populated with pockets of poverty including inadequate housing, roads, health care, schools and inadequate education. For too long, the Delta has been commonly thought of as, "too black, too poor and too uneducated."

Overall population in the Delta continues to decline. Education attainment levels are too low and the number of residents living in poverty is too high. Median household income is the lowest in the state. The percentage of personal income derived from transfer payments is too high. Illiteracy seems to have a stronghold and dropping out of school is common.

Some have gone as far as to observe that there are "*two Mississippis*" – the Delta and the rest of the State.

For decades, the Delta has been the focus of much attention as an area that is economically "challenged". The sentiments of state economic development professionals suggest *image* is everything and that "*You just can't sell the Delta.*"

Race relations, education levels and poverty remain in the spotlight. The problems of the region are more complex than what can be summed up in a few issues.

Contrary to the Delta's problems, much attention and assistance, ranging from federal resources to regional and community initiatives, have been directed to the Region. On every level (federal, regional, state, local, private and community/ neighborhood) and in every area (human, social, economic and community development, technology, physical, business, and strategic) projects, programs, initiatives, partnerships, and coalitions have sought to address and alleviate many problems that impede economic development and growth in the Delta. Yet, the question must be raised, has the state of Mississippi ever seriously planned to economically impact the Delta?

Many Delta residents believe that its regional demographics are often used to bring financial resources to the state, but those same resources do not seem to benefit the Delta in the long run.

Some argue that for decades resources have been poured into the Mississippi Delta to address all kinds of issues. However, nothing has changed the overall economic climate of the region. While there is an element of truth to this assessment, the State of Mississippi has never had a long term vision of committed time, energy, and brain power to developing a plan to lift the most economically challenged area in the Nation, out of economic despair. Piecemeal efforts have not brought about the desired change for the

region. Regardless of the amount of state, federal and private dollars expended in the Mississippi Delta, there has been no long range, state-held *vision or plan* in place to change the Delta. As a result, progress has been much too slow and limited.

In some instances, Delta problems have not been properly diagnosed. They are not merely financial. They are as much "attitudinal", inside and outside of the region, as they are educational and economic.

The Delta region has suffered from benign neglect – prolonged isolation and hands-off attitudes and approaches from the State, toward real commitment to change – until now.

***“Change means movement.
Movement means friction.
Only in the frictionless vacuum of a
nonexistent abstract world can movement
or change occur without that abrasive
friction or conflict.”***

Saul Alinsky

Executive Summary

The Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta met on June 15, 2006 to begin laying the ground work for developing an action plan to change the quality of life in the Delta. After four short months of sorting through a host of interrelated issues and concerns articulated by Delta residents throughout the eighteen county region, and discussion among the members, the Special Task Force decided to begin working in three major areas: *Education, Economic Development and Social issues.*

Economic development will focus on addressing the unique challenges of the Delta in an effort to reverse decades of neglect by requesting special focus, attention, consideration and support from the State of Mississippi to insure the revitalization of the Delta.

A priority of the Special Task Force is to develop ways to provide decent and affordable housing in the region. The housing situation in the Delta is the result of lack of investment in low income communities, resulting in too many residents still living in dilapidated, over-crowded, "shot gun" structures built in the first half of the 20th century.

The Task Force is also looking at the practicalities of requesting the creation of a new economic incentive zone exclusively for the Delta. This special incentive zone will not be characterized solely by traditional tax incentives and grant awards, but unique provisions to address more fundamental needs of the Delta.

One of the concerns in the area of education is the quality of services provided for Pre-Kindergarten - third grade students. The task force believes that educational needs for the early years, including a daycare educational component should be under the supervision and direction of the Department of Education, in order to assure certain standards are set and maintained.

Revitalization efforts will also include a cultural tourism initiative to explore and develop the possibilities surrounding aspects of Delta life, while seeking to turn them into economic development and job opportunities.

Funding will be sought to develop and implement an aggressive ad campaign to highlight the attributes of the Delta and focus more attention on stressing the value of education as a cultural ideology. The intent is to impact internal and external images and mindset of the region.

Health issues are a major concern in the Delta. With a high concentration of uninsured, minorities living in the Delta, the task force will focus on providing prevention health services and ways to decrease the number of uninsured residents.

Social issues are often neglected, yet they affect health, education attainment, workforce development and economic and community development. The Special Task Force understands that some of the most fundamental problems in the Delta are fueled by social issues: cultural attitudes, perceptions, practices and behaviors. The Special Task Force intends to advocate policies that will begin to systematically address social

issues, particularly teen pregnancy, teen parenting and the need for preventive services as relates to healthcare.

One of the greatest challenges of the Special Task Force is to identify, sort and understand the efforts of countless organizations, programs, and initiatives that are currently attempting to address some of these same issues. The purpose is to avoid duplication and provide support for those efforts that are working and need to be expanded.

Compilation of this information will take time and persistence, but is essential in developing a plan to revitalize the Delta.

As prescribed by law, the Special Task Force began this process by requesting descriptions of work programs and activities implemented by state-funded organizations that impact the Delta. Over 50 state agencies, economic development organizations, and colleges and universities responded. The Special Task Force has begun organizing this data into a useable format for planning purposes.

Phase one of the revitalization plan is beginning with a series of small, deliberate steps toward long term change and long term gain.

**The following recommendations are
the top seven priorities identified by the
Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta
2006**

- Focus on improving housing in the Delta Region by centralizing functions, stream lining processes, and working closer with non-profit organizations.
- Create a new economic incentive zone for the Delta Region.
- Focus on Pre-Kindergarten through 3rd grade education with an effective daycare component under the MDE supervision and direction and provide transportation for daycare students.
- Develop a cultural tourism initiative for the Delta Region.
- Fund an aggressive marketing campaign on the attributes of the Delta Region.
- Develop a mandatory health insurance plan covering preventive services- including dental and sick care - covering individuals 0 to 18 years old.
- Develop and fund a teen pregnancy prevention and parental development initiative.

Recommendation #1

Focus on improving housing in the Delta Region by centralizing functions, streamlining processes, and working more closely with non-profit organizations.

The Delta Region faces a housing crisis that is equal to or greater than the one faced by the residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Large numbers of people are living in substandard housing. The delta housing crisis is negatively affecting the economy, the environment, and thousands of households that cannot reasonably afford better housing. The Delta Revitalization Task Force has recognized a correlation between the rising number of low-income families who are forced to move and change schools multiple times during each school year and low student achievement. The time for an effective regional, coordinated approach to the Delta housing problems is now.

“Change starts when someone sees the next step.”

Action Step: Authorize a Delta Regional Housing Clearinghouse (DRHC).

The DRHC will

1. Serve as a virtual one-stop housing center for all Delta citizens and be the public coordinator for public, private and foundation housing efforts in the Delta Region.
2. Be a source of information on all housing program including those by government, private companies, and foundations. Collect, disseminate and provide information about housing needs on a regular basis to Delta citizens.
3. Promote the importance of affordable, adequate housing for the long-term development of the Delta Region.
4. Conduct a Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) that details growth issues and housing needs. The purpose of a RHNA is to quantify the need for housing within each jurisdiction, whereby the communities then plan for and decide how they will address their needs.
5. Prepare and disseminate an annual Delta Region Housing Report that will serve to guide policy-makers and Legislators on housing needs in the Delta.
6. Provide a bibliography of housing redevelopment resources including; reviews, studies, programs and organizations that deal with affordable housing issues. The report will be a good general guide for current literature on housing and redevelopment.

7. Provide a description of housing projects, the agency involved, and a contact person for all housing efforts in the Delta Region. Programs listed will include but not be limited to: multi-generational developments serving very-low income families, technical assistance for providing affordable housing, and redevelopment projects.
8. Develop a resource database to catalog housing programs, government, private lenders, and foundation grants. Each program will be listed by name and identify the goals, type of funding, and application information needed. This database will be updated on a regular basis.

The Delta Regional Housing Clearinghouse will be governed by a board of directors consisting of one representative from each of the 18 counties and each city over 10,000 in population in the Delta Revitalization Region.

The Special Task Force believes that local revitalization efforts must be strengthened to meet the needs in Delta communities. Increased empowerment of community based organizations with a proven history of competence and productivity must be utilized to address local problems, including the housing situation.

The State of Mississippi currently recognizes 20 certified Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs) in the 18 county Delta region. The Special Task Force is committed to working with and through existing organizations that have demonstrated competence and commitment to Delta revitalization. Therefore, it is important to maximize the ability of existing organizations to do what they have been created to do.

CHDOs are responsible for developing decent affordable housing to low income persons, which describes many in the region. Unfortunately, Mississippi CHDOs lack administrative dollars. This adversely affects their ability to carry out their mission. While most states set aside a percentage of their HOME allocations on an annual basis for CHDOs operational support, Mississippi does not. CHDOs are burdened in the implementation of their HOME award because they lack administrative dollars.

Action Step: Authorize the Mississippi Development Authority to make available to qualified CHDOs that are awarded HOME funds for housing projects funds for administrative operating support. Request a state appropriation equal to one-half of the five percent HUD allows the state for administrative operation support of the HOME program

Administration funds will be initially, granted one-time to all certified CHDOs, in addition to regular HOME awards. Administrative funds will thereafter, be allocated annually, as incentive funds, based on each CHDO performance. Performance criteria will be determined by the Mississippi Development Authority.

Recommendation #2

Create an (new) economic incentive zone for the Delta Region.

The Delta Region needs additional specific help of state government in order to attract private business investment, to help existing businesses reinvest and grow, to help communities and schools improve services and performance, and to improve the economic chance for individuals to earn a decent living.

***"We must become
the change we
want to see."***

The purpose of the creation of a new economic incentive zone for the Delta Region is to stimulate economic growth and promote regional revitalization in the most economically depressed area of the state as evidenced by persistent high unemployment, low workforce participation rate and high poverty rate.

Action Step: Create and authorize the Delta Revitalization Zone

The Delta Revitalization Zone (DRZ) is designed to stimulate economic growth in the most distressed regional area of the state. By offering wide-ranging financial business incentives, community and school enhancements, and individual employee incentives, the DRZ will become a catalyst for new business development, existing business expansion, job creation, and high performance public schools.

To qualify for a Delta Revitalization Zone business incentive, a business must be located in the DRZ and must meet eligibility requirements as specified for each business incentive.

To qualify for a Delta Revitalization Zone community incentive, a community located in the DRZ must demonstrate economic distress and meet eligibility requirements as specified for each community incentive.

To qualify for a Delta Revitalization Zone education incentive, a public school must be located in the DRZ and must meet eligibility requirements as specified for each public school incentive.

To qualify for a Delta Revitalization Zone individual employee incentive, the individual must:
Be a Mississippi resident **and** receive wages from an employer in the Delta Revitalization Zone **and**
be eligible for benefits under the Workforce Investment Act as a dislocated worker or a low-income individual, **or**
Have received public assistance benefits anytime within the previous two years (e.g. cash payments including TANF, Safety Net, Medicaid, Food Stamps), **or**
Have income below the U.S. Commerce Department's established poverty level, **or**
Is a member of a family whose income is below poverty level **or**
Is an honorably discharged veteran from any branch of the US Armed Forces.

The DRZ will

1. Conduct an on-going extensive marketing program to promote the incentives within the zone to workers and businesses and to prospective businesses elsewhere.
2. Quarterly convene a meeting of representatives of each state and federal agencies and major foundations that have any programs and efforts in progress in the DRZ for the purpose of coordination and collaboration of all work efforts.
3. The DRZ Regional office will work with all state and federal agencies and private entities to enhance its Delta Region Resource Directory and Website to provide more complete and up-to-date information on state programs and resources. The Website will also be designed to incorporate an electronic mailing list that local officials can use to request information and assistance. The DRZ office will enter into agreements with state, federal, and private entities to market this Website so that local government representatives are aware of it and the programs of the participating entities.
4. Develop an economic distress index composed of most recent county unemployment rate divided by same time period state unemployment rate, plus the most recent family below poverty rate divided by same time period state family below poverty rate, plus the most recent county median family income divided by the same time period state median family income, plus the most recent substandard housing rate divided by the same time period state substandard housing rate. The higher the total index, the greater the level of economic distress within the county and the more emphasis given to the county with the highest economic distress index number.
5. Provide a refund of sales taxes paid on purchases of building materials purchased in the DRZ used to rehabilitate real business property located in the DRZ.
6. For DRZ businesses that collect and remit sales taxes, provide a monthly sales tax credit equal to 7% of wages paid to new employees who have been employed at least six months for a maximum of 36 months for each new employee.
7. For DRZ businesses that pay corporate income taxes, provide a corporate income tax credit equal to 5% of wages paid to new employees who have been employed at least six months for a maximum of 36 months for each new employee.
8. For DRZ businesses that pay corporate income taxes, provide a corporate income tax credit to new or expanded DRZ businesses equal to 75% of any ad valorem taxes paid on new or improved business property.

9. For DRZ businesses that pay corporate income taxes, provide a 50% corporate income tax credit for DRZ business donations made to approved DRZ community development project.
10. For DRZ businesses that pay corporate income taxes, provide a corporate income tax credit equal to 10% of any direct job training costs paid to training workers at any qualified training school physically located within the state of Mississippi.
11. Provide an annual state workforce development grant of an additional 5% of state workforce development funds over and above any workforce development funds allocated to the DRZ counties.
12. Establish an Early Learning Mentoring Program in each of the school districts in the Delta Revitalization Zone.
13. Establish a high school dropout prevention coordinator in each of the high schools in the Delta Revitalization Zone. A comprehensive dropout prevention strategy will be developed and implemented by the coordinators for the DRZ high schools.
14. Provide an educational cash incentive of \$500 for each adult over 24 years of age that does not have a high school diploma to be paid when the adult obtains a General Education Development (GED) certificate.
15. Provide a Delta Revitalization Zone Nursing full scholarship for any DRZ resident who will agree to practice in the DRZ for five years after graduation from an accredited nursing program located within the State of Mississippi.
16. Establish a DRZ nursing shortage coordinator to work with health and teaching facilities and delta residents to implement a comprehensive program to eliminate the shortage of nurses in the DRZ.
17. Establish a "Help the Delta Help Itself" state match program where the state will match city or county funds that are dedicated to community improvement projects.

The Delta Revitalization Zone Authority will develop the rules and procedures for and administer the programs designated for the Delta Revitalization Zone through an office staffed and located in the Delta Region.

Recommendation # 3:

Focus on Pre-K through third grade education with an effective daycare educational component.

Much concern is expressed over the educational needs of children, particularly in the early stages of life. High numbers of births to single and teen mothers add to these concerns. Single parenting brings its own set of problems due to maturity levels and educational levels of the mothers.

High quality child care is essential for children in the Delta; it is an investment in their future. All parents that depend on child care can benefit from assistance in choosing high quality care. Childcare is one of the most important decisions a parent can make. Studies have shown 60% of a child's total development occurs by age 4. Children who attend high quality early childhood programs are later rated by teachers as being socially successful and more motivated to learn.

Children in low income environments, as many Delta communities, often experience low quality out-of-home care and inferior childcare programs.

According to research done by the Mississippi State University Early Childhood Institute, information collected through on-site evaluations using a nationally recognized scale to measure program quality of licensed child care centers in Bolivar, Coahoma, Holmes, Leflore, Panola, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica, Washington and Montgomery counties over a 5 year period (2000-2005) indicated that the average program quality for programs serving infants was inadequate to minimal with only two counties having program averages that were good.

In an effort to set up a targeted approach to change the "culture" of licensed childcare in the Delta (and the rest of the state), and to assist parents in choosing quality care the following action step is suggested.

Action Step: Authorize the Mississippi Department of Education to establish and promote minimal guidelines for quality education programs implemented in licensed and unlicensed daycare/childcare facilities;

Mandate that all daycare/childcare facilities licensed by the State in the Delta revitalization region meet minimal requirements in quality education programs established by the Department of Education, by the end of 2009.

Authorize and fund the Mississippi Department of Education to assess the quality of education programs in licensed daycare/childcare facilities and develop a non-compliance procedure that will disallow facilities to continue to operate once the non-compliance procedure has been exhausted.

"Both tears and sweat are salty, but they render a different result.

Tears will get you sympathy; sweat will get you change."

Require all unlicensed daycare/childcare facilities in the Delta Revitalization Region to be licensed and in compliance with MDE guidelines for quality education programs by 2010.

Recommendation # 4:

Develop a cultural tourism initiative for the Delta Region

The Mississippi Delta is a national cultural treasure. Cultural Heritage tourism is a rapidly growing national and international industry that represents a significant opportunity within the Delta. The absence of sufficient dedicated resources to support the growth of cultural heritage tourism has acted as a significant barrier the Mississippi Delta's ability to realize the full potential of its cultural heritage.

"People who wait for changes to occur on the outside before they commit to making changes on the inside will never make any changes at all."

Action Step: Support the designation of the Mississippi Delta as the Delta National Heritage Area.

The Mississippi Legislature and the Executive Branches of Mississippi Government should aggressively endorse and support the efforts of existing organizations to secure the designation of the Mississippi Delta as the Delta National Heritage Area. These activities may include working with the Mississippi Congressional Delegation to gain support for Federal action on this initiative.

Action Step: Increase funding for the Mississippi Development Authority's (MDA), Tourism Division's Heritage Trails Development Program to accelerate the completion of the Blues Trail Interpretive Marker and to implement the Civil Rights Trail Interpretive Marker Program.

To accelerate the completion and implementation of the Heritage Trail Program requires 1) increased staff and 2) funding for trail markers and related interpretive materials. It is recommended that \$2 million annually over a 5 year period be allocated for the purchase of markers and the creation of interpretive materials. It is also recommended that funding for one additional full-time staff person within the Tourism Division's Heritage Trails be allocated.

Action Step: Provide funding to support expanded and enhanced functions of the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University, Mississippi Valley State, Tougaloo College, and Alcorn State University to provide funding for dedicated staff and graduate assistants in support of MDA's Heritage Trails Development Program and the Mississippi Delta Tourism Association.

Action Step: Establish a fund to provide grant cash match requirements to leverage additional financial resources that support the development and expansion of cultural arts and heritage tourism.

A significant amount of federal grant funding is available to fund cultural heritage development. It is recommended that a cash match fund of \$500,000 be established for the purpose of providing a cash match for federal grant applications that will fund cultural heritage development.

Action Step: Develop mechanisms to enhance existing cultural heritage tourism attractions and attractors and support programs that create employment opportunities in the cultural arts and related tourism industry. Existing Federal programs and grants should be pursued that will enhance workforce training and create job opportunities plus enhance cultural heritage tourism in the Mississippi Delta.

Action Step: Expand the geographic scope of activities of the Mississippi Delta Tourism Association to include Warren, Claiborne, and Jefferson County.

Action Step: Support the creation of cultural heritage business incubators in Delta communities and branding “made in the Mississippi Delta.”

The total cost of implementing the proposed recommendations is \$4.46 million annually.

Recommendation # 5

Fund an aggressive marketing campaign on the attributes of the Delta Region.

Mississippi Delta Region citizens tend to have low self images of the Delta Region's attributes, low expectations for the future, persistent low education and skill levels, and a general closed mindedness for change. The vestiges of racism, wide-scale poor health, very high levels of poverty, large numbers of secondary school students that do not complete a high school degree and far too many births to single mothers render the aggregate human capital of the region to one of the lowest amounts in the nation. The general failure of state and local leadership in addressing these problems along with an aversion to risk taking contributes to the region's overall low rankings in most socio-economic measurements.

"We cannot become what we need to be, remaining what we are."

The efforts for solving long-term social problems, economic success, and increased prosperity for all Delta Region citizens are obviously very complex, but revolve around increased education for all citizens and improved educational attainment for Delta Region children. Accomplishing these objectives requires that Delta Region citizens have a high level of interest in improved educational attainment and aggressive participation in activities and programs associated with schools.

A casual review of educational attainment statistics for the Delta Region leaves one to draw the conclusion that, in general, Delta citizens do not value education, increased educational and skills attainment or participate in and support educational initiatives. Part of the low valuing of educational attainment is related to long-standing cultural ideas and attitudes. Changing the cultural attitudes or mindsets of Delta Region citizens about education will be critical to the long-term economic success of the Delta Region.

Cultural change is a form of regional transformation, that is, a radical and fundamental form of change. Cultural change involves changing the basic values, norms, beliefs, etc., among citizens of the region in order to improve regional economic performance. Cultural change is getting citizens to think and act differently about education. Part of cultural change is to market and sale new ideas and higher values to the Delta Region citizens.

Action Step: Authorize and fund a Delta Regional Marketing Board (DRMB).

The DRMB will

1. Promote, in collaboration with all Delta tourism efforts, the attributes and opportunities within the Delta Revitalization Region.
2. Engage in a long-term multi-faceted effort to "change the conversations" about the Delta Region and the importance of education to the region's improvements.

3. Promote the personal, social and economic benefits of education to individuals, communities, and bodies of influence throughout the Delta Region.
4. Make public education the most talked about and discussed public issue.
5. Seek out and engage those citizens and leaders who are not satisfied with the results of the current educational system.
6. Reduce the high school-drop out rate in every district of the Delta Region
7. Serve as an incubator for ideas and strategies that will advance the educational system.
8. Support and encourage those students who are not candidates for formal postsecondary education by giving them information, tools, and education that support career choices.
9. Provide support, experiences and information to enable young people to make informed education and career choices.

The Delta Regional Marketing Board will be governed by a board of directors consisting of one representative from each of the 18 counties and each city over 10,000 in population in the Delta Revitalization Region.

Recommendation #6

Develop a mandatory health insurance plan covering preventive services- including dental and sick care - covering individuals 0 to 18 years old.

***“Change is not made
without inconvenience,
even from worse
to better.”***

The Special Task Force realizes that the most fundamental aspect of a good quality of life is good health. Healthy people are happier, more productive, and less costly to insure.

Mississippi's State Health Plan identifies poverty, low educational levels, large minority groups, limited healthcare manpower- particularly in rural areas, as conditions that contribute to racial and ethnic healthcare disparities.

These conditions describe the Mississippi Delta Region more than any other area of the State of Mississippi.

Demographics for the Delta Region are as follows:

- The population is 70% African American
- The unemployment rate is 9.8 %
- Approximately 20 % of the population is living in poverty
- Fourteen out of eighteen counties in the Region have 20 to 30% of the population living in poverty
- An estimated 35 % of adults 25 years and older do not have a high school diploma
- The school drop out rate is 43 %.

While seeking ways to address the many education and social problems that impact economic development in the Delta, the Special Task Force is determined to prevent key health problems prevalent among African Americans (obesity, diabetes, hyper-tension, heart disease) from crippling future generations and their productivity levels.

The Special Task Force is concerned about how the federal freeze of CHIP allotments beginning in FY 2007 will affect Mississippi's ability to insure its children, in particular those who historically and collectively, have had the greatest needs. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Mississippi's CHIP shortfall is projected to be \$49.6 million and \$37.5 million after regular redistribution. Because insurance dollars are limited, the Special Task Force believes it is imperative that children in the Delta remain as healthy as possible.

There is no legislative mandate for school districts to hire nurses. Hiring of school nurses is left to the discretion of each school district. In an area as the Delta, with its high rates of chronic health problems, lack of a sufficient number of healthcare providers, and a population most likely to be uninsured, prevention health services become increasingly important.

A school nurse may be the only consistent source of health services for uninsured school-aged children. School nurses provide health education to students, staff and parents. They may also be utilized to help link and enroll uninsured children to the state CHIP program.

At present, eleven school districts in the Delta Region are without one school nurse, including the county with the largest number of school districts in the region. Superintendents, administrators and school board members must begin to realize the role of the school district in prevention services and health education.

The following action is requested.

Action Step: Maximize the Mississippi Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid to reach the area of the state with the highest, concentrated population with the greatest health needs by fully funding the CHIP and Medicaid programs.

Action Step: Petition the Governor to direct the Division of Medicaid or another organization, to apply for grants from organizations such as the *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation* and other similar funding sources, to secure money for the purpose of aggressively marketing the CHIP program in the area of the state with tremendous Chronic Disease burden for obesity, Diabetes, hypertension, HIV, infant mortality.

Action Step: Develop a system that supports preventive health care measures throughout the Delta Region by requiring school districts to show and report evidence that they have made attempts to pursue hiring a school nurse - through exploration of funding sources and options, grant applications, requests for technical assistance from MDE and other sources, collaboration with other districts or organizations, and so on - that will indicate they understand the need and importance for prevention health services in the Delta.

Action Step: As a part of prevention services, make provisions to require, fund, and provide free annual physicals for all K-12 students in the Delta revitalization region.

Recommendation #7

Develop and fund a teen pregnancy prevention and parental development initiative.

The rate of teen pregnancy in Mississippi is 72 per 1,000 teens, the highest rate in the country. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 40% of single parent households in Mississippi are living below the poverty level.

In the Mississippi Delta Region, these statistics increase dramatically. In 2004, the Mississippi Delta Region ranked higher in the percentage of births to single mothers than the entire state: 70% in the Delta region compared to 48% for the State. Likewise, the percentage of births to single teens was also higher than the state average: 18% in the Regions compared to 13% for the State.

To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life, we must first set our hearts right.

In 2004, nine of the top ten counties with the highest percentage of births to single teens were in the Mississippi Delta Region.

Research from the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. has indicated that if girls delayed having a baby until marriage, it would eliminate a huge amount of poverty, which would be more effective than anything that could be done through the welfare system alone. Preventing early-child bearing is much more cost effective than dealing with all the problems that occur after babies are born.

In order to revitalize the Delta and improve the quality of life, some very fundamental issues must be addressed – teen child bearing is one of them. The state and region must commit to a long term, aggressive and focused strategy to reduce teen pregnancy. A “system of change” needs to be established to fight teen pregnancy in the Mississippi Delta. Again, working with organizations currently in place, the Special Task Force recommends the following action.

Action Step: Designate and fund through the Mississippi Department of Education, the Mississippi Community Education Center, (a non- profit 501c 3) to do the following:

- 1. Establish a two year pilot project for reducing teen pregnancy in the East Tallahatchie County School district, (with possible expansion into West Tallahatchie County in the first year) targeted to students aged 10 years of age and above, their parents and community members.**

- 2. Create a curriculum designed specifically for preventing teen pregnancy, educating teen and expectant teen parents in the East Tallahatchie School District.**

This curriculum will be interwoven into the students' daily schedule at school. In addition, students and their parents will participate in weekly evening events that feature a strong abstinence and healthy choice subject matter.

While there are many on-going efforts to address teen pregnancy/teen parenting in the region, they are often too widespread and impact is difficult to determine. The proposed pilot project will be a concentrated, intense, customized effort for one to two school districts at a time. The proposed pilot project will be designed to be a model for success in reducing teen pregnancy in the Region, as well as re-directing the mindset from out-of-wedlock births toward abstinence, and healthy, responsible choices.

Within the first year of the pilot project, an evaluation component will be developed to measure the success of the project. The intent is multiply similar projects throughout the Delta until the teen pregnancy rates drop significantly below state and national levels.

The annual estimated cost for this project is \$ 430,000.

APPENDICES

Work of The Special Task Force For the Revitalization of the Delta

The Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta Region was created by House Bill 1034, as signed into law by the governor in 2006. Legislative findings indicated that the Mississippi Delta needed a comprehensive, coordinated, long range economic development plan. The Special Task Force was created to address the issues and concerns associated with revitalization of the Delta. The law describes an 18 county region as the revitalization area, including: Tunica, Coahoma, Quitman, Panola, Bolivar, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Washington, Leflore, Humphreys, Holmes, Carroll, Sharkey, Issaquena, Yazoo, Warren, Claiborne, and Jefferson.

The Mission of the Task force is to develop a plan of action to revitalize the Delta by setting measurable, achievable and significant goals that will improve the economic well being of Delta residents.

The 27 member task force, comprised primarily of Delta residents, is represented by state government, universities and community colleges, local elected officials, business, and regional development organizations.

The Delta revitalization effort began with an unofficial and informal meeting of the Delta legislative delegation, representatives from the Institutions of Higher Learning, Department of Education and the Mississippi Development Authority, on March 30, 2006.

Issues and concerns discussed included : the Power Structure in the Delta; the need for Collaboration; Social, Education, and Perception issues; Infrastructure; Equity/fairness issues; and Monetary resources from the State.

Once the taskforce was appointed, an organizational meeting selecting a chairman and vice chairman was held in June 2006. Regular Task Force meetings, subcommittee meetings, and seven public hearings were held during the next three months, culminating in a two day retreat in September.

In compliance with the mandates spelled out in the law, the Special Task Force discussed numerous complex and interrelated issues. The Special Task Force decided on seven prioritized recommendations to pursue and present to policy makers. Other recommendations are pending and will be presented in Phase 2 of the Action Plan.

PENDING RECOMMENDATIONS

(Identified by the Special Task Force for the Revitalization of the Delta during the retreat held September 25-27, 2006.)

- Require mandatory physical education for all secondary school students in the Delta Region.
- Develop a leadership training course for all public officials in the Delta Region.
- Promote regional development in the Delta.
- Revise water system rules and regulations and permit consolidation of water systems.
- Enact an optional sales tax for special projects for Delta Region cities.
- Develop an incentive plan to encourage cities and counties to adopt and enforce codes, ordinances and health standards.
- Conduct a review of existing laws for city/county relationships and make recommendations that clarify relationships and encourage cooperation.

The Mississippi Delta Revitalization Act of 2006 required the Special Task Force to hold a minimum of three public hearings in the eighteen county region. The Special Task Force decided to hold seven hearings within a two month period in the following locations: Greenville, Tunica, Clarksdale, Yazoo City, Fayette, Belzoni and Greenwood

Close to 1000 Delta residents attended the hearings and nearly 400 verbal and written comments were categorized as issues pertaining to *Cultural Attitudes, Behaviors and Mindsets, Development, Education, Health, Social, and Institutional Processes*. Examples of comments in each category are presented below.

Cultural Attitudes, Behaviors and Mindsets:

"Delta residents must become myth-busters-dispelling the myths about the Delta."

"Attitudes of racism and mindsets need to be changed. There needs to be a renaissance in thinking *in* the Delta and *about* the Delta."

"We lack vision in our local communities."

"If we can change mindsets, we can change behaviors."

Development:

"We need short range plans and long range plans for improving infrastructure in our communities."

"Economic development entities are not representing the Delta fairly or completely."

"We need small businesses development opportunities, including technical help, credit, loans and grants."

"Visibility of tourism needs to be raised."

"Banks need to reinvest in the area."

Education:

"The *value* of education is lacking in the Delta."

"Pre-school must be funded."

"Consider consolidating school districts for better programs."

"MAEP is a starting point for the Delta, but it is not enough."

"Why not have program that targets the Delta, as relates to funding?"

Health:

"Hospitals have to improvise, just to provide services to people."

"The state needs a way to reimburse hospitals that treat people with no insurance."

"Accessibility to a network of rural clinics is needed."

"Look at ways to use technology to address access to healthcare needs."

"Doctors have difficulty practicing in areas with insurance constraints."

Social:

"Delta children have no recreation facilities. They have limited or no exposure to much."

"Available jobs don't pay a livable wage. People have to leave."

"Re-entry programs are needed for individuals released from prison."

"The cycle of teen/single motherhood must be broken."

"Seniors need access to decent housing and transportation."

Institutional Processes:

"Identify model social and economic development programs that are working."

"Cities need taxing authority for special projects."

"There needs to be *laws* that will create and support economic development in the Delta."

"The legislature needs to hold individuals and organizations that receive state resources accountable - Develop a *Delta Report Card* that is easy to read on all issues."

"We need a state Department of Labor to protect workers rights."