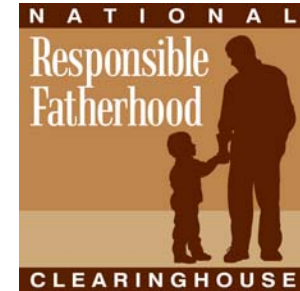




U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services
Administration for Children
and Families
Office of Family Assistance

Responsible Fatherhood State Profile: Mississippi

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www.fatherhood.gov

Mississippi

Strategies Intended to Promote Healthy Marriage

State-Funded Marriage Promotion Activities

Mississippi does not fund marriage promotion activities explicitly, although the state uses federal funding to encourage marriage. Mississippi modified its requirements for eligibility for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to disregard the income of a new spouse during the first three-to-six months after a couple's wedding.ⁱ In addition, the state uses TANF money to fund its Healthy Marriage Initiative.

Other Marriage Initiatives

Mississippi's Healthy Marriage Initiative is funded through TANF monies and administered by the Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Economic Assistance, in collaboration with child welfare and faith-based and community-based organizations. The program teaches the principles and concepts of a healthy relationship to youth, parents, and engaged and married couples with incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Through this initiative, organizations provide a range of services and activities, including media campaigns, marriage mentoring, training in relationship skills and conflict resolution, as well as parenting education for unmarried expectant couples.ⁱⁱ

Strategies Intended to Promote Parenting and Responsible Fatherhood

State-Funded Direct Service Parenting/Responsible Fatherhood Programs

The Mississippi Department of Human Services, Office of Community Services administers a Responsible Fatherhood Initiative with the help of TANF funding. The goal of the Responsible Fatherhood Initiative is to assist fathers in becoming "team parents"; to share the legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood with the mother or mothers of their children; and to improve the self-image of fathers and their families. Services provided through this initiative include parenting skills training; crisis intervention; job readiness and literacy training; and apprenticeship, mentoring, and employment development.ⁱⁱⁱ

State-Funded Programs to Prevent Unwanted or Early Fatherhood

The TANF-funded Just Wait abstinence initiative aims to involve community groups, faith-based organizations, schools and families within the state's four congressional districts in establishing educational and training programs on teenage pregnancy prevention. Under the initiative, the

Take Time to Be a Dad Today



Mississippi Department of Human Services provides a community-wide abstinence-till-marriage curriculum to teach that abstinence from sexual activity before marriage and fidelity within marriage are the only certain ways to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The department also spearheads multimedia marketing campaigns to reach a wide audience with the abstinence-till-marriage message, offers workshops in community settings that address at-risk behaviors, and provides resources that promote the abstinence-till-marriage message and allow the program to be replicated statewide.^{iv}

In addition, with funding through a federal Promoting Safe and Stable Families grant, the state has established Family First Resource Centers. One focus of the centers is preventing teen parenthood, but the centers also work with teens who already are parents to help them improve their chances in life and the life chances of their children. Grant funds are also made available to the office of the Attorney General to implement programs to serve the needs of at-risk youth. These programs provide services aimed at preventing and reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies.^v

The Family and Medical Leave Act

Mississippi abides by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows both fathers and mothers time off after the birth or adoption of a child, or during an illness, without fear of losing their jobs. Parents in companies with 50 or more employees are entitled to up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave over a one-year period to care for a new child, an ill family member, or to recover from their own illness. Furthermore, all public sector employers must provide employees with up to six months of unpaid family and medical leave. The FMLA protects fathers and mothers who have worked with the same organization for at least one year and have worked at least 1,250 hours within the past year. In addition, Mississippi has its own family and medical leave law that allows public employees in agencies of more than 500 to accrue up to 90 days of leave to be used in case of their own illness or injury of the illness or injury of an immediate family member.^{vi}

Domestic Violence Services

Resources for the prevention of family violence are provided through contracts with domestic violence shelters, which provide public education on domestic violence and the cycle of violence. The Mississippi Coalition Against Domestic Violence meets monthly and links domestic violence shelter programs with each other and with professional service providers and funding sources. The coalition initiates and develops recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of services and presses for legislation to aid victims of domestic violence.^{vii}

Child Custody Policy

Upon divorce, both parents may petition the court system for custody of their children. Mississippi has a presumption or preference for joint custody when both parents agree.^{viii} Joint legal custody obligates the parents to exchange information concerning the health, education, and welfare of the minor child, and to confer with one another in the exercise of decision-making rights, responsibilities, and authority.^{ix} Parents may participate in Mississippi's Access and Visitation Program (MAV-P), which is designed to ensure that noncustodial parents can visit their children as specified in a court order or divorce decree. Services provided include mediation, supervised visitation, and parenting education.^x



Paternity Establishment

Paternity establishment secures a child's rights to benefits from both parents, including Social Security, medical and life insurance, and veterans' benefits. If a child's parents are not married, paternity can be established through voluntary acknowledgement (known as the A Simple Acknowledgement of Paternity) or through court proceedings. Legal paternity can be established while the mother is still in the hospital when both parents sign an acknowledgement of paternity form and return it to the hospital staff. There is no fee when the acknowledgement of paternity form is filed with the birth certificate. If parents are not in agreement, court action is required and paternity testing is performed if there is uncertainty.^{xi}

Child Support Assistance

The Division of Child Support Enforcement provides a number of services, including locating noncustodial parents, establishing paternity via court order, obtaining court orders for support and enforcement of those orders, collecting and distributing payments, and working with child support programs in other states to collect payments. Recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are automatically referred to a child support office, and there is no application fee for services.^{xii}

Child Support Enforcement

Mississippi's Division of Child Support Enforcement uses a number of methods to enforce child support, including credit bureau reporting, license suspension, passport revocation, and court-ordered employment. A noncustodial parent can also be taken back to court for noncompliance and can possibly be incarcerated. The division also keeps a "10 Most Wanted" list on its Web site with names and photos of parents who are delinquent in their child support payments.^{xiii}

Strategies Intended to Enhance Fathers' Economic Stability

Welfare Benefits

Through the TANF program, Mississippi provides assistance to needy families with children up to 18 years of age. If a parent has received TANF benefits for at least 24 months over his or her lifetime, or if a parent is deemed to be "work ready" but does not participate in work activities, the parent will not continue to receive TANF assistance. Single parents with children under one year of age are exempt from these requirements for up to 12 months over a lifetime.^{xiv} The TANF Work Program (TWP) refers participants to work activities based on their needs, such as seeking employment, earning a GED, pursuing vocational education, and getting job-skills training. Participants continue to receive their TANF and food stamp benefits and to receive transportation and child care services. The TWP also pays for work-related expenses, such as tools, work permits, and GED tests. For those participants who find full-time employment at or above the federal minimum wage, the income is disregarded for up to six months so that they may receive both the paycheck and TANF benefits. Such participants also receive transitional child care and transportation services, along with job retention bonuses. Further, to encourage marriage, the income of a new spouse is disregarded for up to six months.^{xv}



Services Geared Toward Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers

When noncustodial fathers have a limited income, child support orders are made at the court's discretion. A number of programs across the state promote responsible fatherhood. Specifically, Mississippi's Access and Visitation Program (MAV-P) assists noncustodial fathers in developing better relationships with their children.^{xvi} In addition, the Responsible Fatherhood Initiative offers fatherhood workshops to noncustodial and incarcerated fathers.^{xvii}

Job Training and Employment Services

Under the federal Workforce Investment Act, Mississippi has created the Workforce Investment Network (WIN) to provide three levels of job services through job centers. Core services include basic assessment of skill levels, aptitudes, abilities, and supportive service needs; job-search and placement assistance; and the provision of labor market information. More intensive services may include comprehensive and specialized assessments of the skill levels and service needs of adults and dislocated workers, counseling services, the development of an individual employment plan, case management for participants seeking training services, and short-term pre-vocational services. These latter services include helping to prepare people for unsubsidized employment or training by emphasizing learning, communication, and interviewing skills; punctuality; personal grooming; and professional conduct. Those who have received at least one core and one intensive service may receive training services. These services include: occupational skills training; on-the-job training; workplace training with related instruction, which may include cooperative education programs; private-sector training programs; skills upgrading and retraining; entrepreneurial training; job readiness training; adult education and literacy training, in conjunction with other training services; and customized training.^{xviii}

Incarceration and Reentry

Services and Programs for Incarcerated Fathers

Through Mississippi's Responsible Fatherhood Initiative, the Mississippi Department of Human Services and the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) have partnered to offer a nine-week fatherhood program at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. The MDOC also has a program in place to prepare residents to reenter the workforce.^{xix}

Resources

- **Mississippi Department of Human Services.** This Web site provides an overview of state services and policies for families, including information about child support, child care assistance, welfare, protective services, and fatherhood <http://www.mdhs.state.ms.us/index.html>



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