

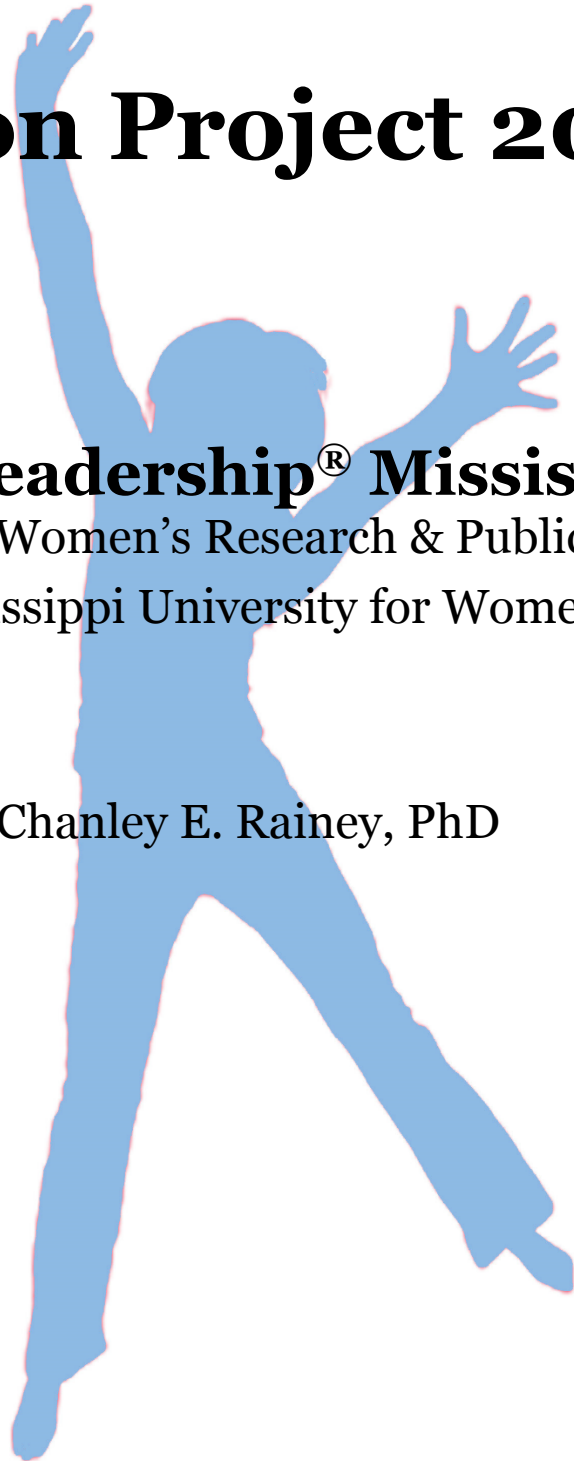
Action Project 2023

NEW Leadership® Mississippi

Center for Women's Research & Public Policy

Mississippi University for Women

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Overview

The Action Project is a core component of the NEW Leadership ® program. Each year, we focus on an issue that has recently captured the attention of state policymakers. Students research the issue from the perspective of an assigned interest group or coalition of interests. The project culminates in group presentations in the form of witness testimony before a mock legislative committee hearing on proposed legislation related to the chosen policy area. The faculty in residence (FIRs), Dr. Chanley Rainey, and special guests will play the roles of legislative committee members.

As you conduct your research and craft your presentation, make every effort to represent the best arguments and evidence your assigned interests have to offer. Though you may personally favor a different policy approach, use this opportunity to deepen your understanding of the logic and values motivating the other side. Ultimately, this will make you a better advocate of the policies you support in real life.

To make the presentations effective and believable, each group should create characters who might testify in front of a real legislative committee. A good strategy is to

pair personal, “human impact” testimonies with experts who are able to generalize those experiences. Each speaker should provide evidence from a particular perspective, so think about the kinds of research and argument each character will offer and how each contributes to the group’s overall message. While some of your members may be doing research to craft realistic stories about the effects of a policy on ordinary people’s lives, others might be looking at research that analyzes the ethical, political, economic, or social implications a policy may have for Mississippi as a whole.

Regardless of your specific interest group assignment, consider doing general research into the current policies, state and national, related to the policy issue. It will certainly be helpful to learn about the recent reform efforts (whether successful or not) in Mississippi. It’s likely that you’ll also benefit from learning how other states have fared after adopting similar policies. Did they achieve the benefits touted by proponents of reform? What were the costs associated with the reform, and did they affect the state budget? Have there been any unanticipated consequences of reform? As you look at other states, keep in mind that neighboring states are often the best comparisons. They face similar conditions and compete with MS for population and industry. Also, ask yourself how different groups might attempt to persuade their audiences. What kinds of evidence could they use to support their arguments? To what beliefs and values would they appeal? This will help you “hit the ground running” and anticipate the arguments the committee will hear from other groups. That will be especially useful as you prepare to answer committee questions.

Group Assignments

Blue Group: Social Justice Feminists' Alliance

LEADING FIGURES: Carol Burnett, Low-Income Child Care Initiative; MS Senator Angela Turner-Ford; MS Senator Rod Hickman

Vision: Improve women's lives and ensure systemic sexism, racism, and economic exploitation are recognized and combatted. Gender discrimination continues to result in higher rates of poverty among women despite the greater share of work (especially when unpaid labor is considered) they shoulder. Women living at the intersection of gender and race-based oppression are even worse off, as evidenced by the fact that Mississippi's poverty, maternal mortality, and infant mortality rates are much higher among women of color and their babies than for other groups of women. If we want Mississippi to thrive, we must ensure government policies redress these inequalities and finally invest in those whose labor has been exploited for far too long.

Ni-Lah Jones

Angelia Hogan

Kaley LeCroy

Abigail Maddox

Elsi Muñoz-Ramos

FIR: Adrienne Wooten

Peer Mentor: Isabella Escobedo

Red Group: Coalition of Compassionate Conservatives

LEADING FIGURES: Lynn Fitch, Attorney General; Phillip Gunn, Frm. Speaker of the MS House; Tate and Elee Reeves, Governor and First Lady; MS Senator Nicole Boyd

Vision: Strengthen traditional family values, improve pregnancy-related outcomes for Mississippi families, and make Mississippi the model pro-life state while nurturing the economy and limiting the size and power of government. Now that abortion is no longer legal, Mississippi has the opportunity to demonstrate the moral superiority of pro-life conservatism by adopting policies that encourage families to stay together, strengthen community resources, and support families, particularly poor mothers in crisis, throughout pregnancy and during early childhood. These goals can be achieved without sacrificing economic growth if policymakers find creative ways to partner with the private and nonprofit sectors to address these needs. Business-friendly, low-tax policies are good for Mississippians, rich and poor alike, while welfare programs require higher taxes, lead to more bureaucracy, and encourage people to become dependent on government services.

Belle Keebler

Hayden
Kirkhart

Nyla Jones

Keona
Sanders

Lynzy
Sandoval

FIR: Michelle Easterling

Peer Mentors: Mackenzie Pearce and Keara Williams

Yellow Group: Network of Entrepreneurs & Early Care Professionals

LEADING FIGURES: Carol Burnett, Low-Income Child Care Initiative; Dr. Cathy Grace, Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning; Ryan Miller, Accelerate Mississippi

Vision: Eliminate child care deserts and ensure every parent in Mississippi has access to affordable, quality care for their infants and toddlers. Economic development experts know that Mississippi's economy won't really grow until the state solves its work-force participation rate problem. Increasingly, they recognize that a lack of child care is at the root of the problem. The lack of child care itself results from a market failure whereby impoverished parents cannot afford to pay child care providers a living wage, so the supply of child care workers is low and subject to high turnover. Leaders must work together to overcome these market failures and invest in early care professionals and providers, recognizing that they are the "workforce behind the workforce." When we build this critical infrastructure, we will enable greater workforce participation and develop a more highly skilled labor force for the future.

Alyssa
Edwards

Erin Hanson

Aabha Mantri

Diamond Rayford

Rie Trask

FIR: Kristie Metcalfe

Peer Mentors: Rachel Shirley

Note on Roles & Responsibilities

Throughout the week, FIRs, Mentors, and MUW staff will guide and support students in their efforts to research and prepare a presentation for the mock legislative committee hearing described in the following pages. FIRs and mentors will work closely with their assigned student groups as they prepare for the mock hearing, while MUW staff will periodically provide focused assistance and will be available for additional support as needed. Mentors may be called upon to assist with group presentations—particularly if a group is small—while FIRs and MUW staff will play the role of legislators during the mock committee hearing.

Students are responsible for being fully present during all scheduled Action Project prep sessions and for working with group members, mentors, and FIRs to arrange extra research and rehearsal sessions as needed. Be engaged, attentive, and respectful of the experience and knowledge your peers, mentors, FIRs, and other staff have to offer. Contribute your best efforts to the project. When challenged to represent a view in conflict with your own values and beliefs, trust that a) we owe it to one another to fully consider the best arguments each side has to offer and b) it is strategically useful to know thine enemies.

Policy Focus

The Issue

This year, the committee will be studying issues related to child care access and affordability. Mississippi policymakers have raised child care as a core concern in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's elimination of a national right to abortion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022). Over the fall, the Senate Study Group on Women, Children, and Families held four public hearings and dozens of private meetings to create a legislative agenda that would be responsive to the needs of women and families with young children, particularly those who might experience crisis pregnancies for financial and other reasons. In the first hearing, on September 27, witnesses provided a statistical overview of women and children's quality of life in the state, while testimony at the third hearing (Oct. 25) focused on child care.

Across the first and third hearings, committee members repeatedly heard calls to do more to help families offset the staggering cost of childcare and take steps to increase the availability of child care across the state. They heard this from state agencies, early childhood education policy analysts and researchers, and advocates working with child care providers. A range of suggestions were made to ensure more families are served by the Child Care Payment Program (CCPP), which partially covers the cost of child care tuition for families earning up to 85% of the state median income. CCPP is funded through a federal grant (the Child Care & Development Block Grant, CCDBG) and administered by the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS). In fact, MDHS testimony grabbed headlines when officials informed the committee that the agency will run out of funds to provide stipends for an estimated 12,000 children when COVID-19 relief funds expire in September 2024.

In addition, several witnesses testified to the dismal wages earned by early child and education workers and the razor thin (or nonexistent) profit margins of many child care providers. They stressed that the state would not be able to solve the problem of child care deserts unless it took steps to make a career in early child (infants and toddlers) education more financially appealing. As for solutions, witnesses pointed to the successful Child Care WAGE\$ initiative (WAGE\$), which provides wage supplements to those working in early education every six months on a graduated scale that encourages educators to increase their educational qualifications and remain in their positions, reducing staff turnover and enhancing professionalization in the child care industry. Many suggested that the state consider drawing on the 12% of Child Care Development Funds (CCDF) that must be used for quality enhancement, lottery funds, or other public funds to launch a similar program in Mississippi. In addition to salary supplements, witnesses suggested the state could raise early educator salaries by increasing the amount paid per pupil under the CCPP. Whereas Mississippi currently pays a rate that represents the 75th percentile of market rates in the state, other states estimate the real cost of quality childcare—what providers would charge if parents could afford it—and use that as the basis for CCPP subsidies.

Ahead of the spring 2023 legislative session, the Study Group's Chairwoman, Senator Nicole Boyd, highlighted a host of reforms the committee was interested in pursuing and specifically mentioned access to quality child care. She also repeated a statement she had made at the committee's third hearing, "Our general workforce participation rate in the state is around 55%, and we know that 75% of our single mothers are out there working. So, this is a group that wants to work, and we need to help."

The Senate Study Group was not alone; many of their proposals were echoed by the House Committee on the Sanctity of Life, and two executive officials lent their voices to the chorus as well. Attorney General Lynn Fitch launched her Empowerment Project ahead of the legislative session to encourage a host of similar reforms. In an appearance on MidDays with Gerard Gibert of SuperTalk FM radio, she highlighted the fact that it often costs more to enroll an infant in child care than to enroll in a public university. She explicitly encouraged the use of tax credits to incentivize employers to provide child care benefits and paid family leave to their employees. On March 3, the Mississippi State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC), whose members are appointed by the Governor, recommended that MDHS rescind its rule requiring that parents participate in child support cases against the noncustodial birth parent in order to become eligible for the Child Care Payment Program (CCPP), hoping this would increase access to child care while also providing more stable revenue for child care providers who serve struggling families.

Legislators in the House and Senate offered a raft of bills aimed at addressing the unmet demand for and prohibitive cost of child care. Several Republicans in each chamber drafted proposals to expand the tax credits employers can claim for providing child care benefits to workers, and the law that eventually passed also allowed individual taxpayers to deduct 25% of the child care expenses they file on their federal returns when filing with the state. Though at least three bills would have also provided income tax credits to child care providers and teachers, none of these measures made it out of committee, including one authored by Republican Senator Bryce Wiggins. Besides the income tax bills, Democratic lawmakers attempted—through their own bills as well as amendments to Republican proposals—but failed to legally require that MDHS spend more of its federal funds on CCPP to help poor families pay for child care. The state of Mississippi routinely fails to spend all of its Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds, and the federal government allows up to 30% of those funds to be used for CCPP, so these lawmakers reasoned that the legislature should step in to ensure maximum funding for child care. The legislative majority showed no interest in the effort. However, MDHS did follow through on the recommendation to eliminate the child support enforcement provision after the session ended, which will likely mean more single mothers are able to successfully apply for the program.

The Scenario

We will pretend that the Speaker's Commission on the Sanctity of Life and the Senate Study Group on Women, Children, and Families are holding a joint committee hearing in September of 2023 to prepare for the 2024 legislative session. While FIRs and others will play the role of committee members, keep in mind who the actual legislators would be. Below are the representatives and senators who serve on the joint committee:

Senate Study Group on Women, Children, & Families

Nicole Boyd (R), Chair	Kevin Blackwell (R)	Hob Bryan (D)
Dean Kirby (R)	Rod Hickman (D)	Angela Burks Hill (R)
Chad McMahan (R)	Angela Turner-Ford (D)	Brice Wiggins (R)

Speaker's Commission on the Sanctity of Life

Otis Anthony (D)	Cedric Burnett (D)	Angela Cockerham (I)
Kevin Felsher (R)	Jill Ford (R)	Missy McGee (R)
Dana McLean (R)	Sam Mims (R)	Lee Yancey (R)

The committee has asked to hear testimony on what more the legislature should do to increase access to quality child care in Mississippi. They have invited various groups as witnesses and have requested that presentations include both information about the extent to which there are problems to be addressed regarding child care access and quality in Mississippi as well as proposals for legislative action that could solve the problem. Lawmakers want to know whether there is a problem that needs solving, whether and to what extent legislation and government action would be helpful solving it, and what return on investment the state should expect if a proposal requires the investment of state funds.

Students will play the role of the invited groups. Each action project group represents one of the organizations or coalitions invited to provide testimony to the joint committee. Each member of your team is someone chosen by your interest group(s) to speak at the hearing. While you were invited as a committee witness, that does not mean that all members of the committee are aligned with the mission and values of your bloc. You will need to prepare not only to make a strong case, but also to respond to the questions of lawmakers who may be skeptical or even hostile to your position. In addition, the legislative hearing is public, so each group must assume that a wide variety of media representatives are reporting on the presentations. Your testimony should be a public-facing, professional, and influential presentation based on the goals and beliefs represented within your assigned group and your strategic approach to persuading legislators that your proposals should be adopted. By strategically coordinating your members' testimony, you are attempting to tell a coherent story that will influence public opinion as well as the committee members' decisions on child care policy in Mississippi.

In the end, you must decide how best to represent the array of principles and goals contained in your coalition.

Group Presentations

Fictional organizations have been created to represent the different segments of public discourse surrounding child care policy in the state of Mississippi: the Social Justice Feminists' Alliance, the Coalition of Compassionate Conservatives, and the Network of Entrepreneurs & Early Care Professionals. Although the group, coalition, or alliance itself is not real, the assorted interests that support each group are. In this way, your research will engage with actual groups, bills, and political actors as much as possible.

Each group will have 30 minutes for its presentation: 20 minutes for the group to present its case, followed by 10 minutes of Q&A with committee members. As part of its 20-minute presentation to the legislative committee, each group is allowed to call on "experts" and other witnesses and may use a variety of appeals in its presentation, including emotional, intellectual, and ethical appeals.

In your presentations, each individual will assume a particular role and needs to introduce themselves and speak from the perspective of a fictional persona. For example, a group might include a low-income mother who can speak to her experiences with TANF and the CCPP, a business owner or young professional who prefers that the state restrict spending so taxes can be reduced (or, alternatively, wants the state to help create more child care options for workers), or a child care provider who will explain how CCPP impacts their ability to serve children and make a living. Consider the following types of roles as you compose your group's presentation to the legislative committee:

- Concerned and impacted citizens
- Representatives of the business community
- Early education teachers, administrators, and owners (including licensed centers and registered residential caregivers)
- Spokespersons for advocacy organizations
- Policy experts and academics working in relevant disciplines
- Officials from other branches of government, such as MDHS

Although your group assignment may entail a policy perspective at odds with your actual political or personal beliefs, you will be expected to use research materials, concepts, and ideas which support the consensus of the group to which you are assigned. As you read the group descriptions below, think about how you would propose persuasive arguments from each group's perspective. Be prepared to give the most robust argument on behalf of your group's position and to anticipate and effectively counter the best arguments of others. If you can do both, you will be fully prepared to discuss this policy area with anyone, not just with the fictional committee during NEW Leadership MS.

Detailed Group Descriptions

Blue Group: Social Justice Feminists' Alliance

LEADING FIGURES: Carol Burnett, Low-Income Child Care Initiative; MS Senator Angela Turner-Ford; MS Senator Rod Hickman

Vision: Improve women's lives and ensure systemic sexism, racism, and economic exploitation are recognized and combatted. Gender discrimination continues to result in higher rates of poverty among women despite the greater share of work (especially when unpaid labor is considered) they shoulder. Women living at the intersection of gender and race-based oppression are even worse off, as evidenced by the fact that Mississippi's poverty, maternal mortality, and infant mortality rates are much higher among women of color and their babies than for other groups of women. If we want Mississippi to thrive, we must press government policies must redress these inequalities and finally invest in those whose labor has been exploited for far too long.

Your coalition is a network connecting various feminist and progressive groups in the state, some that belong to national federations and others that are homegrown and exist only in Mississippi. You are diverse: some organizations are majority black and others majority white; some organizations skew younger, others older; what binds you together is that you all advocate for those living in poverty and working low-wage jobs. In the legislature, you are most closely aligned with the Legislative Black Caucus.

These diverse groups are united by a commitment to improving the lives of society's most disadvantaged and by a conviction that most social, political, and economic institutions have been designed in ways that rely on and maintain the existence of an impoverished and disenfranchised class. Western European cultural traditions and the legacies of plantation slavery mean that women, queer folks, and people of color face more barriers to class mobility and are overrepresented amongst the poorest and most politically alienated in Mississippi. Political power must be truly democratized and used to reform or replace the institutions that perpetuate sexism, racism, and economic exploitation.

Your groups are focused on reducing poverty and economic inequality through redistributive and social safety net programs, a high-quality system of public education and child care, and laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, sex, and gender. Programs like the Child Care Payment Program (CCPP) are essential to mitigating the worst effects of the systems we've inherited. Around 90% of the children enrolled in the program are black, and most of them are being raised by a single mom. These mothers are working in some of the lowest-paying jobs in our state, and without the stipends provided by the CCPP, the cost of childcare is a barrier that means many of them face difficult choices about how to balance the safety and developmental needs of their children with the need to devote time and attention to work. It is difficult for them to hold the jobs they have, much less pursue opportunities that would lead to better-paying positions. The CCPP relieves some of this stress by increasing both the amount of their paychecks that they can use for basic necessities and also the hours they can work. In

addition, most of the small business owners whose day care centers serve CCPP families are themselves black women who are struggling to provide critical services to their communities in a low-wage industry. Mississippi's child care rates are among the lowest in the nation because so many families in the state cannot afford to pay what it actually costs providers to care for children. CCPP payments mean that fewer providers have to choose between turning children away and eating into their profits when parents are unable to cover the cost of care.

For years, your network has been pushing Mississippi to increase the funding available for CCPP and to reduce the regulatory burdens parents and providers face as they try to access stipends. This has been an uphill fight, but some key Republican leaders in the state now support these ideas, and you are hopeful that piecemeal progress is possible. In fact, Governor Tate Reeves' State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC) threw its support behind your proposal to eliminate the requirement that women cooperate with child support enforcement efforts before they could be approved for the CCPP. MDHS has now adopted this proposal, but more must be done before the CCPP program will reach its full potential.

While MDHS claims there is no waiting list, the state of affairs in Mississippi leads you to suspect that many more families could benefit from an expanded CCPP program. Your coalition has repeatedly called attention to the fact that Mississippi's infant and maternal mortality rates are unacceptably high and are frequently the worst in the nation. Poverty, racism, and the stress these put on poor women's mental health are at the root of these statistics. While safety net programs are in place, they don't come close to meeting the need. In 2021, the Mississippi United Ways Association released a report that reveals the scope of that need and just how important gender is to understanding poverty: it's ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) report showed that about a third of Mississippians who earn enough to live above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) nonetheless struggle to afford housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and a basic smartphone plan each month. Just under 9% of all households in Mississippi are single-female-headed with children; of these, 83% live below the FPL or are in the ALICE category. These rates of economic hardship reflect the burdens facing women—especially women of color—and the potential impact on women and children that the state could have if it increased the amount of funding for CCPP and advertised the program more broadly.

The feminist women's groups in your coalition strongly support public service programs like TANF and CCPP because government programs often reduce the burdens of women's care work or mitigate the effects of gender discrimination in other ways. For example, working mothers struggling to make ends meet benefit not only from early childhood education subsidies, but also from programs like SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, and others. Further, women are overrepresented in the charitable sector, which already works tirelessly to supplement government services that don't go far enough in helping the most vulnerable. Yet, the Mississippi policymakers often want to shift even more of the work onto nonprofit organizations and want to cut the amount of state and federal dollars spent. Instead of seeing investment potential in working mothers who need

assistance to overcome systemic barriers, many in positions of leadership suspect them of trying to game the system and prefer to put up more barriers to government aid.

Some will argue that poor women with children should help themselves by getting married, but the feminists in your network point out that a woman's choice over whether or not to pursue a domestic partnership or marriage should be independent from her ability to live in poverty. There are systemic issues that place the work of child-rearing disproportionately on women's shoulders and that render them less able to achieve economic self-sufficiency. These are not acceptable. It is easy to see that a woman should not have to choose between staying in an abusive relationship and poverty, but the same is really true for *any* relationship: women shouldn't be forced into intimate partnerships by the need to escape poverty. At least MDHS seems to have finally recognized that women shouldn't be forced to allow the state into their co-parenting relationships as a condition of assistance. It's a step in the right direction.

You are also unsympathetic to the argument that a programs like CCPP and TANF should be limited so that taxes can be reduced. Look at the recent income tax cut passed by the Mississippi legislature: it reduces the state's already-low income tax even further but leaves the grocery tax—the tax that poor and rich alike pay—as the highest in the nation. You're not interested in starving programs that actually help the poor so that people who already have more than they need can keep more of their income.

The same calculations explain your dissatisfaction with the child care tax credits recently passed by the legislature. These may provide some small benefit to poor families, but they will do more to further reduce the tax burden of middle and upper-class families. This will reduce the amount of tax revenue Mississippi has to spend on public education, welfare, infrastructure, and other priorities. With every step forward, you are disappointed by the fact that reforms weren't taken further and confronted by the potential for backsliding.

This is frustrating work, but the coalition is united in its belief that eliminating economic inequalities based on gender and race is a moral imperative and a practical investment in a better future for all. Uplifting the most disadvantaged among us and eliminating discrimination will improve the lives of all Mississippians and make our society not only more just, but more successful. Only when everyone thrives can we benefit from the full and diverse range of talents, ideas, and effort that Mississippi has to offer.

Red Group: Coalition of Compassionate Conservatives

LEADING FIGURES: Lynn Fitch, Attorney General; Phillip Gunn, Frm. Speaker of the MS House; Tate and Elee Reeves, Governor and First Lady; MS Senator Nicole Boyd

Vision: Strengthen traditional family values, improve pregnancy-related outcomes for Mississippi families, and make Mississippi the model pro-life state while nurturing the economy and limiting the size and power of government. Now that abortion is no longer legal, Mississippi has the opportunity to demonstrate the moral superiority of pro-life conservatism by adopting policies that encourage families to stay together, strengthen

community resources, and support families, particularly poor mothers in crisis, throughout pregnancy and during early childhood. These goals can be achieved without sacrificing economic growth if policymakers find creative ways to partner with the private and nonprofit sectors to address these needs. Business-friendly, low-tax policies are good for Mississippians, rich and poor alike, while welfare programs require higher taxes, lead to more bureaucracy, and encourage people to become dependent on government services.

For nearly fifty years—ever since the US Supreme Court issued its opinion in *Roe v Wade* in 1973—activists in your network have been fighting against the practice of abortion. It has been a long fight, but you have had tremendous success since the 1990s in getting state laws passed that restrict the practice and in barring the use of federal funds to pay for the procedure. Now, the Court has finally corrected the mistake it made fifty years ago.

However, your work is far from over. Even though you’ve succeeded in eliminating the constitutional right to abortion in federal law and criminalizing it in Mississippi, you recognize that the end to legal abortion will not be the end to abortion. Desperate women will still seek to end unwanted pregnancies, and an underground network of abortion activists and providers is already forming to assist them. You don’t want to put doctors and women in jail; you want to keep babies alive by working with pregnant women who find themselves in crisis.

To truly defeat abortion, you seek policies that will reduce the demand for illegal abortion. The pro-choice movement has long criticized the pro-life movement as being concerned only with life in the womb. If you are going to convince majorities across the country to outlaw abortion entirely, you must demonstrate concern for the lives of women and children broadly. Just as importantly, you seek a society where women are empowered to choose life and laws banning abortion are rarely needed. You believe that the vast majority of women will eagerly choose to continue their pregnancies if only they are given the support they need.

By understanding the factors that drive women to end to their pregnancies, your network will bring together the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build safety nets that catch women and keep them from falling into the trap of abortion, which only appears to offer a solution to their problems. Faith-based crisis pregnancy centers are already leading the way in this effort. The centers provide or connect women to counseling, temporary shelter or housing assistance, medical care, food, clothing, and other goods and services. The 2022 passage and 2023 expansion of tax credits under the Pregnancy Resource Act is a significant win for this effort, as it will encourage more charitable giving to these centers.

One important resource women need when they show up at the pregnancy crisis centers is child care. Many of these women are already working or are in school, and they need an affordable, safe place to send their child as soon as possible so they can continue working. Most of these women are in crisis because they are living in poverty or are on the brink of poverty, and taking an extended time off from work is not an

option. The costs associated with an infant are the chief reason women turn to abortion, and childcare is one of the most expensive items on the list. Crisis centers can connect women to church daycares, which are sometimes a bit more affordable, but these centers often don't provide care every day or for the entire work day. Unfortunately, the decline in church attendance also means there are fewer and fewer churches offering day care.

Those working in the pregnancy crisis centers echo what you hear from state welfare agencies and advocates on this issue: there are not enough options for child care in Mississippi and those that do exist are too expensive. This, then, turns out to be a critical issue for a post-abortion world. Mississippi government leaders must set an example in this area. Conservatives must be creative in finding a way to stimulate growth in the child care industry while also reducing the costs so that women—especially poor women—can afford to be mothers.

There is a bit of tension surrounding some of the work involved in this new “pro-life plus” campaign. Your coalition is firmly situated in the Republican Party of Mississippi and includes many with strong commitments to fiscal and social conservatism. That means that you must balance your desire to support mothers, children, and families against your belief that society will ultimately be better off when government policy encourages strong, nuclear families and economic self-sufficiency.

Given this diversity of opinion, it isn't surprising that some in the network are as uncomfortable encouraging women to leave their young infants with others while they head off to school or work as they are increasing access to birth control and starting single-moms support groups at their local church. They worry that these actions condone sex outside of marriage and encourage women to work instead of supporting them in nurturing their young children. Families should be the center of socialization, and children raised in child care centers—especially secular ones—may not learn important values and beliefs that they would otherwise get from their parents. Still, the majority in your coalition is convinced that women who feel the love and support of their communities will be more likely to make healthy, ethically-sound choices when compared with those who are left to fend for themselves. Besides, even if a woman remains unmarried, it is better that she have a healthy and happy child than an abortion. Finally, scripture teaches us that we can defeat evil and save people only when we address the temptations that overwhelm them: “Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people” (Psalms 82:4, New Living Translation).

Because your coalition is united by beliefs in traditional social values, fiscal conservatism, and the importance of limited government, the solutions it proposes will be different from those others may support. Mississippians and Americans will prosper more in the long run when government intervention in the economy is limited. Efforts to redistribute income from the wealthy to the poor are understandable, but do not really help the poor and end up hurting everyone else as well. Limited public aid programs may be necessary, but welfare programs like TANF have a natural tendency to expand over time. Conservatives must carefully guard against gradual expansion and ensure

that these popular programs don't lead to a bloated bureaucracy and a weakened economy.

People who have fallen on hard times need temporary assistance and encouragement to get back on their feet as quickly as possible. Generous, long-term benefits programs remove the incentives that naturally push people to make the investments that will benefit them more in the long run. Instead of helping them improve their labor skills and gain a more stable, profitable position in the economy, these programs render individuals dependent on continued public support. This deprives them of the dignity of work and independence while also depriving the economy of their labor and increasing the burden on taxpaying members of society.

Some will argue that government interventions meant to expand child care are an exception because they encourage parents to work and support businesses who are struggling to find workers. Others will point to the long-term benefits of quality early child care—children receiving such care end up being better educated, more highly skilled, and more reliable employees, they say. They also point to evidence that these children grow up to be more financially and socially stable—less likely to end up incarcerated or needing government assistance—which should ultimately reduce the strain on government funding.

Admittedly, the state has a poor record on women's and children's health; in addition, it is reasonable to expect that poverty is the main culprit driving poor outcomes. However, the solution is not to radically expand government benefits programs. Whether advocates are asking the state to give more money to the poor or to intervene and subsidize particular industries, you are skeptical. There are better, smarter ways to solve the problem while keeping government in its lane.

In fact, Mississippi reduced the state income tax in 2022, increasing the ability of our businesses to expand and employ more people. We should be figuring out how to further reduce taxes or, at minimum, how to keep spending within the limits of the new, lower tax burden. This same approach can provide the solution to Mississippi's child care crisis. By adopting child care tax credits for families and extending the credits available to employers who offer child care benefits to their employees, the legislature has started down the right path. These credits will stimulate businesses to make the investments in child care that they say they know are needed (though they'd prefer that government step in to make the investment). There may be more in this vein that the state can do in 2024. Attorney General Lynn Fitch has called for tax credits that reward businesses for providing paid maternity leave, and this is especially appealing because it encourages women to take time out of the workforce to care for their children, strengthening families and family values. In addition, law makers should reconsider the tax credits that were proposed but not passed in 2023. Perhaps child care teachers and providers should also receive tax credits to help them build their businesses and expand services.

Yellow Group: Network of Entrepreneurs & Early Care Professionals

LEADING FIGURES: Dr. Cathy Grace, Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning; Ryan Miller, Accelerate Mississippi

Vision: Eliminate child care deserts and ensure every parent in Mississippi has access to affordable, quality care for their infants and toddlers. Economic development experts know that Mississippi's economy won't really grow until the state solves its work-force participation rate problem. Increasingly, they recognize that a lack of child care is at the root of the problem. The lack of child care itself results from a market failure whereby impoverished parents cannot afford to pay child care providers a living wage, so the supply of child care workers is low and subject to high turnover. Leaders must work together to overcome these market failures and invest in early care professionals and providers, recognizing that they are the "workforce behind the workforce." When we build this critical infrastructure, we will enable greater workforce participation and develop a more highly skilled labor force for the future.

Your network brings together groups that do not regularly work together and that don't always align on policy. Your core constituency is made up of early child care educators and directors who are chiefly concerned with raising the status of the profession and ensuring those in the field can earn a decent living. These professional associations are joined by individual business owners from other industries as well as economic development groups. They have joined the network after becoming convinced that early child care is essential to the success of their businesses and the overall health of the state's economy.

Those of you who are members of early educator's professional associations are passionate about the work you do to care for infants and toddlers in our state. You firmly believe that high-quality early education can go a long way toward levelling the playing field and ensuring that even children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the skills, confidence, and support they need to thrive. You know it is tough to do this work well, and those who do it well are not adequately compensated for the labor involved. Child care is so much more than babysitting. You change diapers, clean up messes, prepare and serve meals, and care for bee stings, cuts, and hurt feelings. You pursue certifications and degrees that help you nurture children in all the ways they need. You must understand developmental psychology so that you can help children learn to regulate their emotions, process traumatic events, and form healthy relationships with their peers. You must develop expertise in pedagogy and the science of learning so you can craft appropriate lessons in early literacy and kindle a love of learning. No matter how tired or stressed out you are when you come to work, the children need you to enthusiastically engage them in physical play and give them your attention and care.

Too many of you live from paycheck to paycheck. Those of you who are able to live a middle-class lifestyle feel lucky and often wouldn't be able to enjoy such financial stability without your spouse's income. When high school and college students take on

part time work in your facilities and show an interest in a career like yours, you feel torn between wanting to encourage more passionate people to join a noble pursuit and wanting to warn them that there's no money in it. Many of you with college degrees feel the classes you took in education and human development make you better caregivers, but you worry about encouraging others to take on student debt with the salaries in the field so low. In fact, many with degrees have left the classroom to pursue higher salaries in administration or have doubled-down to earn advanced degrees and teach in early childhood education college programs. Others are lucky enough to be working in early learning collaboratives, Mississippi's patchwork of Pre-K programs for four-year-old children. The salaries and benefits in these programs are commensurate with those of elementary school teachers, which—while not being tremendous—is a big step up from what others are making. Those of you without degrees cannot justify the cost of pursuing one now. Even certificate programs are often out of reach, and there's little economic incentive to make the investment.

Some of you work in large day care centers, some on college campuses, but others provide home-based care; you're what the state sometimes calls "registered in-home providers" as opposed to "licensed centers." You are running small businesses on tight budgets and providing care in a familiar, family-like environment for six to twelve children. Though the state calls you "registered" as opposed to "licensed," you still have to apply for a license and renew it each year, submitting paperwork, paying a relicensing fee, and undergoing inspections from the fire department and the Mississippi State Department of Health. You often have only one or two staff to help, if any, and serve an especially crucial function in rural areas of the state, which tend to be so-called "child care deserts" where people must rely on family or neighborly providers like you. You save on overhead and staff, but you can't buy in bulk and don't bring in much tuition because you serve a small number of children and, perhaps to an even greater extent than the centers, are limited in what you charge by the ability of parents to pay.

You all want to see rising wages in your field, and not just for the sake of your own financial stability. For years, you've wanted to be able to charge higher tuition so that you can expand capacity, hire and retain more qualified staff, and upgrade facilities and supplies, including toys. When the pandemic hit, you realized that higher rates are also necessary to ensure centers can survive a crisis. You know of many centers that didn't have enough of a cushion to make it through; you know of many more that would have failed if not for the emergency relief payments that eventually came down from Washington, D.C.

However desperately you might need to raise tuition, the reality is that many parents already struggle to afford your rates, and many could not pay without CCPP chipping in to cover over half of the cost. The state must step in to provide this public good, because the market cannot. Everyone would be better off if all children had access to quality child care during the hours when their parents need to work, so the government is justified in spending tax dollars to develop the early child care workforce and ensure centers are able to grow and expand.

Now, you are joined by powerful new allies: business owners and economic development specialists who can make the case to the legislature that early child care is good for the economy. You hope that they will lend credibility to your arguments and that they will persuade conservatives that spending to expand and improve child care will yield a strong return on investment. The legislature is dominated by Republicans, and they have long fashioned themselves as the champions of business and those best able to promote economic growth. Hopefully, your new partners can convince them that supporting child care is not at odds with their conservative credentials.

Indeed, those of you who came to this coalition from other industries see this as an economic growth issue. Small, medium, and large businesses in Mississippi struggle to find workers and to maintain full staffing. The lack of childcare is a major reason why. Businesses hurt when well-trained employees leave the workforce—or stop advancing in the company—because they cannot find care for their children. The time you spend recruiting and training new hires is a constant drain on your energy and resources, and as you’ve learned that the problem is widespread, you’ve come to believe that the government must contribute to the solution.

The economic development specialists among you have been surprised to find how widespread these complaints are and have begun conducting more research on the issue. One of the first results of this effort is the report, “Untapped Potential in Mississippi,” which quantifies the staggering amount of revenue businesses in Mississippi are losing because their workers lack access to quality childcare (2020). The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Mississippi Economic Council, and the Children’s Foundation of Mississippi teamed up to conduct the research, and they make a powerful case that the state would see significant returns on any investments it makes in the child care infrastructure.

Bibliography & Beginning Research

The list below is only a beginning to the kind of research that you will need to engage in when you arrive on campus. You will not need to know, understand, or represent all of the groups and arguments suggested below because your group will only represent a small slice of a much larger conversation. Still, skimming the sources should help you find something to get you started on your main arguments while also getting a lead on the opposition research you'll need to do. This preliminary list is also meant to give you a sense of the kind of evidence, sources, and perspectives that exist on this topic.

Possible categories of research might include public opinion, news articles on the debate in Mississippi, laws and legal advisories on state policies, guides to relevant federal policies, and white papers, policy briefs, and other policy-related publications from advocacy groups, think tanks, and academic researchers.

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To access this document (and its links) and resources online, go to
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