





*A Mississippi where everyone can rise*



*Celebrate the Past*  
**EMPOWER**  
— THE FUTURE —



Founded in 2014, Empower Mississippi is a solutions center, working with stakeholders to tackle Mississippi's biggest challenges. We remove barriers to opportunity so all Mississippians can flourish.



## EDUCATION

We believe every child is unique, full of potential, and deserving of a quality education that works for them.

## WORK

We see every Mississippian as a contributor to society, deserving of the opportunity to earn success and find fulfillment in their work.

## JUSTICE

We believe justice is foundational to a safe society and requires fairness, equality, and when appropriate, a path to redemption.

EMPOWER  
MISSISSIPPI  
FOUNDATION

EMPOWER  
MISSISSIPPI

EMPOWERPAC

Embark  
New Schools for Mississippi



# CELEBRATE THE PAST EMPOWER THE FUTURE

Dear Friends,

In 2024, Empower Mississippi celebrated its 10-year anniversary helping all Mississippians rise. Through our focus in Education, Work, and Justice, we have made tremendous progress over the past ten years to achieve our vision of a Mississippi where every child has access to a quality education, every adult has the opportunity to engage in meaningful work, and all citizens receive fairness, equality, and when appropriate, a path to redemption from our justice system.

As we took time to celebrate our past in 2024, we also doubled down on our commitment to empower the future for all Mississippians for years to come and secured some exciting wins for our state:

- We led the passage of a new education funding formula that puts kids at the center of the equation (page 8)
- Our initiative, Embark, supported the approval of two new charter schools (page 9)
- We released a landmark study on Mississippi’s labor force participation (page 18)
- We supported the expansion of the state’s work release program (page 19)

We also welcomed some of the state’s most impactful leaders to our 4th annual Empower Solutions Summit (page 22), and we crisscrossed the state (page 17) to engage in solution-based conversations with policy and business leaders, civic and non-profit organizations, and to empower our ambassadors to affect real change in their communities.

In this year’s Impact Report, we reflect on a decade of wins (page 12) that would not have been possible without the support of so many generous Mississippians. And as we embark on our second decade of service, we are grateful for your continued investment and look forward to working with you throughout the years to come.

Onward,



Grant Callen  
Founder & CEO



Abb Payne  
Chairman

# LEADERSHIP TRANSITION Gerard Gibert

## THANK YOU, GERARD, FOR A DECADE OF SERVICE

Last spring, after a stellar decade of service, Gerard Gibert announced he would step down as Chairman of the Board of Directors (but would remain on the board), paving the way for new leadership of Empower’s governing board. The board unanimously voted to appoint Abb Payne as the new Chairman. Under Gibert’s Chairmanship, Empower Mississippi grew from a start-up to an influential and respected statewide advocacy organization with ten full-time staff and a combined annual revenue close to \$2.5 million between the Empower associated entities.

“Many nonprofits never make it past the one-year mark, so when we were starting Empower a decade ago, I knew it was critical that we find a strong, steady chairman of the board to shepherd us through those early years,” said Grant Callen. “We found just that in Gerard and I could not be more grateful for his steadfast leadership over the past decade. I am also delighted that Abb Payne has stepped into the leadership position, and I’m excited to work with him in the years to come.”

Payne is a third-generation entrepreneur, founder, and CEO of Payne Companies, as well as a family office and investment manager for many diversified entrepreneurial endeavors. The company owns, co-owns, and manages home health, hospice, and private duty companies, specialty pharmacy operations, multiple assisted-living facilities throughout the southeastern United States and many other various businesses.

# CONGRATULATIONS Wil Ervin



This past year, Empower’s Senior Vice President Wil Ervin was named to Mississippi Top 50, an annual recognition of the most influential leaders in the state. The awards are presented to leaders in government, business, media, culture, and community who are making a difference throughout Mississippi.

**“There is no doubt our team is second to none,” Grant Callen said. “And this recognition of Wil is further proof. Congratulations, Wil! This is a well-deserved honor.”**



2024 EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI STAFF

Not Pictured: Wil Ervin



**GRANT CALLEN**  
Founder & CEO



**KATIE ELLIOT**  
Operations Manager  
of Embark



**WIL ERVIN**  
Senior Vice President



**JOANNA HOLBERT**  
Director of Outreach



**KIENNA HORN**  
Communications Manager



**ELYSE MARCELLINO**  
Director of Embark



**GINA METZGER**  
Executive Vice President



**DR. PATRICK MILLER**  
Vice President of Development



**JOANNA POLK**  
Executive Assistant  
& Development Manager



**FOREST THIGPEN**  
Senior Advisor

CONTRIBUTING FELLOWS

- J. ROBERTSON** Fellow on Criminal Justice Reform
- CHRISTOPHER KOOPMAN** Fellow on Regulation & Innovation
- CONOR NORRIS** Fellow on Entrepreneurship
- MATTHEW LADNER** Fellow on Education
- REBECCA STAPLES** Fellow on Work

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



**ABB PAYNE**  
Chairman



**GRANT CALLEN**



**GERARD GIBERT**



**JOEY HAVENS**



**PHILLIP HOLMES**



**LEX LINDSEY**



**SCOTT NOBLITT**



**MARIE SANDERSON**



**GEORGE WILLIAMS**

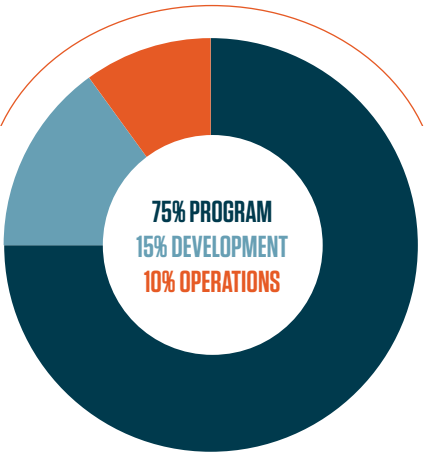
Empower was founded to be different. Our unique, multi-organization structure allows us the greatest flexibility in activity and safety in complying with all federal and state regulations.

Empower Mississippi is the umbrella organization, income tax-exempt under Internal Revenue Code 501(c)4, with Empower Mississippi Foundation, an internal educational trust fund, tax-exempt under IRC 501(c)3, and Empower PAC, a connected state PAC, exempt under IRC 527. Embark, LLC, is a single-member LLC, wholly owned by the foundation.

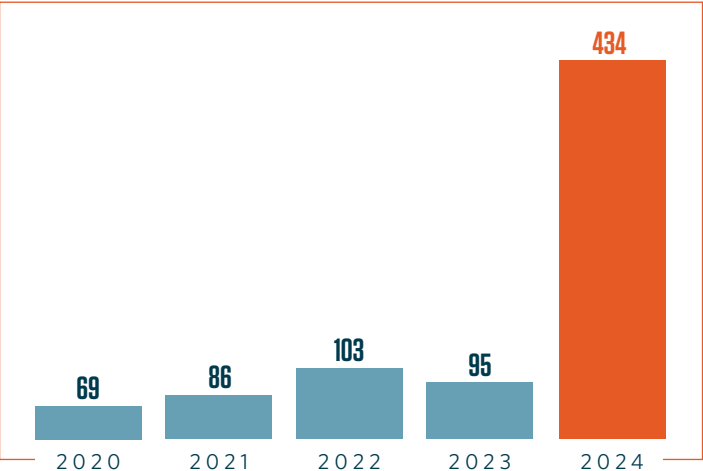
Each entity is privately funded by individuals, foundations, and corporations. Financials below are preliminary and unaudited. Audited financial statements will be available for review on or after November 15, 2025.

2024 FINANCIALS	INCOME	EXPENSES
EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI	\$811,636	\$542,852
EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI FOUNDATION	\$1,243,447	\$1,264,793
EMBARK	\$199,443	\$621,732
EMPOWER PAC	\$25,000	\$18,000
	\$2,279,526	\$2,447,377

2024 EXPENSE ALLOCATION



NUMBER OF DONORS

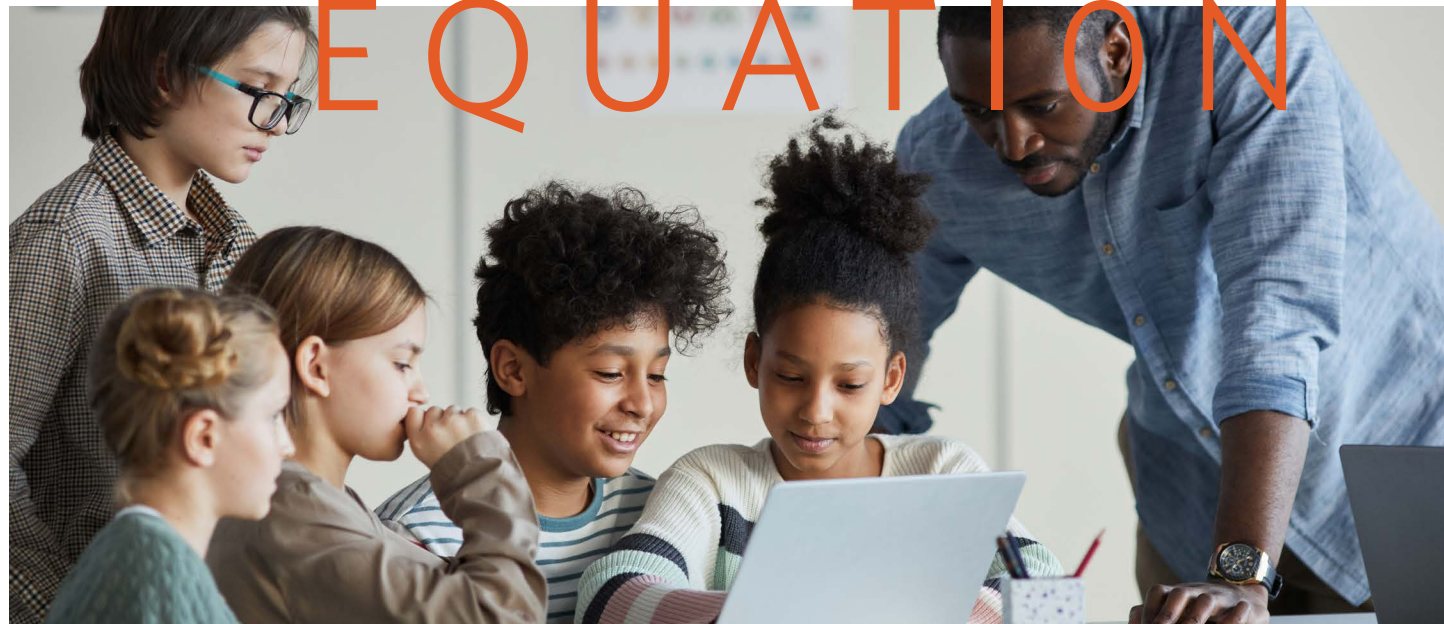


2024 REVENUE BREAKDOWN





# PUTTING KIDS AT THE CENTER OF THE EQUATION



**FOR YEARS, EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI** has advocated for changes to the state's public education funding formula to direct funding in a child-centric way to help public schools meet the needs of individual students. In 2024, Mississippi took a significant first step in that direction.

Governor Reeves signed into law the "Mississippi Student Funding Formula" repealing the antiquated Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), and creating a new "weighted" student funding formula for distributing tax dollars to public school districts based on the characteristics of the students within each district.

"Throughout my time as governor, you've heard me talk about the importance of funding students, not systems," Governor Reeves said during the bill signing ceremony. "This is another good day for education in Mississippi."

Thanks to the Governor's leadership,

districts will now receive additional funding (above and beyond the base student cost) for students who may require additional resources, such as English Language Learners, students entitled to and receiving special education services, and low-income students. Additional funding is also allocated for career and technical education.

The base student cost for the 2024-2025 school year is \$6,695. It will be fully recalculated every four years, and in the years between recalculations, the base student cost will increase each year based on an inflation factor. The bill provides that the base student cost may only be reduced if total state revenue does not increase, in which case the legislature may retain or reduce the base student cost from the previous year. The bill also contains a three-year "hold harmless" provision that ensures no school district receives less than the amount it received for the 2023-2024 school year in any of the three following years.

This is a good first step and moves Mississippi ahead of many states in how we spend education dollars, but there is still more work to be done.

Education funding isn't portable for all students. Empower Mississippi believes the most effective approach is to assign a dollar amount to every student, allowing the student and their family to spend those funds at a school they feel best fits their needs.

Despite this missing element, Empower Mississippi supports and applauds this significant reform. In fact, Empower was selected as a finalist for the State Policy Network's prestigious Bob Williams Awards for Most Influential Research for its work on this issue. Public schools represent an important choice for families and play a pivotal role in local communities. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Mississippi parents choose to enroll their children in local public schools, and it is essential that we maintain a world-class public education system.

## Embark

New Schools for Mississippi

Helping Start Great Schools



### TWO NEW MISSISSIPPI CHARTER SCHOOLS AUTHORIZED IN 2024

#### MISSISSIPPI GLOBAL ACADEMY

Mississippi Global Academy will be located in the West Bolivar Consolidated School District in the Delta, and once it reaches capacity, it will serve grades 4-12. The school model is based on Washington Global Public Charter School, an award-winning college preparatory charter school with an international focus that has operated in Washington, DC, since 2014.

#### ARCHWAY CHARTER SCHOOL

Archway Charter School will be Mississippi's first hybrid charter school, utilizing a blend of live online learning, self-paced learning, and traditional on-campus learning. Archway's unique model is designed to bring excellent content and instruction to rural Mississippi students. The school will open its doors in Humphreys County in Fall 2026, serving students throughout the Delta in grades 7-12 once at capacity.

#### FOLLOWING THE SUCCESSFUL AUTHORIZATION OF CLARKSDALE COLLEGIATE IN 2023

#### CLARKSDALE COLLEGIATE

Clarksdale Collegiate, which originally received a charter in 2017 to serve K-8 students, will begin serving its first high school students in Fall 2025 after successfully merging its approved high school charter with its original K-8 charter. Clarksdale Collegiate is unapologetically college preparatory and works to help all students excel within a structured, ambitious, and jubilant environment. With a commitment to values-based character education, Clarksdale Collegiate supports students' personal growth, academic achievement, and life success.

**MISSISSIPPI PASSED ITS CHARTER** school law in 2013, but over the succeeding decade the state's charter authorizing body approved only ten charter schools.

That's why Empower Mississippi launched Embark, a new schools accelerator focused on supporting aspiring school founders to open new education options across the state. To increase the number of approved charter school applications, Embark works with charter school applicants as they navigate the complex application process and develop quality school plans. In two short years, Embark has already successfully supported the approval of three new charter schools – **this represents a 30% increase in the number of charter schools in Mississippi.**

This is just the beginning and clearly shows that Embark is a much-needed resource for entrepreneurs looking to launch new education options for Mississippi families.

The Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board (MCSAB) approved the two newest charter schools in 2024, noting that this met MCSAB's aim to provide underserved students with a top-notch education. "The application cycle is both rigorous and demanding to ensure that only those founding teams that clearly demonstrate the ability to open and operate a highly successful school are offered a charter," said Dr. Lisa Karmacharya, Executive Director of MCSAB.

Both founding teams received intensive application year support through the Embark Fellowship. The Embark Fellowship prepares promising charter school founders to submit an excellent charter application with strong academic, operational, and financial plans and to build capacity and connections to open a school successfully upon approval. Throughout its year-long fellowship, Embark walks alongside fellows to build a customized program of support based on the fellow's unique needs and experience.

**"This is a big win for Mississippi students and families,"** said Embark's Director, Elyse Marcellino. "We are grateful to the authorizer board for approving these new charter schools and Embark is honored to have played a role in this exciting expansion of our state's charter school sector."

Embark provides free guidance to leaders who want to start new schools, from ideation and early planning to application and start-up. To date, Embark has also supported ten private microschools to open through its Momentum Microgrants program with at least eight more planning to open in 2025. "We know the journey to opening a new school is full of obstacles that can result in losing momentum," Marcellino said. "Embark is there to find, guide and invest in school founders so that communities throughout the state have more quality education options."



# FOR TOO MANY KIDS TIME HAS RUN OUT

## TOO MANY CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN

Mississippi are stuck in educational settings that aren't working for them, and their parents are spending sleepless nights worrying about what to do. Often, their only choices are paying for private school or uprooting their lives and moving to another school district. Many can't afford either option.

Mississippi has a program that was designed to solve this very problem. An Education Scholarship Account (ESA) allows parents of students with special needs to use money appropriated by the legislature to place their child in an education setting that better meets their individual needs. Allowable expenses under the ESA include tuition, tutoring, therapies, and more.

But unnecessary bureaucratic regulations and a lack of funding have left a waiting list of students who need a specialized education but aren't getting it adequately, if at all, in their current school settings.

Take Lauren, for example, who had been stuck on the ESA waitlist and unable to attend the school of her choice. Lauren was diagnosed with autism at age four. Her mom, Anequa Robinson, knew something wasn't right because her daughter's speech began regressing.

"They did testing, and when we got the autism diagnosis, it was very hard. They hand you this diagnosis, and then you are on your own. You don't know about any resources," Robinson said.

Anequa learned of the ESA and quickly applied. Lauren was placed on the waitlist, where she remained for over a year while continuing to struggle in her assigned school, which did not have the adequate resources to support her needs. Still today, Lauren is stuck in a school that isn't the right fit.

Five years ago, Empower Mississippi launched the "Waitlisted" campaign to tell these sorts of stories—real life examples of struggle and anxiety, met with glimmers of hope only to see that hope dashed because of a lack of funding for a program that can make a real difference in kids' lives.

Our Waitlisted campaign had an impact. In 2019, lawmakers took notice and funded the program to eliminate the ESA waitlist and restructured the program to award the scholarships in the order of application rather than in a lottery.

But that funding only lasted one year and, due to political infighting, was reduced to the initial funding level of \$3 million, where it has remained ever since. Tragically the waitlist once again grew to more than 300 children (100 more kids than when we launched the "Waitlisted" campaign five years ago).

To make matters worse, a change in the law during the 2024 legislative session caused almost half of the children on the waitlist to be kicked off – dashing all hopes of an ESA.



Lauren Robinson was one of those children.

"I cried that day when I got the letter saying we were kicked off the waitlist because Lauren won't get the opportunity she deserves. It's a hopeless, continuous fight full of hurdles for our kids."

With adequate funding, many of those students would be given the chance, for the first time, to attend a school that will best enable them to thrive. And, in this case, adequate funding means only an additional \$2.5 million in state spending. That's .05% of the current state portion of K-12 education spending.

Parents of students with special needs have enough on their plates. This program was intended to make their lives easier, not harder. Yet, after navigating the ESA application process, many parents often find themselves no better off than before.

The legislature can fix these issues during the 2025 legislative session and fund the program in full. Rather than making things harder on these families, let's empower them to give their children the education they so desperately want and need.

**"It's a...continuous fight full of hurdles for our kids."**





## In the summer of 2013...

a handful of Mississippians began meeting regularly on the patio of Biaggi's Restaurant in Ridgeland to talk about our shared love for Mississippi and the challenges they perceived to be going unaddressed.

They saw too many Mississippians struggling to build a great life in our state, too many people trapped by broken systems and bad laws. They believed in every person's innate dignity and worth and wanted to build a Mississippi where everyone can rise.

## As those conversations progressed...

that small group of citizens began to build consensus around the idea of a new organization that would:

- Start with genuine curiosity, seeking to understand root causes and the people impacted by the state's challenges;
- Be conservative, emphasizing The Success Sequence and affirming the significance of earned success;
- Build bridges and work with people of good will across the political spectrum;
- Start off laser focused on education reform, before strategically adding a few additional policy pillars;
- Bring more tools to bear than a traditional 501(c) (3) think-tank; and,
- Measure success by the lives that are changed because of their work.

## Three board members emerged...

Grant Callen was named CEO, and he began to sketch out the vision and business plan for this new, nonprofit enterprise. By the fall of 2013, it was time to "fish or cut bait," as they say. The question was, would anyone want to invest in this vision? There was only one way to find out. Grant Callen set up a few meetings with leaders across the state to share the idea, and within two days a handful of generous early investors had contributed \$100,000.

A decade later, Empower Mississippi is a \$2.5 million annual operation with nine board members and a full-time staff of ten. Because of the goodness of God and the generosity of Mississippians who continue to invest in that vision, Empower Mississippi has accomplished more than anyone ever imagined back in 2013.

## Today, Empower Mississippi...

is more clear-eyed about its purpose and path than ever before, working on behalf of people who face barriers in their pursuit of a meaningful life in the Magnolia State. Our unique approach is to identify specific problems, find solutions, and work with lawmakers and local leaders to implement those solutions in the areas of education, work, and justice, to unleash Mississippi to achieve its full potential.

**Inside this centerfold, we mark the key milestones of our decade of service, and as we Celebrate the Past and Empower the Future, we are grateful for your continued support.**



OPEN

HALL OF WINS



★ Empower Mississippi has established a life-size Hall of Wins in the front hallway of our Ridgeland office, and we invite you to come visit and see the hall in person!

# EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI HALL of WINS

✂ Empower Mississippi was founded



2013

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

2022

2023

2024

💡 Business plan was drafted and more than \$100,000 in seed money was raised to launch Empower Mississippi

📋 Two future Empower team members led a coalition of partners to advocate successfully for passage of Mississippi's original charter school law

🗺 Empower team began traveling the state, hosting town hall discussions about the need for new education options



🏠 Reimagine Prep Charter School opened in Jackson



📊 Initiative 42 successfully defeated



🗺 Empower began hosting annual School Choice Rally at the State Capitol



AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT

Christeen Moffett



👤 Empower launched second policy pillar focused on public safety and justice reform

📋 Criminal justice reform bill enacted that safely reduced the incarcerated population and promoted employment

🏠 Smilow Collegiate Charter School opened in Jackson



📋 In response to Empower's highly successful #waitlisted campaign, the legislature increased funding for ESA program to create close to 300 new scholarships

🏠 Clarksdale Collegiate Charter School opened in Clarksdale



📋 Dyslexia Scholarship Program expanded from grades K-6 to grades K-12

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT

JoJo Talley

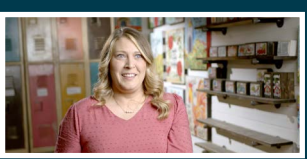


JoJo Talley, who has Down syndrome, was one of the first children to receive a scholarship when the Empower-backed ESA program launched in 2015, and now she cheers proudly for her St. Joe Bruins!

👤 Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2019 enacted to remove barriers to employment for people leaving Mississippi's criminal justice system

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT

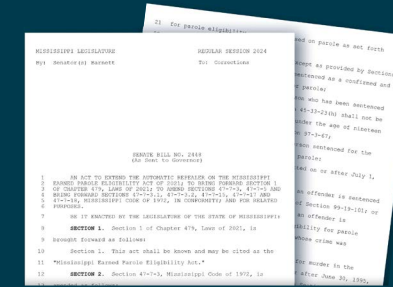
Mindy McNutt



Mindy McNutt took a risk and applied for her dream job believing she wouldn't be hired due to her criminal record, but much to her surprise she received the second chance she needed to change the trajectory of her life.

📋 Empower won fight to renew Special Needs ESA, which was scheduled to sunset

🏠 Leflore Legacy Academy Charter School opened in Greenwood



📋 Landmark parole reform legislation enacted

📋 Bill enacted to ensure individuals released from prison can obtain driver's licenses to get to and from work

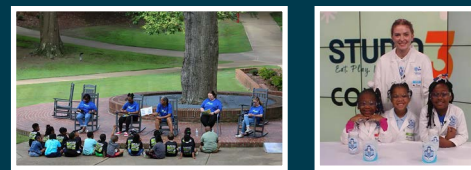
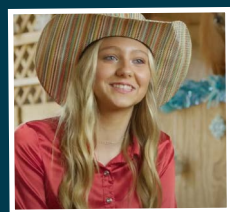


🏆 Empower won the "Biggest Win for Freedom" award at State Policy Network's annual meeting for Empower's role in the passage of the largest tax cut in state history

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT

Kensley Martin

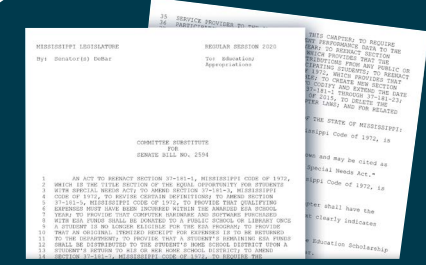
Once lacking self-esteem because of her learning differences, Kensley Martin found confidence and a love of barrel racing when her parents, with the help of Empower, discovered the ESA and used it to get her into a school that suits her needs.



🏠 SR1 College Prep Charter School opened in Canton

📋 Embark supported its first Fellow through approval of application for first charter high school in Mississippi

🏠 Three microschools opened with support from Embark:  
• Faith Christian Academy (Ocean Springs)  
• Kingdom Leadership Academy (Gulfport)  
• Purposed Academy (Brandon)



📋 Special Needs ESA renewed

📋 Mississippi Student Funding Formula enacted

🏠 Four microschools opened with support from Embark:  
• Magnolia Oak Microschool (Jackson)  
• Rocket Learning (Silver Creek)  
• Beyond the Classroom (Olive Branch)  
• Level-Up Learning Academy (Greenville)

🏆 Embark won State Policy Network Education Council's Ed Choice Award

★ The EMPOWER PODCAST launched

📋 Full Expensing Tax Reform enacted

🏠 Instant Impact Global Prep Charter School opened in Natchez



🏠 MDOC work-release program expanded

📋 Parole reform statute renewed

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT

Ben Little

Coming out of incarceration, Ben Little made it his mission to help those transitioning from prison back into society with housing, work, and self-worth.







# THE EMPOWER PODCAST

**EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI IS COMMITTED TO** helping all Mississippians rise by removing barriers to opportunity. In The Empower Podcast, we talk with state and national experts about ways the Magnolia State can grow and thrive. These conversations help shape the debate for future legislative sessions and highlight policy changes that are necessary to make Mississippi the best place in America to live, work, and raise a family.

Subscribe to The Empower Podcast on your favorite podcast platform to stay updated on our latest episodes. Join us as we explore some of Mississippi's biggest challenges and brightest opportunities!





# EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI'S STATEWIDE IMPACT

In 2024, Empower Mississippi convened dozens of workshops, meetings, seminars, and discussion groups; our team testified at the Capitol and met with lawmakers; we connected with donors from across the state, and served as a convener of anyone and everyone interested in bettering the lives of Mississippians.



In 2024 Empower staff spent time with key stakeholders in every community starred on the map.





**EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI SET OUT TO** answer this question for lawmakers in a landmark labor force study released in August 2024 – one of at least two such reports planned in the coming years.

At issue are the conflicting realities that: (1) over the past five years, Mississippi has experienced significant economic growth, with historically low unemployment rates, record levels of capital investment, and wide job availability; and yet, (2) our state’s “labor force participation rate” is lowest in the U.S. at just 53.9%.

Empower commissioned the National Strategic Planning & Analysis Research Center at Mississippi State University (NSPARC) to provide critical data and insights into the state’s labor market challenges. This first report establishes a baseline of findings and identifies opportunities for improvement with a single goal in mind: help more Mississippians experience the life-changing benefits of work.

The report looks at several factors to determine who is participating in the workforce in Mississippi and why more people aren’t taking advantage of increasing job opportunities in our state. Some of the key findings include:

**EDUCATION:** The most critical indicator of labor force participation is the level of educational attainment. This study shows that Mississippians with postsecondary education participated in the labor force at greater rates than those with lower educational attainment, with the highest rates observed by those with an associate’s degree (68.3%) followed by those with a bachelor’s degree (66.7%). The least likely to be recorded as being in the labor force are those who do not have a high school diploma.

**RACE:** Average monthly labor force participation rates were similar for non-Hispanic Black and White populations (54% and 53%, respectively), while Hispanic individuals had a higher-than-average rate (61.8%).

**GENDER:** Males participated at higher rates than females (59.8% compared to 48.5%) but experienced similar levels of decline.

**AGE:** The populations most likely to be in the labor force are in the 25-44 (78.9%) and 45-64 (61.7%) age groups, with the lowest being in the 65+ group (13.5%). All age groups have seen a decline in labor force participation since 2010.

In addition to NSPARC’s research, Empower Mississippi conducted interviews with economists, elected officials, economic developers, public policy professionals, nonprofit

organizations, university professors, state agencies, and trade associations to better understand local perspectives surrounding labor force participation.

These stakeholder interviews were designed to provide context and guide future labor force research. The qualitative results suggest the need for further study on most issues in this report, including gender and racial gaps, further veteran analysis, public sector employment, wage analysis, benchmarking data against southeastern U.S. states, and looking closely at regulatory burdens. There is also an underlying concern about the strength of the data collected and reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is the primary source of labor force data nationwide.

This report is part of an ongoing project led by Empower Mississippi to identify the causes and possible solutions to improving Mississippi’s labor force, which is crucial for our economic future. Work is good for everyone and essential to the human experience. Work provides dignity and purpose, and we want everyone to experience the benefits that come from using one’s God-given gifts to provide for themselves and their families.

**READ THE FULL REPORT HERE:**



**“I read the report twice and I think it gives us a good base from which to operate on our labor force participation rate . It’s very helpful to me and I’m sure it’ll be helpful to the legislature.”**

*Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann on the Empower Mississippi’s labor force study.*

# A Win-Win

## EXPANDING WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

**DURING THE 2024 LEGISLATIVE** session, lawmakers passed legislation to expand opportunities for individuals to work outside of prison while they are still incarcerated. Work release programs give certain incarcerated individuals who are nearing the end of their sentences the opportunity to engage in meaningful work in the community to prepare them to successfully re-enter society.

Previously, Mississippi had a pilot work release program that was limited to 25 participants at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. Thanks to the leadership of lawmakers and Empower Mississippi’s work on this issue, the program will now expand to include all state-run facilities. Additionally, around 20 regional correctional facilities will have the opportunity to implement similar programs. Each of the programs operated by the state or by a regional facility will be limited to no more than 25 participants.

“Work release enables select inmates to participate in meaningful employment outside prison, aiding their transition

back into society,” Grant Callen remarked. “Frequently, these individuals retain their jobs after release, shifting from being economic burdens to valuable contributors to the economy.”

To qualify for the program, inmates must meet certain criteria. They must have no more than two years remaining on their

are only eligible to participate if they have no disciplinary convictions in the last 12 months.

- **Prepare individuals for success:** Program participants usually leave the program having paid off some of their fines, fees, and restitution, with some savings to get their lives restarted, and with a job once they get out.

- **Improve public safety:** Work release reduces the likelihood that a person will commit another crime once they are released by addressing one of the main predictors of recidivism – not having a job.

- **Promote responsible government spending:** These programs are inexpensive to operate and should responsibly reduce state spending by preventing future crime.



sentence; have no disciplinary violations in the last 12 months; and be nonviolent offenders.

There are numerous benefits of work release programs for both the participants and the broader society:

- **Encourage good behavior:** Individuals

Work release programs are truly a win-win. They are good for both the individual and the state, and Empower is encouraged by this positive step towards making our state safer and our prison system more redemptive. Lawmakers should be proud of their work on this issue, and we look forward to seeing the results of their efforts.



# SECOND CHANCES



Grant Callen and Kayla Hulett testified before the Mississippi House Constitution Committee on the topic of expanding expungement and restoration of voting and 2nd amendment rights to non-violent offenders.

path to redemption. As part of this mission, we believe that all crimes carry consequences, and punishment for these offenses should be swift and certain. We also believe in the power of restoration and redemption. And we believe the punishment should fit the crime.

To that end, not every crime deserves a life sentence. We know that a felony conviction, including for nonviolent acts, stays with a person for the rest of their life and can make finding work, housing, and other important necessities extremely challenging, if not outright impossible. Virtually every job application, lease agreement, or loan application requires disclosure of felony convictions without any distinction of the crime.

Dangerous felons should be off the streets, but the lasting stigma that comes with a nonviolent felony conviction doesn't make us safer. It just continues to hold people back who made a mistake, paid their debt to society, and are trying to rebuild their lives. Lifelong punishment for nonviolent crimes through the imposition of these barriers is not in our best interest.

Further, these barriers may actually jeopardize public safety. For example, studies show that restoring voting rights for those with felony convictions can improve public safety. According to The Sentencing Project, "The re-entry process

**ONE OF EMPOWER** Mississippi's highest policy priorities is public safety, and our work in Justice seeks to create a system in which every citizen receives fairness, equality, and a

after incarceration improves because restoring voting rights gives citizens the sense that their voice can be heard in the political process and contributes to building an individual's positive identity as a community member."

And we know that the two most important predictors of recidivism, not having a job or a place to live, are made more challenging when a person carries a felony conviction with them for the remainder of their lives.

Our state's workforce is diminished when we make it more challenging for those with felony convictions to get a job. It is estimated that 1 out of every 10 Mississippians has a felony conviction. The social and economic impact of this reality is devastating on families, communities, our workforce, and our economy.

Research shows that those with felony convictions face significant challenges in re-entering the workforce. In fact, a criminal record can reduce the likelihood of a callback or job offer by nearly 50%, and formerly incarcerated people experience an unemployment rate of 27%, compared to Mississippi's unemployment rate of under 3%.

For these reasons, Empower Mississippi endorses lawmakers' recent efforts to establish a fair expungement process in Mississippi. Grant Callen and Kayla Hulett (see next page) testified before the Mississippi House Constitution Committee on the topic of expanding expungement and restoration of voting and 2nd amendment rights to nonviolent offenders.

Empower Mississippi supports reforms that remove barriers for those who want to be productive members of society. It is a choice between the status quo—which has contributed to the lowest labor force participation rate and highest poverty rate in the nation and has not made us safer—and

*Kayla Hulett is making the most of her second chance*



an evidence-based approach to expungement that will change lives and communities for the better.

At 16, Kayla Hulett began using crystal meth with her parents. "Growing up I didn't realize my life was different from others," she said. "It was difficult, but I just thought that's how it is."

Kayla's mother tragically overdosed when Kayla was only 18, and her younger sister was just 3.

"I started spiraling out of control," Hulett recalled. "I tried rehab multiple times because I wanted to get better for my sister. I didn't know how to live a successful life. I wanted different, but I just didn't know how."

During that time Kayla was charged with a felony while riding around Oxford. "It was 3 a.m. and I was pulled over by the police because the lights on

the car were off," she said. "I was riding around in a stolen vehicle because I had escaped being held hostage by the guy I was with. I took the car to get away."

The police searched the car and found meth, bath salts and paraphernalia. Kayla spent about a month in jail before she was sentenced to a long-term, faith-based rehabilitation program in Brandon called Saving Grace Women's Home.

"The first thing they tell you is to change your people, places, and things. Well, that's not always easy. If you have nowhere to go and no opportunities, then you go back into the same unhealthy home, like I did in the same town where it's too difficult to stay clean. I had to get away."

Kayla cut off contact with her dad, who was still struggling with addiction, and entered the program at Saving Grace Women's Home. At the age of 22, Kayla graduated from the program and her new life began.

Saving Grace offered Kayla a job and she gained custody of her little sister. But it wasn't always easy. "I didn't know how to pay a bill. I knew nothing," she said, "but I knew I

wanted my sister's life to be different, and God made a way for us."

A key turning point was when Kayla was also able to get her record expunged.

"That was huge," she said, "because it wasn't holding me back anymore. I was able to go to college and have a career. I remember thinking when I got the felony that my life was over, but that was not true. There are second chances."

Fast forward to today, and Kayla is a college graduate raising a family of her own in Braxton with her husband Donovan and Kayla's sister, who is now 17. And she still works with the Saving Grace Home for Women – the place where her second life began.

"My dad lives right across the street, and we go to church together and he is able to be a part of my kids' lives," Hulett shared with us. "It's a miracle to see him go from cooking meth to raising his hands at the altar."

Kayla's message for those struggling with addiction is that there is always hope.

"We can't throw the book at people and then throw them away. People have to have hope."





*in the next decade*

# 2024 EMPOWER

## Solutions Summit



With one of our most power-packed lineups of speakers-ever and an eye toward building an opportunity rich future for the Magnolia State, Empower Mississippi hosted its 4th Annual Empower Solutions Summit in December.

The event featured Mississippi leaders like Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann and Speaker of the House Jason White, as well as nationally acclaimed comic Kyle Mann, Editor-in-Chief of The Babylon Bee. Attendees also heard from a diverse group of panelists and speakers committed to making positive change in Mississippi.



Phillip Holmes, Highest Good Media



Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann with  
Empower Mississippi Board Chairman Abb Payne



Speaker of the House Jason White with Empower Founder & CEO Grant Callen

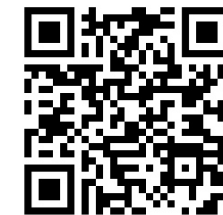


Keynote Speaker, Kyle Mann, Editor-in-Chief of The Babylon Bee

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EVERY ADULT

JUSTICE  
FOR ALL



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We love Mississippi, and we know you do too.

As we continue our efforts to make our state more competitive and prosperous, remove burdensome taxation and regulation that impedes growth, create more innovation and competition in our K-12 education system, and ensure individuals who have earned a second chance get one, we are counting on your support. So, thank you again and as you consider your 2025 philanthropic giving, we hope you will keep Empower Mississippi in mind.

**Give a tax-deductible gift today to help us help every Mississippian rise! Just scan this code and contribute today.**

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# EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI



Founded in 2014, Empower Mississippi is a solutions center, working with stakeholders to tackle Mississippi's biggest challenges. We believe every Mississippian can rise, so our work focuses on removing barriers to opportunity so that people in the Magnolia State can earn success, contribute to their families and communities, and live meaningful lives.

To find out more, please visit [\*\*empowerms.org\*\*](https://empowerms.org).