

2020

HELPING EVERY MISSISSIPPIAN RISE!

EMPOWER  
MISSISSIPPI



Impact  
Report



— ★ —  
**A MISSISSIPPI  
 WHERE  
 EVERYONE  
 CAN RISE**



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** *A Great Education for All*

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

**WORK** *Opportunity Through Work*

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

**JUSTICE** *Safe, Strong Communities*

We believe public safety is the foundation of a strong society and works best when it is just, effective, and accountable.



Dear Friends,

As we look back on 2025, we are reminded how much can change when Mississippians come together around a simple conviction: every person, no matter their ZIP code, income, or background, deserves the opportunity to rise.

Last year brought meaningful progress across education, work, and justice. Mississippi continued to earn national attention for its academic gains, and the "Mississippi Miracle" is no longer viewed as an outlier but as evidence of what's possible when high expectations meet strong reforms.

Lawmakers advanced tax and regulatory policies that strengthen our competitive position, and communities across the state continued to benefit from reforms that Empower helped champion over the past decade. Most notably, lawmakers took a historic step by beginning the phaseout of Mississippi's income tax. This reform was years in the making and shaped in part by Empower's labor force studies and policy recommendations, which helped clarify why our state's low labor force participation rate demands bold action (see pages 8-9).

But 2025 was more than a year of results; it was a year of preparation as we focused on building the capacity necessary for more audacious policy efforts in 2026. That includes strengthening our advocacy model so we can define problems more precisely, conduct Mississippi-specific research, craft stronger policy solutions, and support implementation once laws pass (see page 6).

We also deepened our efforts to support families and communities directly in preparation for a bold legislative push to build upon our state's education reform wins so far.

None of this progress - or potential - would be possible without you. Your support continues to strengthen an organization committed to solving problems, elevating people, and helping our state flourish.

Thank you for standing with us. We look forward to the work ahead and to the opportunity 2026 brings for even greater progress for Mississippi's children, workers, and families.

Onward!



Grant Callen  
Founder & CEO



Abb Payne  
Chairman

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## FROM IDEAS TO IMPACT *Strengthening Our Advocacy Model*

Over the past decade, Empower Mississippi has earned the reputation as one of the most effective advocates in the statehouse. Our team has told compelling stories, built broad coalitions, and helped move major reforms across the finish line. But as the stakes have grown and the opportunities have multiplied, one thing has become clear: if we want durable change, we can't just be excellent at one piece of the work. We need to operate effectively across the entire advocacy pipeline, from identifying a problem to making sure new laws actually work for Mississippians in real life.

That conviction is driving a strategic expansion of our advocacy model. Historically, much of the early-stage research and model legislation we advanced came from national partners or other states. Those ideas have been valuable, but they often start with national trends instead of ideas tailored to Mississippi's challenges and realities. Today, Empower is deliberately building the capacity to define the problem, conduct original research, craft policy solutions, advocate for change, and support implementation—all under one roof, and all rooted in Mississippi's needs.



Empower is investing in deeper, Mississippi-centered understanding of the issues facing individuals by collecting data, listening directly to communities, and grounding our policy agenda in real needs rather than national assumptions. This ensures we begin with an accurate diagnosis rather than borrowed narratives.

Through expanded in-house expertise, including the launch of EPIC (see page 17), Empower is generating original data and analysis that answer the questions no one else is asking. This work strengthens our credibility, sharpens debate, and exposes inaccuracies that often cloud policy discussions.

Armed with state-specific insights, we are increasingly developing Mississippi-made policy solutions rather than relying on templates from other states. This shift positions Empower as a substantive policy leader, offering lawmakers proposals that reflect local realities.

Empower continues to excel at the advocacy work that built our reputation: strong storytelling, strategic communications, coalition-building, and effective government affairs. Now our messaging will rest on our own research, making our case clearer and stronger.

The final step, which is often overlooked, is where long-term durability is won. Through initiatives like Embark (see page 14), among others, we are building the infrastructure to help families, schools, and communities navigate new laws and translate policy wins into practical outcomes. This implementation capacity will continue to grow across all pillars of our work.

No other organization in Mississippi has consistently done all five components of this work—until now. Empower is stepping up as the organization that understands how to address issues, from defining them, all the way to real life impact in communities.

This expansion is not mission drift; it is mission maturity. By engaging in the full advocacy process, Empower is becoming more durable, more effective, and better positioned to turn today's momentum into long-term gains for Mississippi's students, workers, and families.



In 2025, Mississippi became the first state since Alaska to set a course toward full elimination of its income tax (see page 9). At State Policy Network's Annual Meeting this past fall, Empower Mississippi once again was honored with the prestigious Bob Williams Award for Biggest Home State Win (our second win in three years).

SPN recognized Empower for its work building years of public momentum, releasing policy reports, publishing a tax calculator, and engaging leaders through media and grassroots advocacy to achieve this significant policy win that will return up to \$100 million annually to taxpayers once triggers are met—benefiting over one million households.

As SPN said when announcing the honor, "This victory marks a turning point in Mississippi's economic policy and creates a model for pro-growth tax reform across the nation."



## *Congratulations* GRANT CALLEN

Each year, Mississippi Top 50 recognizes the influence of business, government, culture, and media leaders who are making a difference in our state. Congratulations to Grant Callen for his selection to the 2025 class of Mississippi Top 50 for his impact on government affairs and advocacy in Mississippi.



# Tackling Mississippi's Labor Force Challenge

## AND ADVANCING LANDMARK TAX REFORM

One of Empower's top priorities is promoting a culture of work and opportunity in the Magnolia State, because we believe that work is not only an economic imperative, but also fundamentally good, fulfilling, and essential to the human experience. So, last year we set out to study why people work – or don't, and issued two reports, one in August 2024, and the second in January of 2025, on state labor force trends.

For decades, Mississippi has had one of the lowest labor force participation rates in the country. That trend did not begin in the past few years; it dates back to the 1970s. And while we have seen a modest increase in the number of Mississippians participating in the workforce (from 53.7% to 55%) the gaps remain stark.

Empower's labor force study confirmed what many employers, educators, and community leaders have long sensed: persistent barriers continue to keep people out of the workforce. For young Mississippians, labor force participation has declined sharply, even as early work experience is strongly correlated with greater long-term earnings and stability.

For adults without a high school credential, workforce participation is less than 30%. For individuals involved in the justice system, re-entry challenges often turn temporary mistakes into lifelong economic setbacks. And for many families, child care, transportation, and credentialing barriers introduce daily friction that makes work less attainable.

Perhaps most striking was how much of the statewide conversation was driven by incomplete or outdated data. Empower's research highlighted the need for stronger state-level data collection, local insight, and targeted policies that match regional realities rather than national trends.

The report also elevated several high-impact pathways to strengthen Mississippi's workforce, such as:

- Promoting early work for youth
- Eliminating unnecessary degree requirements
- Reducing unnecessary and burdensome regulations
- Closing high-school-equivalency testing gaps

But one recommendation stood above the rest: **eliminating the tax on work.**

Empower was thrilled to see Governor Reeves and legislative leaders take up this cause and champion a historic plan to phase out Mississippi's income tax.

Governor Reeves and lawmakers understand that if we want more Mississippians to work, invest, and stay here long-term, the state must directly reward work and make it easier for job creators to thrive. The evidence presented in Empower's analysis showed a clear connection between labor force growth and stronger tax revenues, a trend already visible as more Mississippians entered the workforce.

House Bill 1 was signed into law by Governor Reeves in March and represents more than a policy win; it is a bet on Mississippi's people. It recognizes that work strengthens families, reduces dependency, and positions Mississippi to compete nationally for talent and investment. It affirms that economic freedom is a precondition for upward mobility. And it signals that after years of incremental progress, Mississippi is ready to think boldly about the future of its workforce.

Mississippi has momentum. The labor force is growing. Barriers are being identified and removed. And for the first time in many years, Mississippi is positioned to compete not as a low-cost state, but as a high-opportunity one.

To see the full labor force report, visit [empowerms.org/labor-force-participation-in-ms](https://empowerms.org/labor-force-participation-in-ms)



# National School Choice Week

Every January, National School Choice Week highlights the many educational opportunities available across the state, including public schools, charter schools, private schools, virtual learning, and homeschooling, emphasizing the vital role of parental choice in shaping students' futures.

In 2025, Empower once again hosted parents and policymakers for discussions on how we can bring more choices to Mississippi families.



# The Empower Podcast

The Empower Podcast showcases state and national experts in dynamic conversation on ways the Magnolia State can grow and thrive. This past year, we welcomed dozens of guests, including: 1) Mike Hurst, former US District Attorney; 2) Andy Gibson, Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce; 3) Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch; 4) Speaker of the House, Jason White; 5) Jackson Mayor John Horhn; 6) Former Governor Haley Barbour; and 7) Bill Cork, Executive Director, Mississippi Development Authority.



# It's Time for BOLD REFORM

School choice, or “education freedom,” refers to policies that empower families to select the best K-12 educational setting for their child, whether that’s a public or private school, a charter school, or homeschooling. In recent years, microschoools (private schools with under 50 students) have also become popular with parents.

School choice policies, such as public school open enrollment and Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) that allocate per-pupil funding for private school tuition, tutoring, or other educational services, are designed to remove financial and regulatory barriers. These policies ensure that every child can access the education that best fits their needs by making it easier for parents to choose and move their kids between districts or other education options.

Mississippi has made meaningful progress in the past decade to improve outcomes for kids and to give parents greater autonomy of their child’s learning, but 2026 is shaping up to be the most consequential year for Mississippi education reform in a generation.

It’s time for bold reform.

House Speaker Jason White called education freedom the House’s number one priority for the 2026 legislative session, adding that Mississippians can expect a “bold and uncomfortable” education bill.

For too long, a child’s educational path in Mississippi has been determined not by their needs, interests, or potential, but by their Zip code. School choice changes that.

Across the country, families are demanding more options, and Mississippians have steadily moved in the same

direction. School choice is popular with Mississippi voters – 85% of voters support school choice, because they understand that:

- Parents know their children best and deserve meaningful options.
- Communities grow stronger when families have access to quality schools.
- A diverse education system supports workforce development and economic growth.
- Research shows school choice improves outcomes for both participating students and those in traditional schools.

Parents want environments where their children feel safe, challenged, and known. They want schools that reflect their

values and cultivate strong character. And they want the freedom to choose the setting that gives their child the best chance to thrive.

For the past decade, Empower Mississippi has been at the forefront of education reform—leading efforts to reform the funding formula, fully fund the special needs ESA, support new school founders through Embark, amplify parent voices, and clear barriers that prevent families from accessing the education their children deserve.

From advancing charter school options to championing innovative private school leaders to elevating stories of families who have found the right fit, Empower has worked relentlessly toward a vision that every child in Mississippi has a chance to rise. In 2026, we hope to see that dream further realized.

## School Choice: MYTH VS. FACT

**MYTH:** Families already have adequate access to quality public schools, so geography isn’t an issue.

**FACT:** In Mississippi, many families are still locked into a single neighborhood school, even when it’s not a good fit. School choice simply gives parents the freedom to select public, charter, private, or home-school options based on what their child needs.

**MYTH:** Allowing transfers or letting public funds follow students to private schools will drain districts and overload classrooms.

**FACT:** Districts only accept transfers when they have empty seats, and funding follows the student to fill seats taxpayers have already paid for. This doesn’t burden districts; it helps them operate more efficiently.

**MYTH:** Public dollars belong exclusively to public schools.

**FACT:** Taxpayers pay the same regardless of where their child learns. Directing funds to the school—public, charter, or private—that delivers the best outcome is common sense. Real-world evidence shows that expanding choice improves results not only for students who move to a new school but also for those who remain in their public school.

“Every child, regardless of their Zip code, deserves a fair chance to succeed. As we examine and debate this topic, let us please be mindful that parents also happen to be taxpayers, and they are the ones footing the bill.

And parents know what’s best for their children.”

House Speaker Jason White



**Embark**  
New Schools for Mississippi

**MORE Quality SCHOOLS**

Embark launched in 2022 with a clear and ambitious goal: to find, guide, and invest in new school founders who can expand access to high-quality education options across Mississippi. From the beginning, Embark was designed not only to support individual school leaders, but to demonstrate that Mississippi has a real and growing supply of educational entrepreneurs – even in a policy environment that has often limited their ability to launch. Since its inception, Embark has played a pivotal role in shaping a more diverse and responsive education landscape by supporting leaders who are reimagining what school can look like for Mississippi families.

Over the past three years, Embark has intentionally built a strong pipeline of prospective charter and microschool founders. This pipeline now includes dozens of operational school founders, a broader network of prospective leaders receiving guidance, and a deep bench of educators exploring what it would take to start a school of their own.

This work has resulted in meaningful charter school and microschool growth across the state:

- Prior to Embark, Mississippi opened just 10 charter schools in 10 years. In its first two years of providing application assistance, Embark successfully supported the approval of three new charter schools, representing a 30% increase in the number of charter schools in Mississippi.
- Since Embark launched, 18 microschools have opened or are in the process of opening.

Microschools have become a particularly powerful part of Embark’s impact, in part because legislative and accountability constraints have made new charter launches increasingly difficult in recent years. As a result, microschools have emerged as a viable pathway for educational entrepreneurs to meet demand today as more families actively seek non-traditional options.

In the past year alone, eight new microschools have opened with Embark’s support, underscoring both demand and opportunity. These schools offer smaller class sizes, greater flexibility, and a strong sense of community – qualities that resonate deeply with parents and educators alike.

At the heart of this growth is Embark’s Momentum Microgrants program, which equips experienced educators with the resources, guidance, and peer network they need to bring their vision to life. Many microschool founders are longtime public-school teachers who have seen firsthand where traditional systems fall short and are motivated to create learning environments where students are known, challenged, and supported as individuals.

Embark has also remained deeply engaged in strengthening Mississippi’s charter school pipeline. Even with new charter applications and approvals severely limited by legislative and accountability requirements, Embark continues the behind-the-scenes work essential to long-term growth: identifying promising leaders, providing technical assistance and thought partnership, and advocating for founders navigating an increasingly narrow authorization landscape.

Through its early-stage conversations, general guidance, and charter fellowship and assistance efforts, Embark has built a growing pipeline of leaders who are prepared to move quickly as conditions improve. As policy conversations advance and unnecessary barriers begin to shift, Embark is positioned to help translate pent-up demand into high-quality charter schools serving students in need of options throughout the state.

Overall, as Mississippi looks ahead to potential school choice reforms in the coming year (see pages 12-13), Embark is uniquely positioned with a proven pipeline, a strong network, and on-the-ground experience to help scale new schools quickly and responsibly as opportunity expands.



For years, Empower Mississippi has led the charge to expand the Mississippi Education Scholarship Account (ESA) so that more families of students with special needs can access schools that meet their children’s needs. This year, that work resulted in a major victory when Governor Tate Reeves signed legislation increasing ESA funding from \$3 million to \$5 million, finally making it possible for every family on the waitlist to participate in the program and choose the learning environment that best supports their child.

Mississippi’s ESA gives parents of students with special needs the flexibility to tailor an education that best fits their child. Families can use funds for approved expenses such as private school tuition, educational therapies, specialized services, and tutoring.

Parents of children with special needs face unique challenges, and the ESA program is a lifeline for so many families. Demand for the program has remained strong since its creation, driven in large part by strong parent satisfaction. A recent PEER report showed:

- 99% of participating parents are satisfied with the ESA program overall
- 88% are satisfied with the disability and special education services offered by participating nonpublic schools
- And, incredibly, 93% have seen improvement in their child’s specific disability while using the ESA.

These numbers reflect what families consistently tell us: the ESA is a lifeline to hope for their child.

Yet until this year, access remained limited. More than 150 students with special needs were stuck on a waitlist, unable to participate despite qualifying for the program. This year’s \$2 million increase in funding is expected to fully eliminate that waitlist, opening the door for every eligible family to seek the education setting that works for them.

Empower Mississippi has been fighting on behalf of these families for years through our Waitlisted campaign. We have elevated stories like the Bland family, who were unexpectedly removed from the waitlist in fall 2024 and had no clear path forward, and the Aikens family, who were paying \$1,300 a month for their son Aiden’s schooling while hoping an ESA would finally bring financial relief. These parents, and hundreds more like them, will now be able to pursue excellent education opportunities without carrying overwhelming financial burdens. Their stories shaped public understanding, galvanized lawmakers, and helped secure this year’s breakthrough.

This year’s ESA expansion represents not only a policy win, but a meaningful step toward ensuring that every Mississippi child with special needs has the chance to thrive. Through sustained advocacy, storytelling, and partnerships with families across the state, Empower Mississippi helped make that possible.



# A Public-Safety Approach

BUILT ON  
ACCOUNTABILITY  
AND ACTION

Keeping Mississippi’s communities safe requires a justice system that is fair, effective, and committed to reducing and solving serious crime. In 2025, Empower Mississippi continued advancing a public-safety strategy rooted in proven data-driven reforms. Our focus is to maximize opportunity and minimize injustice, which will increase long-term public safety. That means ensuring clear, certain consequences for crime, strengthening investigative capacity, improving rehabilitation, and ensuring that communities and victims are protected every step of the way.

A central theme of Empower’s work this year has been addressing the gaps that allow crime to persist. Mississippi’s justice system often struggles with delayed justice, inconsistent supervision, and limited access to programs that help people change their behavior. These gaps have real consequences, not only for the individuals involved, but for families, neighborhoods, and victims who depend on the system to prevent future harm. Empower’s focus on public safety reflects the belief that accountability must be clear, swift, and certain so that people understand expectations, and the community remains protected.

At the same time, long-term safety depends on what happens after accountability is enforced. Mississippi cannot

afford a revolving door of reoffending, and the state’s high recidivism rate shows what happens when people return home without the tools they need to succeed. Empower has emphasized the importance of programs that strengthen reentry, improve supervision, and support behavioral change. This includes encouraging access to proven work experience, treatment, and structured pathways that help people meet the conditions of their supervision and avoid returning to crime.

Data-driven decision-making is another critical part of building safer communities. Empower has underscored the importance of using accurate data to understand where breakdowns occur and to guide reforms that increase accountability and reduce repeat offenses. Public safety improves when decisions are based on real outcomes rather than assumptions, ensuring we prioritize what works.

Taken together, these efforts reflect a justice philosophy centered on safety, evidence-based solutions, and results. By strengthening accountability, improving supervision, and ensuring better pathways to comply with the law, Mississippi can reduce crime, support victims, and build safer communities for everyone.



**EPIC**  
EMPOWER POLICY & INNOVATION CENTER

# Building Better Ideas

INTRODUCING THE EMPOWER POLICY & INNOVATION CENTER (EPIC)

For more than a decade, Empower Mississippi has worked to advance opportunity-focused policy at the State Capitol. Many supporters and partners have played a role in that work—meeting with lawmakers, investing financially, and championing reforms that help Mississippians live free, work meaningfully, and learn effectively.

That advocacy has always been grounded in research and policy development. From the beginning, Empower has believed that good advocacy starts with good ideas, and that durable reform requires more than slogans or short-term wins.

As Empower’s work has expanded, so too has the complexity of the policy challenges facing Mississippi. Experience has made one thing increasingly clear: advancing reform is only as strong as the ideas behind it. That realization led to the launch of the **Empower Policy & Innovation Center (EPIC)**.

EPIC represents a focused investment in deepening the research and policy design that underpin Empower Mississippi’s advocacy efforts. While Empower has long engaged in research as part of its advocacy work, EPIC formalizes and prioritizes this function, ensuring that Mississippi-specific data, analysis, and policy development receive sustained attention and resources.

Too often, important policy conversations in Mississippi stall due to a lack of credible, state-specific research to guide them. Legislators, business leaders, and engaged citizens regularly express a need for trustworthy data that reflects real conditions on the ground. Without that foundation,

policy debates can grow thin, recycled, or disconnected from the realities in our communities. EPIC is designed to help close that gap. Its purpose is to transform data into action by examining Mississippi’s most pressing challenges and developing practical, research-driven policy solutions tailored to the state’s unique context.

Empower’s Advocacy Model follows a clear progression - from defining problems and conducting research, to crafting solutions, advocating for change, and supporting implementation (see page 6). EPIC strengthens the early and essential stages of this model by sharpening the research and policy design that everything else depends on.

Put simply: if advocacy is how ideas move, EPIC is where stronger ideas are built.

To lead this work, Empower recently welcomed Dr. Kristin Vance Richards as Director of Research. Dr. Richards brings academic rigor, policy experience, and a deep commitment to integrity and transparency. Her leadership ensures that EPIC’s work meets high standards while remaining focused on practical, real-world outcomes for Mississippi families.

With the launch of EPIC, Empower Mississippi is not changing course. It is doubling down on a long-held conviction: Mississippi deserves better data, better ideas, and better policy solutions. By investing more deeply in research and innovation, Empower is strengthening the foundation that makes effective advocacy—and lasting reform—possible.

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.

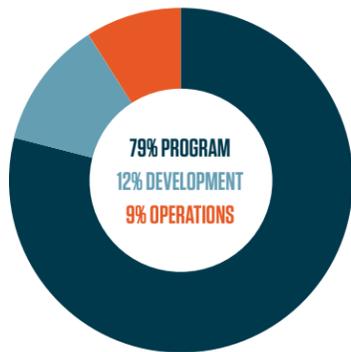
Empower Mississippi is the umbrella organization, income tax-exempt under Internal Revenue Code 501(c)4, with Empower Mississippi Foundation, an internal educational trust fund, tax-exempt under IRC 501(c)3, and Empower PAC, a connected state PAC, exempt under IRC 527. Embark, LLC, is a single-member 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, 2026.

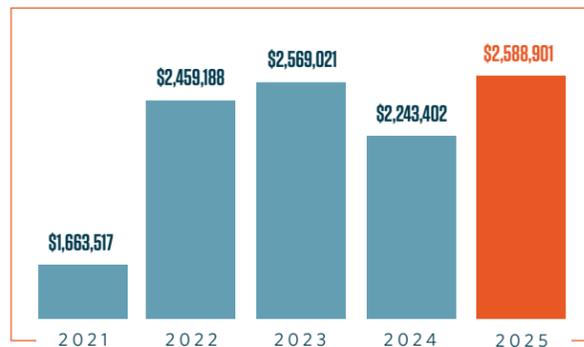
## 2025 FINANCIALS

	INCOME	EXPENSES
<b>EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI</b>	\$916,054	\$883,360
<b>EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI FOUNDATION</b>	\$1,306,072	\$1,231,845
<b>EMBARK</b>	\$281,775	\$370,193
<b>EMPOWER PAC</b>	\$85,000	\$21,000
	<b>\$2,588,901</b>	<b>\$2,506,398</b>

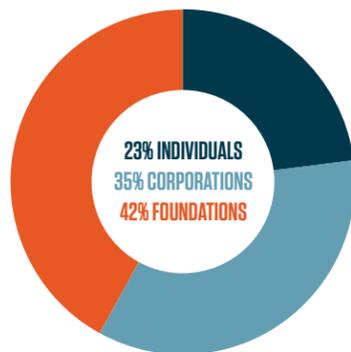
## EXPENSE ALLOCATION



## FIVE YEAR COMBINED REVENUE



## REVENUE BREAKDOWN



## NUMBER OF 2025 DONORS



A QUALITY  
EDUCATION  
FOR EVERY  
CHILD

MEANINGFUL  
WORK FOR  
EVERY ADULT

JUSTICE  
FOR ALL



Empower Mississippi could not accomplish our mission without your generous financial support. We are deeply grateful.

Your support of Empower is an investment in our state. Your support sends a clear message that you believe in the worth of every child, the dignity of every adult, and the principles of equal opportunity for every Mississippian.

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 2026 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.**

You can also mail your tax-deductible gift to:  
Empower Mississippi Foundation  
1000 Northpark Drive  
Ridgeland, MS 39157



# 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).