

EMPOWER MISSISSIPPI



THE TAPE MEASURE PROBLEM

What Mississippians Taught Us About Work and Opportunity

AUGUST 2026



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INTRODUCTION

We didn't ask about tape measures. Yet across multiple conversations with workers and employers, tape measure use was consistently cited as a gauge not of length or depth, but of workforce readiness. Employers described young workers as arriving on the job unable to use one. One worker proudly described learning to use a tape measure as a milestone in his own training.

When we asked an education leader why students were not learning practical skills like this, the answer was blunt: "Because it doesn't count toward a school's score in the state accountability system."

As Empower prepared this report, the tape measure became a proxy for something much larger: competence, problem-solving ability, and lifelong learning. State leaders have spent years working to foster a business-friendly environment that creates more and better jobs. That work must continue. But to keep moving in the right direction, Mississippians must know about

the opportunities that exist today and have the skills necessary to succeed in them, so they can live, work, and stay in this state. And, we must ensure that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to prepare for the jobs of the future.

In this report, Empower shares what we heard from Mississippians across the state on how to prepare them for success in the workforce – and life – one inch at a time.



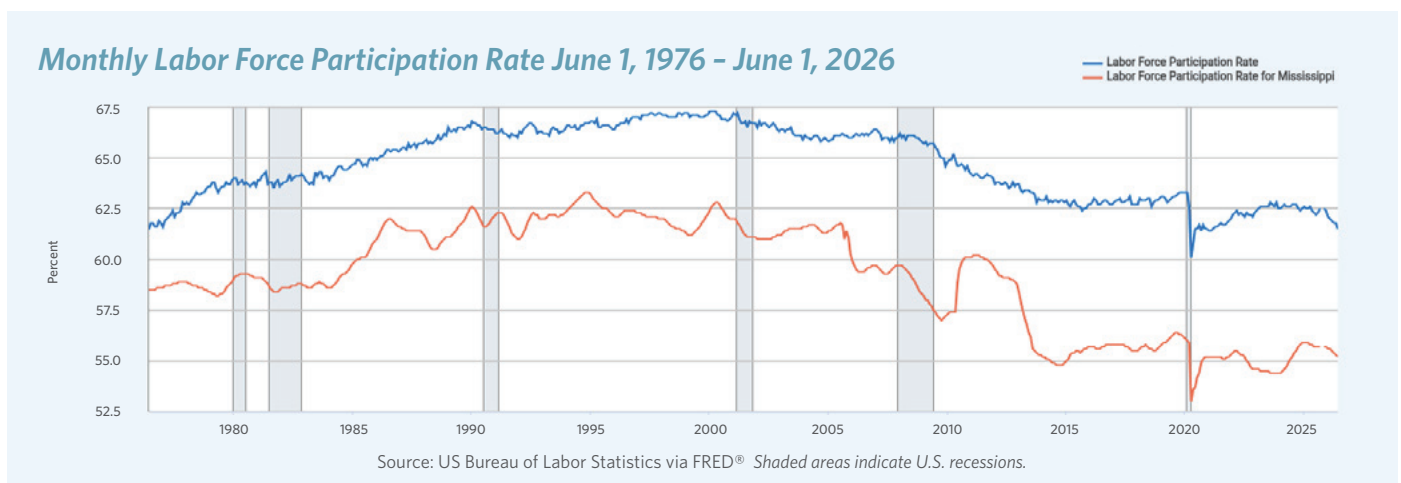
WHY THIS MATTERS

Mississippi's labor force participation rate (LFPR), which is the portion of Mississippi's working-age population that is working or looking for work, has historically ranked among the lowest in the nation. While the unemployment rate often receives the most public attention, that rate is a measure of the number of people who are actively looking for work but have not obtained a job. It does not include those who are neither working nor looking for work, meaning a large number of citizens are left out of this calculation. While the unemployment rate is an important

economic indicator, Empower believes the labor force participation rate provides a better, more accurate view of the state's economic engagement and opportunity.

Research suggests a strong relationship between a state's labor force participation and its economic performance. Communities with a higher percentage of their people working tend to generate stronger economic growth, higher incomes, and, as a result, greater opportunity for even more people to enjoy those benefits.

As of June 2026, Mississippi's labor force participation rate stood at a seasonally-adjusted rate of 55.2%, compared to 61.5% nationally. Mississippi has made meaningful progress in recent years, including record private-sector investment, low unemployment, and one of the nation's largest increases in labor force participation from 2023 to 2024. Yet Mississippi's labor force participation rate remains well below the national average.





Empower Mississippi studies labor force participation not only because of its impact on the state's economy, but because we believe work is good, essential to the human experience, and part of God's design for a fulfilling life. While we recognize that not everyone can work due to disability, age, or other legitimate circumstances, we believe work provides dignity, purpose, independence, and a pathway to a better future – not only for the person working, but also for their children and the community, as we explain later in this report.

Labor force participation is an important measure, but it is not a complete measure of human contribution. Retirees, full-time students, parents at home raising children, and people caring for relatives full-time are generally counted as outside the labor force,



even though many provide immense value to their families and communities. This report therefore does not recommend forcing every Mississippian into the workforce, but rather provides context and better understanding of those who can work yet remain disconnected from the opportunity to do so.

This report builds on Empower Mississippi's previous labor force participation research. Our first report, *Why Aren't More Mississippians Working?*, examined the data and trends behind Mississippi's workforce challenges. Our second report, *Moving the Needle*, explored initial policy solutions, based on our research to that point, designed to increase participation and remove barriers to work.

This report takes a different approach. Data can tell us how many people are working. It cannot tell us why some people struggle to find work, why others leave the workforce, or what factors influence decisions about employment, training, and opportunity. To better understand those questions, Empower Mississippi partnered with organizations across the state to conduct focus groups and gather direct feedback from Mississippians.

The findings that follow point to a common theme: Mississippi's next workforce challenge is not simply creating more opportunity. It is helping more people see it, connect to it, and thrive in it.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mississippi's labor force participation rate has historically ranked among the lowest in the nation, but recent years have shown encouraging signs of progress. The state recorded one of the largest increases in labor force participation in the country from 2023 to 2024. The rate reached a post-COVID seasonally adjusted high of 55.9% in December 2024, where it stayed until March 2025. From that time through June 2026 (the latest available at the time of this report), the rate declined to 55.2%, tracking a similar decline in the national rate, and remaining more than 6 percentage points below the national average.

To better understand why so many Mississippians remain disconnected from work, Empower Mississippi conducted focus groups, interviews, and other



stakeholder engagement efforts with workers, employers, educators, workforce professionals, nonprofit leaders, and community members across Mississippi.

Contrary to many common perceptions, most participants expressed a strong desire – for themselves or among those they work with – for independence, meaningful work, financial stability, and upward mobility. Many spoke about supporting their families, building businesses, learning new skills, and creating better futures for themselves and their children.

At the same time, participants repeatedly described challenges that make it difficult to connect effort and opportunity. The tape measure became a symbol of the broader challenge. Employers described workers arriving without basic practical skills, while workers described wanting, but lacking, skills or opportunities to learn and succeed. The recurring problem was a disconnect between people and the preparation, information, and relationships that lead to opportunity.



Five major findings emerged from our research.

Finding #1: Mississippians Want to Work

The most consistent theme throughout our conversations was a desire for self-sufficiency and upward mobility. Participants repeatedly described work as a source of dignity, purpose, independence, and financial stability. Many expressed interest in entrepreneurship, skilled trades, side businesses, and career advancement.

If the sentiments of this cross-section of our citizenry are indicative of the state as a whole, most Mississippians want to work and build better lives.

However, we must also recognize a difficult, more sobering reality. Some Mississippians don't want to work. And many who do want to work remain disconnected from the workforce because they cannot work, do not know how to enter or remain in it, or do not believe that work will improve their circumstances. The reasons range from disability, addiction, caregiving, and practical barriers, to financial and governmental disincentives, low expectations, a lack of exposure to opportunities that are available, and a lack of role models who demonstrate the value of work.

Recognizing these differences matters. We cannot increase workforce participation through a single program or policy. Rather, we must remove actual and perceived barriers to work by strengthening skills, expectations, incentives, relationships, and pathways that make work both possible and worthwhile. And, of course, we must continue to provide an environment where more jobs can be created.

Finding #2: Too Many Mississippians Cannot See the Opportunity Around Them

Mississippi has grown jobs, reduced unemployment, experienced record economic development, and increased labor force participation in recent years. However, focus group participants frequently described a lack of awareness about available careers, training programs, apprenticeships, and workforce opportunities. Many young people reported limited exposure to career options beyond a small number of traditional professions. Others described discovering opportunities only after someone personally introduced them to a training program, mentor, or employer. While opportunity often exists, too many Mississippians do not know where to find it.

Finding #3: Too Few Mississippians Are Workforce Ready

The tape measure story reflected a broader concern about workforce readiness. Participants described a widening gap between what students are taught, what employers need, and what young people require to navigate adulthood, including employment, successfully.

Employers frequently emphasized the importance of reliability, communication skills, professionalism, initiative, and practical readiness in their employees, and they further underscored the disconnect between these critical skills and what students are being taught.

Finding #4: Real-Life Barriers Can Put Opportunity Out of Reach

Participants identified numerous barriers that can make workforce participation difficult even for people who want to work. Childcare, transportation, caregiving responsibilities, scheduling conflicts, addiction, criminal records, and benefit cliffs (explained later in this report) were among the most commonly cited challenges.

Finding #5: People Connect People to Opportunity

In nearly every conversation, participants emphasized the importance of relationships. Career coaches, mentors, teachers, parents, churches, employers, and trusted community leaders often served as the bridge between individuals and opportunity.

About the Research

Empower Mississippi conducted seven focus groups, along with individual interviews and group meetings, to hear directly from Mississippians across the state. Participants included young people, working-age adults, retirees, employers, educators, workforce professionals, nonprofit leaders, government officials, and individuals with experience navigating workforce and social-service systems.

The research included voices from every Mississippi congressional district and communities across the Delta, Gulf Coast, central Mississippi, northeast Mississippi, and other regions of the state.

Because focus groups are qualitative rather than statistically representative, the findings should not be interpreted as describing every Mississippian. They do, however, reveal recurring experiences and themes that can help policymakers better understand the realities behind the data.



FINDING #1:

MISSISSIPPIANS WANT TO WORK

The most hopeful finding from Empower Mississippi's conversations across the state was that most focus group participants wanted to work, improve their lives, and build a better future.

They spoke about earning more, supporting their families, learning new skills, starting businesses, and finding work that offered both stability and purpose. Many were already working multiple jobs, pursuing training, or building side businesses while preparing for their next opportunity. Their stories challenge the assumption that Mississippi's low labor force participation rate simply reflects a pattern of laziness or widespread lack of interest in work.

The reality is more complicated. Some Mississippians cannot work because of

disability or other legitimate hardships. Others face barriers, disincentives, limited exposure to work, or a lack of role models who demonstrate why work matters. And some simply choose not to work. But across the focus groups, the dominant message was aspiration, not apathy.

Work Is About More Than a Paycheck

Money matters. Focus group participants repeatedly connected wage levels to decisions about training, career choices, and whether a job was worth pursuing. Nearly all participants expressed a desire to earn more, and several said they were working multiple jobs to provide for themselves and their families.

One participant worked two jobs in security and warehousing while trying to launch a music career. A mother caring for two children enrolled in free forklift classes after seeing them advertised online while also selling custom T-shirts for extra income. Other side businesses included baking and custom shoe redesign.

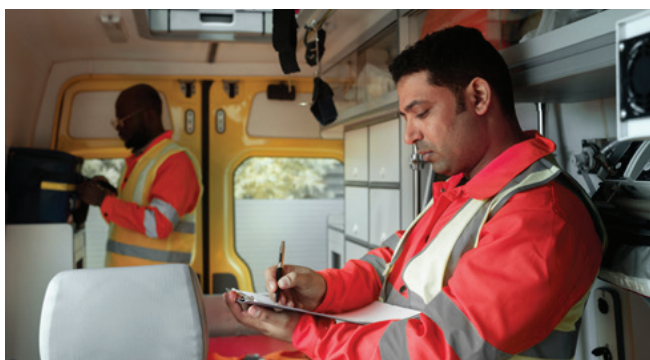
Participants also pursued specific careers because they believed those fields offered stronger wages, long-term stability, or opportunities for advancement. One participant was preparing to interview for a forklift operator job paying at least \$22.75 per hour. Another, already working at Amazon after completing forklift training, was considering electrical engineering because it paid well and appeared likely to remain in demand as robotics expanded.

But participants were equally clear that compensation alone does not create lasting attachment to work. They described purpose, interest, flexibility, and the ability to use their skills as essential to long-term satisfaction.

"You won't stay in a job long if you don't care about it and aren't using your skills...money alone won't work."

Participants chose careers for many reasons beyond pay. One earned a Commercial Driver's License because she wanted a change of scenery and the ability to travel. She drove through 42 states, described the work as an opportunity to save money and gain "peace of mind," and said she could stay close enough to home to see her children while earning about \$2,000 a week.

Another participant, a police officer of more than two decades, pursued Emergency Medical Technician training because he wanted the ability to help people in situations where he previously lacked the necessary skills. He also viewed the certification as a pathway to a second career after retirement from the police force.



A welder described the appeal of straightforward, visible work: joining two pieces of metal, traveling, and making "some real money." An HVAC trainee emphasized problem-solving. A young plumber described the satisfaction of solving difficult problems for customers who had already called several other people.

"I fell in love with something I like doing... plumbing is fun to me. I just love seeing water and love seeing the people happy, like wow, such a big relief on their face."

For these participants, work was not simply an economic transaction. It was a source of identity, accomplishment, usefulness, and pride.

The Desire for Self-Sufficiency

A recurring theme throughout the focus groups was pride in being able to solve problems and provide for oneself. Most participants said they needed help, not a handout. They valued training and support because those tools increased their independence.

One participant said a reason he learned plumbing was so he could "fix my own problems in my house instead of paying thousands of dollars to others." Others said learning electrical work, mechanics, plumbing, and related trades gave them practical life skills and confidence as well as a good income.

Participants also recognized that opportunity requires personal responsibility. One noted



that a local training program offered flexible options like morning, afternoon, and weekend trainings, making it “kind of unacceptable” for people who knew about the opportunity to simply not attend.

Work gave participants a sense of pride and helped them imagine a more independent future. This was especially visible in discussions of retirement. Several participants did not view retirement as an end to productive activity. One planned to retire from public service and begin working as an EMT. Another said retirement would allow him to choose work based on enjoyment and benefits rather than income. A teenage participant described retirement as reaching the point where he owned a home, had money set aside, and controlled his future.

“I don’t know what retirement means to me because I feel like I like to stay busy.”

These stories reinforce a simple point: many Mississippians want more control over their lives, and they see work as the pathway to that control.

Entrepreneurship and Initiative

Empower observed a strong entrepreneurial spirit, especially among younger focus group participants. Many were not waiting for a single employer or traditional career path to define

their future. They were combining training, employment, and side businesses to create their own opportunities.

One participant attended automotive classes at a local community college while also enrolling in HVAC training through a nonprofit provider. He had grown up working on cars, wanted credentials in both fields, and was taking digital marketing classes to help develop and expand his business.

Another participant worked as a pharmacy technician for 20 years before deciding she needed a better job. She saved \$1,800 for truck-driving classes, became a truck owner, and launched a dispatch business. She described it as the “best job I’ve ever had!”

Participants believed skilled trades offered both security and independence. They saw steady demand for welding, electrical work, plumbing, HVAC, automotive repair, and trucking, even as artificial intelligence and automation created uncertainty in other occupations.

“Everyone around is going to need a welder at some point to weld something. Farmers, truck drivers, anything.”

Participants also described the flexibility and earning potential of independent work. One electrician explained how a short service call could generate significant income. A plumber described completing jobs efficiently and earning customers’ trust despite his young age:



"They've never seen nobody young as me. I'm the youngest plumber in my city. I come right on, probably 20 to 30 minutes. [My customers] are like wow, you such a young man. [Some] called three to four other people out here and they couldn't do this...Hearing people say wow, I thought I could never get this fixed."

These stories reflected confidence that skills could translate directly into income, autonomy, and business ownership.

The appeal of independent work also extended to the broader gig economy. Participants discussed remote work, flexible schedules, side hustles, and the ability to build multiple streams of income. Their focus was forward-looking: evaluating markets, developing skills, and identifying ways to turn those skills into a sustainable living.

Taken together, these examples show that many participants were actively creating opportunity rather than waiting for it. Their ambition was practical, entrepreneurial, and rooted in a desire for self-sufficiency.

A More Difficult Reality

While these focus group findings were encouraging, the reality is not every Mississippian wants to work, knows how to work, or is currently able to work.

Some face real limitations and barriers. The Mississippi Department of Employment Security conducted a survey that found that among unemployed Mississippi respondents, 20.1% identified as disabled, 46.6% as single parents, and 36.1% as long-term unemployed. Focus group participants described childcare shortages, transportation challenges, addiction, incarceration, criminal records, and caregiving responsibilities that can make entering or remaining in the workforce difficult.

Others may not have grown up around adults who modeled steady employment, responsibility, or long-term planning. Employers said work culture "starts in the home" and expressed concern that some young people are not seeing work demonstrated as a normal and necessary part of adult life.



A researcher in another state recently relayed to us a conversation with a foster parent that sadly illustrates this point. After being in the home for several days, the foster child asked, “When you leave in the morning, where do you go all day?” When he replied, “To work,” it became obvious the child had never been exposed to that concept.

Several business participants described a “lack of appreciation for work” and said some younger workers viewed entry-level jobs as beneath them. They also said some new workers lacked initiative, communication skills, and the willingness to remain in a job when another opportunity appeared more attractive in the short term.

Governmental disincentives can also weaken the connection between effort and advancement. Employers described situations in which public benefits made poverty “survivable” and calculated that workers sometimes needed significant wage increases simply to offset the value of government assistance. These “benefit cliffs” can create situations in which accepting additional hours, a promotion, or a higher-paying job leaves someone worse off financially. In those cases, remaining on public assistance is a rational economic decision, but it hinders their long-term growth potential.

And some participants were blunt that opportunity exists for people who are willing to work, but not everyone chooses to pursue it.

These distinctions matter because they point to different solutions. A person facing a true disability or childcare shortage needs something different from a person who lacks information, a role model, practical skills, or an expectation of work. Some need barriers removed. Some need better incentives. Some need mentorship, preparation, or a second chance. And some need stronger expectations.

But this harder reality does not erase the central finding. Across the conversations, most participants expressed a desire to work, earn more, develop useful skills, support their families, and build better lives. Mississippi’s challenge is not simply creating opportunity. It is helping more people connect their ambition to the pathways, preparation, relationships, and information that make opportunity attainable.



FINDING #2:

TOO MANY MISSISSIPPIANS CANNOT SEE THE OPPORTUNITY AROUND THEM

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the focus groups was that opportunity is often available, but invisible to the people who need it most.

Across Mississippi, participants repeatedly described training programs, certifications, apprenticeships, careers, and support services that they either did not know existed or only discovered by chance. In many cases, the challenge was not a lack of opportunity but of visibility.

One participant said there aren't many advertisements for training programs, "you don't really see it around."

Participants suggested that Mississippi has spent considerable effort creating programs and expanding pathways to success, but far less effort ensuring people know they

exist. As a result, many individuals remain disconnected from pathways that could improve their lives simply because they never see them. And some training courses unnecessarily have empty seats.

The problem appeared especially acute among young people. Throughout the focus groups, participants expressed concern that many young people have limited exposure to the wide range of careers available to them. Students often knew about a handful of traditional professions but had much less awareness of careers in welding, HVAC, plumbing, electrical work, manufacturing, logistics, construction, or other skilled trades.

"I told my old classmates, and they don't know about [the training]... So I feel like that's probably one of the biggest barriers, especially like younger people... When they get out of high school, they don't really know about this [training] and all the other stuff."

These sentiments were shared by other participants.

"If y'all can reach out to the public school and, you know, surrounding areas... I think it would be a great start, you know, 'cause [there is] a lot of help out here [at the local community college]."

Information Matters

The focus groups also revealed that *how* information is shared may be just as important as the information itself.



Participants repeatedly emphasized that many workforce training programs fail to reach directly the people they are intended to serve. Instead, participants described learning about opportunities by word of mouth, through personal networks, community organizations, employers, churches, etc.

Participants suggested using platforms that reach the intended audience, such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Google, and Reddit. The professional platform LinkedIn was not widely used by focus group participants. When asked how they receive information, these participants said they use online sources but do not consume “traditional sources” like television or print media.

They also said information on social media and other communication channels should represent a variety of options and people, including using students and other relatable recruiters. These individuals tend to be more trusted in their communities. Examples of communication that focus group participants believe would impact behavior include: recording training classes with real students and posting them online to generate interest, showing how jobs actually work, and ensuring compensation is known for each career.

Opportunity cannot change lives if people do not know it exists.

FINDING #3:

TOO FEW MISSISSIPPIANS ARE WORKFORCE READY

Throughout these focus groups, we also learned that awareness alone is not enough. Even when opportunities are visible, people must still be prepared to pursue them. That challenge emerged throughout our conversations, with a particular focus on school and life experiences.

For example, participants indicated “being bored” drives behavior, and outdated school curriculum doesn’t feel relevant. The school system “needs more real life scenarios.”

Participants described a widening gap between what students are taught, what employers need, and what young people require to navigate adulthood, including employment, successfully. Employers frequently emphasized the importance of reliability, communication skills, professionalism, initiative, and practical readiness in their employees, and they further

underscored the disconnect between these critical skills and what students are being taught.

Career Preparation and Exposure

Several participants described career preparation as beginning long before an individual enters the workforce. Exposure to careers, training opportunities, and working professionals often shaped whether participants could envision themselves in a particular occupation.

One participant explained her career journey, which began with learning to lay brick at a local community college. The participant made “great money, six figures early” but shifted careers after fostering several children. She enrolled in a medical program, became a Certified Nursing Assistant, and eventually bought several properties in the Delta. This participant said that her town did not have “much to offer. You know, our town started going down...Around here really wasn’t any jobs. It was only a lot of trades.”

Soft Skills and Workplace Readiness

Several participants said networking is important and related to “soft skills,” or human skills that prepare an individual for success in the workplace and in relationships.

“It’s hard to get on at [company], but they look at more than your resume. Personality and dress matter. I think I have gotten a second look and hired simply because I dressed up for the interview.”



Other skills leading to successful employment include resumé writing, conflict resolution, showing up on time, working well with others, job retention, strong and clear communication, appropriate dress, and other such elements.

Business focus group feedback is aligned with this. Employers said younger workers often lack the skills needed to succeed and advance in the workplace. As one employer explained:

“Retention is a problem in some cases as young workers think the ‘grass is greener’ elsewhere, and usually are disappointed.”

When it comes to soft skills, employers noted that many new workers *“lack common sense. They can’t seem to take initiative and only do exactly what they are specifically told. Many lack communication skills, and speak like they text.”* A couple of participants suggested concerns about the increased usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI), as it is likely to change labor market dynamics while also impacting critical thinking among students and workers.

Preparation Requires Clearer Expectations and Awareness

Business focus group participants agreed that students need better preparation for what is needed in certain careers and expectations based in reality. Employers want students and workers to “be all they want to be” with facts and awareness.

These participants encourage leaders to “speak truthfully” to students and provide more awareness and marketing. One employer said it is *“a challenge to get our name out there. I recently attended a job fair at a local high school, and the students didn’t have a clue about our existence.”* Another business focus group participant suggested better alignment in marketing and messaging about jobs and training, and said career coaches are well positioned to disseminate this information.

Preparation in Middle and High School Needs Improvement

Whether dropping out of school or enrolling in a program, boredom was cited as a reason for action and/or inaction. Participants felt that they would be better served if the “why” was explained: *“Why should I stay in school or learn math? How will this affect my life?”*

Participants tended to believe school is outdated and should be made relevant to students, such as focusing on skills like home economics, financial literacy, and other tools important in life. These individuals suggested they learned more outside of school in a nonprofit program where they acquired trade skills as well as built a broader network.

Participants made the connection between chronic absenteeism and relevant courses.

“We have a lot of kids...not at school because they don’t have the structure at home to force them to be there.”

Participants often spoke about financial literacy and the lack of education provided at the school level. Some were taught by their parents and/or trade programs, but most felt they were generally unprepared for handling finances after getting a job.

One suggested that high school students be allowed to go to school first and/or in the morning, so they can work in the afternoons. He mentioned this schedule would also allow older siblings to assist with school transportation and after-school supervision for younger siblings.





FINDING #4:

REAL-LIFE BARRIERS CAN PUT OPPORTUNITY OUT OF REACH

Participants repeatedly described challenges that make it difficult to connect effort and opportunity. The challenge is not always a lack of jobs. For many individuals, the challenge is navigating circumstances that make entering or remaining in the workforce difficult.

Participants identified childcare, transportation, caregiving responsibilities, scheduling conflicts, addiction, incarceration, criminal records, and benefit cliffs as some of the most common barriers to work.

Childcare and Caregiving Responsibilities

Childcare emerged as one of the most frequently discussed barriers.

"We don't have any grandparents out there anymore... to watch the kids."

Parents described difficulty finding affordable childcare, particularly during training programs or jobs that require nontraditional hours.

Employers and workforce leaders echoed these concerns, describing childcare shortages across many communities and discussing examples of businesses attempting to provide childcare support.

Participants also highlighted broader caregiving responsibilities, including caring for aging parents and relatives, all of which can affect workforce participation.

Transportation Barriers

Participants generally viewed transportation as one of several practical barriers that can place opportunity out of reach, particularly when combined with childcare or financial challenges.

These concerns were especially relevant in rural communities where jobs, training programs, and support services may be located far from where individuals live.

Flexibility and Scheduling Challenges

Participants emphasized the importance of flexible schedules in both attracting and retaining workers.

"If you pick your schedule, you show up on your schedule."



Workers described flexibility as an important factor alongside wages, while employers acknowledged that workplace culture, quality of life, and scheduling flexibility increasingly influence employment decisions.

The conversations suggest that rigid scheduling structures can create barriers for workers balancing childcare, caregiving responsibilities, education, transportation, or second jobs.

Benefit Cliffs and Financial Disincentives

Participants, including employers, discussed

situations in which public assistance programs may unintentionally discourage additional work, promotions, or wage increases.

Known as “benefit cliffs,” these situations occur when the increased compensation offered by an employer is less than the value of the public assistance that will be reduced as a result of the higher compensation. For instance, a \$1.00/hour wage increase would produce around \$2,000 per year before taxes are withheld. But that \$2,000 yearly wage increase could cause the employee to lose far more than \$2,000



in benefits. In those cases, it is an unfortunate but rational decision, at least in the short term, to forego the increased wages. Employers described circumstances in which workers sometimes needed wage increases of as much as nearly 40% to offset the value of benefits that could be lost through increased earnings. Some studies have shown that a much larger wage increase would be necessary.

This weakens the connection between effort and advancement for some workers.

Justice Involvement, Recovery, and Second Chances

Participants frequently discussed the impact of substance abuse, incarceration, criminal records, and reentry challenges on workforce participation.

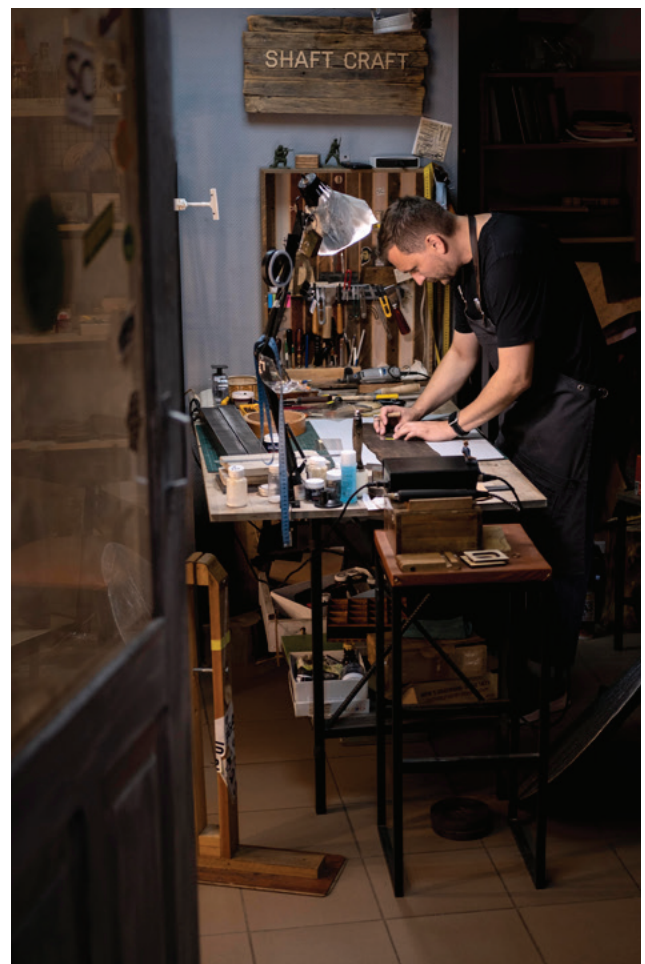
One participant, however, highlighted the opportunities available even for individuals with criminal records:

“They don’t know you can make \$100,000 by being a welder with a felony.”

Participants proposed additional outreach and support for individuals transitioning from incarceration back into society. Some suggested stronger connections between workforce services, corrections agencies, parole officers, and employers.

Business focus group participants also discussed innovative approaches to supporting workers in recovery. One employer described a recovery-friendly workforce model that supports employees with substance abuse treatment while helping them remain employed.

Participants generally viewed work as an important component of recovery, accountability, structure, and long-term stability, and employers often referred to these workers as being more reliable than others.



FINDING #5:

PEOPLE CONNECT PEOPLE TO OPPORTUNITY

Focus group participants described opportunity as something they encountered through another person. Jobs, training programs, internships, and career pathways were often discovered through a cousin, grandparent, counselor, employer, friend, or community connection rather than through a formal system.

Community influences drive significant decision-making. Many focus group participants said their decisions, such as finding a workforce training program, came through conversations with a trusted family member or friend, if such individuals existed in their network. However, many participants said they did not have any mentor or guide in their life to offer direction, and they felt like young people were not being listened to.

The same pattern appeared in how participants learned about programs.

Most said they found out about resources through social media or word of mouth, not traditional media or formal advertising. This suggests that awareness alone is not enough. Trusted people often serve as the bridge between information and action.

The Power of Personal Relationships

Several stories show how a single relationship can alter the direction of a person's life.

One participant was working at Krystal and learned about a local workforce training center from his cousin. He enrolled in the program but did not finish. However, his brother enrolled in the program, creating a spirit of competition between the brothers. The participant re-enrolled and completed the program.

Another participant learned about a local internship opportunity because his grandmother encouraged him to apply. The internship in the local mayor's office gave him relevant work experience and led to a long-term job. He later visited the local WIN Job Center, which helped him get a job with a chemical company and introduced him to free training classes. He said that without his grandmother pushing him toward the internship, he would never have known about the opportunity.

One participant was connected to a training program after meeting someone who knew a community college employee.

■ *"We didn't know [this program] existed."*



These examples illustrate a key finding: programs may exist, but people frequently need a trusted connection to help them find the program, understand its value, and take the first step.

Family Influence

Family members and community experiences influenced not only whether participants pursued work, but also the type of work they chose.

One participant was inspired by his grandfather to become a plumber and was exposed to the trade at an early age. He also described a personal experience with his aunt, where a septic issue cost about \$350 for four hours. The compensation, coupled with early exposure to the job, attracted him to the trade.

"I do what I want to do, like plumbing, and I think plumbing is fun. A lot of people might have like a negative [thought about] it, like the messiness of it...you know it's a hard job, but I can do it like once I learn the training, the basics, and the safety."

Another participant described how seeing the cost of an HVAC service call at his grandmother's home helped spark his interest in that career.

"I moved in with my grandma for a few years. She called a guy out because the air wasn't working. It was when, you know, summer started to get hotter and hotter. Just for that man to come up, it was \$150.00, like, just for him to show up. Not even to fix the problem, just look at it. Just for her to call him and get him to come to our house \$150.00. I was like, OK, so that was one of the reasons."

Family influence was not always supportive of skilled trades. One participant said his mother was not happy about his decision to learn a trade, but she accepted it, while his grandmother continued to support a college-based path. He ultimately completed a two-year degree while continuing to work in the trades.

Participants also described the role of family responsibilities in shaping attitudes toward work and retention.

"You've got a person that lives with their mom. Don't have no bills, no responsibility, just waking up every day. The likelihood of them staying on the job is very slim to none."

Employers echoed this perspective, saying that people often begin to "think differently" and become more loyal as they age, form families, and take on responsibilities.

Mentors Matter

The need for mentors and trusted guides emerged often. Participants generally agreed that more adults should invest time in helping young people identify opportunities, make career decisions, and build confidence. One participant suggested adult mentors should “be the glue.”

Parents are the first and most important mentors. However, where those relationships do not exist, or sometimes even when they do, reliable adults can help meet the need. Parents, policymakers, school and church teachers, coaches, and others with influence in young people’s lives can encourage early work experience and help young people connect what they are learning to a future career.

One participant spoke about his desire to mentor younger people after retirement.

“I’m still gonna be moving around, probably talk to the young generation and try to encourage them, go to trade school like I did...Go make a living for yourself. You know, you might want to have a wife one day...kids one day.”

Participants also described young people as wanting guidance, encouragement, and the chance to be heard.

“[Kids] just want to be guided, you know, get them a conscience, let them express themselves...”

In addition to afternoon and summer jobs, various structured programs offer strong mentorship opportunities. Participants in Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) programs in middle and high schools have demonstrated impressive outcomes, including lower dropout rates, lower suspension rates, and higher graduation rates than their non-JROTC classmates. Internships, youth page programs, and similar opportunities give young people direct experience and relationships with adults in the workplace.

Career Coaches and Counselors Connect Students to Opportunity

Career coaches and school counselors were frequently described as people who can turn an unknown option into a real pathway.

One participant said a counselor suggested plumbing, an industry he previously knew nothing about. Participants believed counselors and career coaches should expose students to a wide range of careers rather than directing everyone toward the same familiar options.

Business focus group participants strongly endorsed Mississippi’s career coaching program. They said employers had long tried to partner with schools, but career coaches made the process much better, with one participant describing it as “spot on.”

One participant shared a local experience in which a career coach found a homeless



student, helped put that student on a better pathway, and reported that the student is now enrolled in community college. Another participant said the program was “the best thing Mississippi has done.”

The same connector model may be useful outside high schools. Participants proposed more intentional outreach through parole and probation officers because they regularly interact with people transitioning back into society and can help guide them toward employment and training. The Mississippi Department of Corrections has begun to train parole and probation officers to assist in job placement for parolees and probationers.

Networks Open Doors

Participants identified networking as a major part of finding and keeping work. They also said many young people do not know how to build a professional network or understand how relationships affect hiring.

“I think one of the major things is networking...a lot of younger people don't know how to network...and really to get like a lot of jobs now, you got to know someone that knows someone.”

“[If someone says,] ‘I know this guy and I know he [knows] what to do,’ I’ll be more willing to hire him than somebody I don’t know who may have the qualification...I don’t know if he’ll be a good fit, but I know this person.”

Participants said public schools do not “really teach stuff like that, like networking...and getting jobs.” One participant said he did not learn how to network until college.

Research suggests that the most useful social connections are often “weak ties,” or people outside an individual’s closest circle. These relationships can widen a network and expose someone to opportunities, employers, and information they would not otherwise encounter.

Participants wanted employers to create more direct connections with students and potential workers.

“Have companies come in and talk to us and to see...if some of us may have potential... It’d be nice, you know...to get that connection... the next step.”

One participant described a company that visits schools and provides two-week, on-site training opportunities. The participant said those new skills allow students to go wherever the company has a location.

Employers Can Create Connection and Belonging

Employers can also serve as connectors, particularly for workers facing barriers such as addiction, criminal records, or who are reentering society after being in prison.

Business focus group participants described “recovery friendly workplace” models —

supporting employees in substance abuse treatment through covered treatment costs, on-site drug testing, and other support. For participants in the program who are on parole or probation, video check-ins with parole and probation officers are provided so employees can meet requirements without leaving work.

In May 2025, Thermo-Kool in Laurel earned national certification as a Recovery Friendly Workplace, a designation given only after a rigorous evaluation.

“We’re proud to be helping define what a recovery-friendly workplace looks like in our industry and to show that compassion and performance go hand in hand... Supporting recovery isn’t just the right thing to do; it creates stronger teams, improves morale, and builds a better future for everyone.”

There are also financial benefits for the company. **Thermo-Kool’s turnover rate fell from 178% to 48%, saving roughly \$1 million a year** — substantial given that the average cost of a single turnover is estimated at \$9,000.

These examples reinforce the broader finding that connection is not only important for finding a job. Relationships, accountability, encouragement, and belonging can also help people remain in the workforce and build a more stable life.

People Connect People to Opportunity

Across focus groups, interviews, and employer conversations, a consistent theme emerged: opportunity is often delivered through relationships. Participants discovered training programs through cousins, careers through grandparents, jobs through networks, guidance through mentors and career coaches, and second chances through employers willing to invest in people.

Mississippi has invested significant effort in creating educational, workforce, and economic opportunities. Our research suggests that maximizing those opportunities requires more than programs alone. It requires people who can help others see opportunity, believe it is possible, and take the next step.





WHAT'S NEXT?

The following recommendations reflect what Empower heard directly from Mississippians across the state paired with data-driven policy analysis. These steps are not exhaustive, but they represent high-impact opportunities to build on the state's current momentum.

EXPOSE YOUNG MISSISSIPPIANS TO WORK EARLIER

Community Engagement

Parents, policymakers, teachers, coaches, and others with influence in young people's lives should encourage and provide opportunities for early work while Mississippians are young. Early work experience [has been shown](#) to lead to long-term positive outcomes, including higher hourly wages, increased annual earnings, and less time spent out of work, with effects still visible 25 to 30 years after high school. One focus group participant, reflecting on his own path, hopes to keep encouraging "the young generation," telling them to go to trade school as he did and "go make a living for yourself."

Meaningfully improving the workforce culture in Mississippi will require all of us to adopt a similar attitude.

Youth Work Initiatives

Mississippi should consider creating youth work initiatives aimed at increasing summer and part-time employment among 16- to 20-year-olds. Such initiatives can happen at the state or local level. Cities and counties, for example, may consider low- or no-cost work opportunities for youth that fill real gaps while providing meaningful career exposure. Lawmakers could consider a pilot youth work initiative in areas with elevated high school dropout rates. While state law will dictate payment structures, Empower believes non-monetary compensation, such as high school or college credit, could meaningfully expand these opportunities. Private sector employers should similarly consider youth work initiatives in their respective communities, perhaps coordinated by the local chamber of commerce.

Address "Gap Time"

Lawmakers should address "gap time" — the months of idle time created, for example, when high school students graduate in December rather than the following spring. Business and training representatives identified this as both a challenge and an opportunity. Some employers try to hire these graduates, while others consider them too young to meet hiring criteria or qualify for training and public assistance. Empower suggests lawmakers identify which programs

are currently available to younger individuals, evaluate whether existing age restrictions are appropriate and necessary, and consider safeguards that reduce employer liability when hiring youth workers, all with the goal of incentivizing more early work experiences rather than leaving this population idle.

PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Teach What Employers Need

The frequency of the unprompted comments about the use of tape measures was indicative of the general lack of connection between the education being provided to young people and the skills they will need after graduation – whether that knowledge is required for a job or simply for functioning well as an adult.

As noted at the beginning of this report, when we asked a school leader why such skills are not taught in school, the leader said, *“Because it doesn’t count toward a school’s score in the state accountability system.”*

The State Department of Education and the legislature should consider that comment when evaluating the state’s school accountability system. But schools and school districts need not wait for state action. They should meet with local employers to find out what skills they need in their employees and make sure those things are taught, whether they’re required by the state or not.

Another aspect of the accountability system that needs scrutiny is whether the graduation rate is a valid measure of a school or district’s quality. As it relates to employers, the “college and career readiness” measure for the 2024-25 school year often did not correlate with the graduation rate. For example, seven districts that had a graduation rate above 90% had college and career readiness rates below 40%, including one with a 1.2% college and career readiness rate and a 94.6% graduation rate. We acknowledge that the updates to the accountability model for school year 2025-26 include a new “Readiness Index.” At the time of this report, the accountability results for that school year have not been published, so it is unclear whether the mixed signals of the quality of instruction have been adequately addressed.

Expand and Strengthen the Career Coaching Model and Include the Success Sequence

Few programs drew as much unprompted praise in Empower’s focus groups as Mississippi’s statewide career coaching model, administered by AccelerateMS. Business leaders described it as “the best thing Mississippi has done.” Students echoed this sentiment from the other side, describing counselors and coaches who introduced them to careers they had never considered. This recurring, cross-cutting praise — from businesses, students, and trainees alike — makes career coaching one of the clearest current success stories to build upon.



The Legislature should expand and strengthen this model, with an explicit focus on exposing students to skilled trades, entrepreneurship, military service, apprenticeships, and local high-demand occupations — not simply traditional four-year college pathways. Focus group participants consistently said their schools promoted the same narrow set of careers (doctor, lawyer, firefighter) while ignoring occupations with far greater near-term job openings, like nursing and the skilled trades. Career coaches are uniquely positioned within the school system to correct that imbalance.

Lawmakers should also consider expanding the career coaching program to serve adults. One point of evidence of the need for this is that the average age of enrollees in community college CTE classes is 24. This, along with comments by higher education leaders in our focus groups, shows that people beyond high school and even beyond college are actively searching for career options. And, as mentioned earlier, there is a lack of awareness of opportunities, a problem career coaches for adults could address. By helping people find a path that matches their strengths and interests, it would not only help the career searchers, it would also help ensure that state training resources are efficiently directed toward people who are highly likely to pursue a meaningful career in the field for which they are trained.

Wherever career coaching is conducted, there should be some common elements that allow for tracking success, and there should be a common reporting system to inform policy makers, not only about the program itself but to learn in near real time any “on the ground” changes in employer needs, worker capabilities, and other employment trends.

Our second labor force participation rate study, “Moving the Needle,” also suggested incorporating elements of the “Success Sequence” into the career coaching model. This model, popularized by the Brookings Institution, shows that people who graduate from high school, get a full-time job, and marry before having children significantly reduce the likelihood they will wind up in poverty. Data overwhelmingly support this – some 97% of individuals who follow these three steps are not poor, and the likelihood of poverty decreases with each step completed.

Career coaches already guide high school students on post-graduation plans such as further education, the workforce, or military service, which provides a meaningful opportunity to encourage students to follow the success sequence. Empower recognizes these steps are simple, though not easy, particularly for young people navigating poverty, addiction, or family instability, but the data-backed pattern is one policymakers, educators, and mentors should not shy away from promoting. At least two other states – Indiana and Tennessee – have passed laws to require this to be taught in schools.



Continue Efforts to Better Prepare Students for Life After Graduation

Mississippi should continue efforts to better prepare students for life after graduation, building on this year's expansion of financial literacy requirements and emphasizing career and technical education as a genuinely viable alternative to a four-year degree — not a fallback option. Focus group participants, both students and employers, were consistent on this point: schools should focus more on skills development. One participant who bypassed general education courses in favor of direct skills training called it a faster, more efficient path to a career. Employers echoed the need for more life-skills training — interviewing, professional dress, punctuality, working with others, etc. — and vocational teachers with actual field experience.

MAKE OPPORTUNITY EASIER TO SEE

Launch a Modern Workforce Awareness Campaign

Empower recommends a modern workforce awareness campaign that uses workers themselves as messengers, built around short-form digital content showing actual Mississippi careers, real earnings, required credentials, and clear entry pathways. Focus group participants were unambiguous that lack of awareness is a central bottleneck to labor force participation. Most learned about training programs through social media or word of mouth, not schools, advertising, or traditional media. Participants specifically pointed to TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Google as the platforms most likely to reach young Mississippians, while noting that older workers still rely more on traditional news



sources. Such initiatives would ideally be undertaken by private entities, such as the Skills Foundation or other non-governmental partners, rather than being funded by taxpayers.

Improve Outreach and Awareness

Workforce partners should consider statewide or regional outreach and awareness programs, potentially sponsored by local employers or chambers of commerce, AccelerateMS, the Mississippi Business Alliance, or other allied partners. Schools could schedule periodic assemblies in middle and high schools where they invite a few local or regional employers to each meeting to tell the students about their business, the type of skills required to work there, at what age an employee can begin working, whether part-time work is available, career paths that could result from their experience, etc. One employer participant described his challenge when attending a job fair at a local high school, only to find that “the students didn’t have a clue about our existence.” Sustained, targeted outreach will be necessary to close this awareness gap.

Expand Programs That Promote Entrepreneurship

Mississippi should intentionally expand programs that promote entrepreneurship, building on ongoing initiatives such as entrepreneurship courses in select schools, Innovate Mississippi networking meetups for young entrepreneurs, university partnerships with local economic development agencies, and local founders visiting schools to share



their experience. Empower believes intentional expansion of these programs can give more Mississippians exposure to additional ways of earning a living and finding fulfillment. The state's career coaching program can play an important role here as well, introducing students to entrepreneurship as one of several legitimate post-graduation paths. One suggestion was to focus entrepreneurship training on CTE students.

REMOVE BARRIERS THAT PUT WORK OUT OF REACH

Build Childcare into Workforce Strategy

Employers and skills-training providers should build childcare into their workforce strategy, including pilots that co-locate childcare with workforce training, and policymakers should remove regulatory barriers to employer-supported childcare.



Focus group participants described a lack of childcare, and particularly after-hours childcare, as a persistent barrier to both training enrollment and job retention. Some employers who have already built on-site childcare reported improved retention and worker satisfaction, with one program pricing care below the local market rate by roughly \$25. In at least one region, a county was identified with zero childcare centers, while another employer's on-site program had a waitlist of several hundred families — underscoring both the need and the opportunity.

Connect Public Assistance to Workforce Opportunity

Lawmakers and state agency leaders should work to connect public assistance to workforce opportunity, so that individuals interacting with safety-net programs are simultaneously connected to employment, training, career coaching, and information about benefit cliffs. Rather than requiring Mississippians to navigate a patchwork of disconnected agencies, the state should move toward a single, coordinated point of entry where assistance and opportunity are presented together. Empower believes this integrated approach, which is already being considered, represents one of the clearest paths toward turning safety-net interactions into pathways to self-sufficiency.

Address Benefit Cliffs

To the extent allowed under federal law, lawmakers should address benefit cliffs, which are the sudden loss of more public assistance benefits than an increase in wages would cover. These “cliffs” keep individuals trapped in dependency rather than rewarding advancement. Business focus group participants independently arrived at similar math: for example, a couple of employers calculated that the wage increase needed to offset the loss of government benefits was significant. Empower continues to study this issue in depth and will offer more detailed solutions in a future report, but the scale of the disincentive already documented by employers and workers alike warrants near-term legislative attention.

Allow Portable Benefits for Gig Workers

Mississippi should allow portable benefits for gig workers and independent contractors. These are tax-deductible accounts for health insurance, retirement, and other expenses that travel with the worker rather than being tied to a single employer, with businesses permitted to make voluntary contributions to the contractors who serve them. Utah became the first state to adopt this model in 2023. Last year, Alabama and Tennessee did the same, and so far this year, five more states have new portable benefits laws.

Given that a growing share of the workforce, an estimated 72 million Americans, according to the 15th Annual State of Independence report, works independently,



and that independent professionals earning over \$100,000 annually have grown 86% since 2020, this is not a marginal population. Private companies including DoorDash and Lyft have already launched their own portable benefits pilots.

Further Expand High School Equivalency (HSE) Access

Lawmakers should continue to expand access, as they began to do last year, to high school equivalency testing. This is often referred to as “getting a GED,” although GED is only one type of HSE. Expanding this access will increase opportunities for people across the state. Empower recommended expanding HSE access in its second labor

force report, *“Moving the Needle,”* after finding that HSE test sites were located in only 42 of Mississippi’s 82 counties, leaving large swaths of the Delta and the southwest region of the state – two regions where the need is most acute – without convenient access. We also acknowledge that testing alone is not enough, as 96% of those who were tested initially tested below eighth grade level. The Office of Adult Education, which is housed at the Mississippi Community College Board, should be equipped with the funding and locations needed to teach, not only to test.

Because a lack of a high school credential is among the strongest predictors of



nonparticipation in the labor force, closing these teaching and testing gaps directly targets one of the state's highest-impact opportunities.

Consider More Remote Work Opportunities

Roughly one-third of paid full days nationally are now “work from home,” concentrated in finance, technology, arts and entertainment, and professional services. The City of Natchez has already proven this approach can work locally. The city's ShiftSouth program offered a \$6,000 relocation stipend, attracted about 70 new families, and generated an estimated \$16 million in free national publicity. A statewide or regional program targeting young Mississippians — and former Mississippians looking to return — could simultaneously improve labor force participation and help reverse the state's “brain drain.”

BUILD STRONGER HUMAN AND INSTITUTIONAL CONNECTIONS TO OPPORTUNITY

Expand Workforce Opportunities for Those in Recovery or Reentering Society

Mississippi, like the rest of the country, continues to grapple with addiction and its downstream effects on the labor force. Employers can adopt recovery friendly workplace models, like the one developed by Thermo-Kool in Laurel. As documented

earlier in this report, this approach has demonstrated measurable business value alongside its human impact. Empower Mississippi commends the Mississippi Business Alliance Foundation for making this a priority and creating a Recovery Friendly Workplace Coalition to increase awareness of these models for businesses to support employees in recovery, reduce workplace risk, and strengthen workforce stability.

Individuals who are in recovery or are reentering society post-incarceration represent an underutilized labor pool, but the societal benefits of connecting them to work are equally important. Having a job greatly reduces the likelihood of recidivism (meaning to commit another crime after being released from prison), demonstrating the public safety implications of workforce opportunity.

One potential model discussed in focus groups is a correctional career coaches pilot program, in which career coaches and/or business leaders would work with parole and probation officers, who already interact regularly with individuals reentering society, to prepare and connect individuals who are leaving prison to high-wage, in-demand careers, much as the state's career coaching program guides high school seniors today. Empower Mississippi recognizes the ongoing work of the Mississippi Department of Corrections in prioritizing job placement as a key issue impacting recidivism rates. Their work includes partnerships with major

employers, work release, and other activities designed to promote self-sufficiency and gainful employment.

Other policy considerations include state-level tax incentives similar to federal credits like the recently expired Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which provided employers a limited tax credit for hiring people who are entering or re-entering employment after being out of the workforce due to a variety of reasons, one of which is incarceration. Another program to evaluate for expansion is the existing program that provides liability coverage to employers hiring individuals with criminal records. Lawmakers should also expand the Fresh Start Act, which currently prevents only a few occupational licensing boards from denying a license to an otherwise-qualified person over an unrelated felony conviction. This should be expanded to virtually all occupations.

Expand Mentorship and Development Programs Like JROTC

The Legislature should expand mentorship and development programs such as JROTC, which has demonstrated impressive outcomes as described earlier in this report. Mississippi already hosts more than 75 JROTC units across the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. House Bill 2 of the 2026 regular session would have established a pilot program to invest in JROTC expansion, and U.S. Senator Roger Wicker's JROTC Act, signed into law by

President Donald Trump, expanded JROTC programs nationwide, including in rural areas.

As Senator Wicker said recently, *"These programs instill core values of citizenship, leadership, and service in our youth. They also provide structure, mentorship, and opportunity in our communities... I look forward to seeing these programs grow and strengthen the next generation of Americans."*

Empower applauds this kind of evidence-based mentorship and encourages lawmakers to continue expanding such programs.

Capture More Mississippi Voices

Focus group participants consistently said they appreciated the opportunity to share their perspective and wanted further input into the policies that affect them. The most effective policies are informed by the people they aim to serve. As a standard practice, lawmakers, agencies, advocates, and other stakeholders should host focus groups or employ similar methods to solicit real-time, on-the-ground feedback from the individuals affected by workforce and social service policy.



CONCLUSION

Considerable opportunities remain to improve Mississippi's labor force participation rate. The voices captured throughout this report reveal both the complexity of workforce participation and the optimism many Mississippians still hold about work, entrepreneurship, and the future. Participants expressed a desire for meaningful work, practical skills, mentorship, stronger networks, flexibility, and self-sufficiency. Employers, educators, workforce professionals, nonprofits, and policymakers likewise demonstrated a willingness to innovate and collaborate.

The themes throughout this report point toward several broad conclusions: exposure matters, mentorship matters, awareness matters, flexibility matters, purpose matters, and work matters.

Empower Mississippi commends the many state leaders, employers, educators, nonprofits, and workforce partners working to strengthen workforce participation and expand opportunity across Mississippi. We also extend a special "thank you" to the



partners and collaborators who made these focus groups and authentic conversations possible. After all, policies are strongest when informed by the people most directly affected by them.

The experiences shared throughout this report provide valuable insights into how Mississippi can continue to expand opportunity, strengthen communities, and help more Mississippians thrive through meaningful work.

Empower Mississippi will continue to study issues and ideas related to labor force participation and will issue future reports to assist agencies, lawmakers, and community leaders as they address this field so critical to our state's future... and we'll be bringing our tape measure along the way.



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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**.