

The Mississippi Monitor



New Freedom Trail marker unveiled in Hattiesburg

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New “Freshly Picked” podcast series highlights specialty crops in Mississippi

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) has launched a new podcast series called “Freshly Picked,” which spotlights specialty crops in Mississippi. Each episode focuses on a different agricultural commodity and features special guests with expertise on growing, maintaining and serving specialty crops.

Specialty crops are defined as fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture and floriculture items. MDAC kicked off the podcast series with an introductory episode featuring special guests Donna Yowell, executive director of the Mississippi Urban Forest Council and organizer of Flower Growers of Mississippi, and Paige Manning, bureau director of MDAC’s market development division. As an expert flower grower, Yowell provides listeners with insights into Mississippi’s horticulture industry.

“Our agency is excited to announce this new initiative to educate and entertain listeners on Mississippi’s #1 industry, particularly focusing on its unique and abundant

scope of specialty crops,” said Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson. “Specialty crops are an important part of our state’s agriculture, accounting for more than \$205 million of our state’s ag industry last year. So, be sure to tune in every week, as we explore the vast world of Mississippi specialty crops!”

In a relaxed, conversational format, each podcast episode will include specialty crop farmers, experts, entrepreneurs and/or chefs as they tell the stories behind their farms, businesses and the unique products they offer. The first Freshly Picked podcast aired on Thursday, September 5, at 9:30 a.m. Listeners can find new episodes every Thursday throughout the fall season at www.MSFreshlyPicked.com, Spotify, Apple Podcasts or other major platforms.

The Freshly Picked podcast series, which will include twenty-four episodes, is funded through the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA.



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New Freedom Trail marker unveiled in Hattiesburg



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Visit Mississippi recently unveiled the newest Mississippi Freedom Trail marker honoring Hattiesburg sisters and Civil Rights leaders Dorie and Dr. Joyce Ladner. Located at 507 Mobile Street in Hattiesburg, the marker sits within the city's Sixth Street Museum District, along with several sites dedicated to the history of the Hub City's Black community, including the African American Military History Museum, the Eureka School and the Smith Drug Company.

"As we commemorate the 60th Anniversary of Freedom Summer around the state, we are honored to have the opportunity to share the story of Dorie and Joyce Ladner with our visitors through this newest Freedom Trail Marker," said Visit Mississippi Director Rochelle Hicks. "Hattiesburg is an essential part of Mississippi's Civil Rights story, and we encourage travelers to discover more about those who fought for equality and justice in this community."

Fueled in part by the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, Joyce and Dorie Ladner became activists at a young age as members of the NAACP Youth Council and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, working closely with figures like Medgar Evers and Vernon Dahmer. Both were active throughout the Mississippi movement and were, at times, arrested for their protest activities. Dorie played a significant role in organizing the Freedom Summer Project, and both



participated in the Freedom Rides, the Selma to Montgomery Marches and the March on Washington.

"This marker celebrates the Ladner sisters' pivotal role in shaping our community's deep Civil Rights history," said Marlo Dorsey, CEO of VisitHATTIESBURG. "It reflects our commitment to preserving and sharing their legacy as hometown heroes with visitors and locals, as well as the more than a dozen other leaders honored on the HBURG Freedom Summer Trail. We invite all to learn and be inspired by their courage."

The Ladner sister marker is located at the former site of the Woods Guest House, which was not only the home of the local Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) office and the headquarters of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party but also served as a hotel for African Americans. The Woods Guest House was destroyed by fire in September 1998, but now a bench and the new Freedom Trail sign mark the spot where the building once stood.

Part of the United States Civil Rights Trail, the Mississippi Freedom Trail consists of over thirty sites that offer visitors the opportunities to learn more about the Civil

Rights movement, honor important figures of the era and sight see across the state.

For more information about the Mississippi Freedom Trail, see VisitMississippi.org.

Mississippi DMH launches mental health mobile app

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Mental Health (DMH) recently launched the Mental Health Mississippi mobile app, designed to be an innovative and user-friendly tool to provide Mississippians with immediate access to mental health resources and support. DMH says the mobile app is a continuing step in its commitment to enhancing access to mental health services and improving wellness throughout the state.

The Mental Health Mississippi app offers a wide range of features and resources to help users navigate mental health services, including:

- **Resource Directory:** Easily search for mental health service providers across Mississippi, including counseling, crisis intervention and substance abuse treatment.
- **Interactive Map:** Mississippians can use the map to find services in their county of residence.
- **Crisis Support:** Access immediate crisis intervention resources, including 24/7 hotlines and emergency services.
- **Educational Materials:** Learn about various mental health conditions, treatment options and wellness strategies



through comprehensive articles and guides.

- **Crisis Resources:** Resources are available in the app for crisis situations, including Mobile Crisis Response Teams, crisis lifelines and Crisis Stabilization Units.

Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health Wendy Bailey emphasized the importance of making mental health resources more accessible to all Mississippians.

"The Mental Health Mississippi mobile app represents a significant advancement in our efforts to support mental health and wellness in our state," said Bailey. "By providing easy access to essential resources and support, we hope to empower individuals to take control of their mental health and seek the help they need."

DMH says the launch of the Mental Health Mississippi app comes at a critical time, as the need for mental health support continues to grow. The app is designed to be a comprehensive, user-friendly resource for individuals, families and communities seeking mental health information and services.

The app is available at no cost on the Apple App Store for iPhone and the Google Play Store for Android. The Mental Health Mississippi web site can also be reached at www.MentalHealthMS.com.

Mississippi's Move Over Law in effect to protect first responders

By Toni Miles

There's a law that's "been on the books" for nearly two decades that some Mississippi drivers aren't yet aware of but could make a court appearance for and get ticketed over – the Move Over Law.

Mississippi's Move Over law went into effect in 2007. It requires anyone driving in Mississippi to move at least one lane away when approaching emergency vehicles that are parked on the roadside with lights flashing. This could include vehicles manned by police officers, highway patrolmen, Mississippi Department of Transportation workers or others who work as first responders. The law requires a lane change, or, if there are vehicles in the next lane over and it is unsafe to change lanes, motorists are required to slow down.

Under the Move Over Law, motorists who are passing an emergency vehicle on the side of the road must slow down and yield the right of way by changing lanes, keeping at least one lane between them and the emergency vehicle and first responders, if possible.

The law is intended to protect ambulance crews, state troopers and other law enforcement, medical personnel and first responders. It also covers tow trucks and highway maintenance vehicles. This often-ignored law also requires motorists to get out of the way of approaching emergency vehicles, as well, usually by pulling over to the right-hand edge of a road or street.

Drivers who don't make room and fail to change lanes when possible under the Move Over Law risk getting ticketed, as some Mississippians have already found out.

Failure to obey the Move Over Law is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine. If the violation results in property damage to an emergency vehicle, highway maintenance or recovery vehicle or bodily injury, the fine can be up to \$1,000.



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Rohnke named director of Museum of Natural Science

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks (MDWFP) recently announced that Deputy Administrator Angel Rohnke of Clinton will serve as the next director of the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science. Rohnke brings expertise in conservation, education, tourism and leadership to the role, having contributed to the growth of the museum and LeFleur's Bluff State Park for nineteen years, as museum educator, education coordinator, assistant director, and deputy administrator. Rohnke holds a Masters degree in environmental interpretation, a B.S. in environmental forest biology, and an A.A.S. in natural resources conservation.

At MDWFP, Rohnke has overseen the creation of the multi-million-dollar LeFleur's Bluff Playground, Spotter's Adventure Trail, The Den, and a new entrance, which have collectively attracted over 350,000 visitors since December 2021.

"We are proud of Angel's work and leadership at MDWFP," said MDWFP Executive Director Lynn Posey. "With her guidance, the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science is set for a promising future, continuing its legacy of excellence in education, conservation, and community engagement."


"I am deeply honored to follow in the footsteps of the directors who have shaped this incredible institution," said Rohnke. "Our talented staff is the heart of this museum; and, together, we will continue to foster a love of the outdoors in our community. I look forward to leading us through a significant renovation project later this summer and a comprehensive branding update that reflects our mission and values."



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Angel Rohnke

Rohnke's contributions to conservation, education and tourism have been recognized by her peers with numerous awards, including the Mississippi Science Teachers Association Outstanding Informal Educator of the Year, the Mississippi Wildlife Federation Conservation Educator of the Year, Finger Lakes Community College Outstanding Conservation Alumni Achievement Award, the Rudolph J.H. Schafer Outstanding Coordinator Award from the Council for Environmental Education, and the Hometown Hero award from Visit Jackson.



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
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MDE releases accountability grades for 2023-24

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) recently released accountability grades for the 2023-24 school year, which show 85.7% of schools and 93.9% of districts earned a grade of C or higher.

The largest-ever share of Mississippi districts are now rated A, B or C. In 2016, the Mississippi State Board of Education set a goal that all schools and districts be rated C or higher. At that time, the percentage of schools and districts meeting this goal were both 62%.

Statewide student assessment data make up a large part of accountability grades. In 2023-24, the overall percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced reached an all-time high in mathematics, English Language Arts (ELA) and science.

"I am incredibly proud of our students, teachers and school leaders for their academic achievements in the 2023-24 school year," said Dr. Lance Evans, state superintendent of education. "This year's school and district grades are a testament to the quality and success of Mississippi public schools. I am confident we will continue to build upon this success to make sure every Mississippi public school graduate is prepared for a successful future."

Mississippi is recognized as a national leader in education because, over the past decade, students have made faster progress than nearly every other state. Several factors contributed to the steady rise in student achievement, including the implementation of higher academic standards and statewide support to teachers to help students reach higher standards. Other factors include the effective implementation of laws and policies that developed or strengthened early childhood education, literacy instruction, school and district accountability, and advanced learning opportunities for high school students.

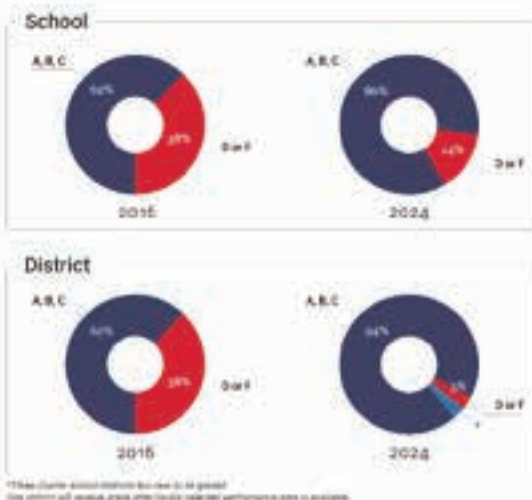
Since 2013, Mississippi's national Quality Counts ranking for K-12 achievement improved from 50th to 35th, and the state's overall education grade improved from F to C- (the nation's grade is C). In 2024, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT® Data Book ranked Mississippi 30th in the nation for education, the state's highest-ever ranking.

Mississippi's accountability grades help teachers, school leaders, parents and communities know how well their local schools and districts are serving their students. The components of the state's accountability system are based on state and federal law and State Board policy. They include:

- Student proficiency and growth rates in ELA and Mathematics in grades 3-8,
- Growth of the lowest performing 25% of students in ELA and Mathematics,
- Science proficiency in grades 5 and 8,
- English Learner progress toward becoming proficient in the English language,

MISSISSIPPI School & District Grade Improvements 2016-2024

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Every School and District is Rated "C" or Higher



- Performance on the ACT and high school Algebra I, English II, Biology and U.S. History assessments,
- Student participation and performance in advanced coursework, such as Advanced Placement, career and technical education programs and dual credit/dual enrollment courses, and
- Four-year graduation rate.

School and district achievements in 2023-24 extend to all districts under state leadership because of poor academic performance or a state of emergency. All four state-led districts have steadily improved under state leadership:

• **Holmes County Consolidated School District:** Improved to a B grade this year, after maintaining a C for two consecutive years. The district was rated F when it was taken over in 2021.

• **Noxubee County School District:** Maintained its C grade from 2023, improving upon its D rating in 2022. The district earned an F every year from 2016 to 2021.

• **Achievement School District (ASD):** The Humphreys County portion of the ASD improved its grade to a C, improving upon its D grade in 2023 and F in 2022. The Yazoo City portion of the ASD improved to a C from an F in 2023.

"The progress of our state-led districts proves what is possible when educators raise expectations, focus intensely on high-quality instruction and provide strong leadership,

"Evans said. "Students are achieving at higher levels because they are being challenged and supported to succeed."

School- and district-level accountability results are available at MDEK12.org/OPR/Reporting/Accountability.

Mississippi's Top 10 Districts for 2023-24		
#	SCHOOL	SCORE
1	Ocean Springs	798
2	Petal	791
3	Long Beach	782
4	Clinton	780
5	Bay St. Louis/Waveland	772
6	Pass Christian	766
7	Enterprise	764
8	Madison County	760
9	Stone County	751
10 (tie)	Newton County	750
10 (tie)	Union	750

New Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council Class holds first meeting

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The 2024-25 class of the Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council (MAYC) recently held its inaugural meeting in Jackson. Fourteen students from across Mississippi came together to hear from Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson, as well as other officials with department, the Mississippi Board of Animal Health and the National Agricultural Law Center.

"It was a pleasure to meet with this year's Ag Youth Council," said Gipson. "These bright students are Mississippi's future, and our agency is dedicated to providing these potential leaders with an understanding of the vast opportunities and overall importance of our state's largest industry, agriculture. With an ever-increasing demand for a trained and experienced workforce, the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce will continue to play an active role in developing the next generation of leaders in agriculture."

During their meeting, MAYC students learned about various aspects of Mississippi's agriculture industry, including regulatory services, marketing and public relations, timber commerce, and veterinary medicine. Council members also engaged in discussions with National Agricultural Law Center Director Harrison Pittman regarding important policy issues impacting agriculture at the state and national levels.

The MAYC is a workforce development program that seeks to expose agriculture-minded high school seniors to a variety of unique, behind-the-scenes experiences within the agriculture industry. Over the course of one year, council members visit agricultural companies and organizations, learn about the legislative process and how it affects the agriculture industry, hold discussions with industry professionals and hone career-development skills.

For more information about the program, visit www.mdac.ms.gov/mayc.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Pictured (l to r) are members of the 2024-25 Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council: Layton Varner and Azion Leflore of Rankin County, Kayleigh Rose Myers of Itawamba County, Hannah Hill of Tippah County, Grey Cruse of Lee County, Alana Whitehead of Winston County, Bryce Bratcher of Oktibbeha County, Sloan Walker of Leflore County, John Clayton Kitchens of Lauderdale County, Gracyn Foster of Jones County, Emma Creel of Kemper County, Emma Grace Putnam of Sunflower County, Claire Rizzo of Bolivar County and Micah Osborn of Leflore County.



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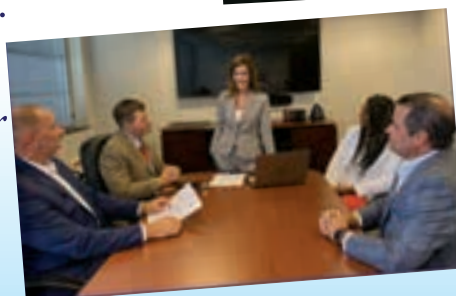
MAYC students heard from Mississippi Agriculture and Commerce Commissioner Andy Gipson, as well as officials with the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, Mississippi Board of Animal Health and National Agricultural Law Center.

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Friends of MSH choose officers and board

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Friends of Mississippi State Hospital recently held its annual meeting to select officers and the Board of Directors for the upcoming year.

Friends of MSH Officers for 2024-2025 are Amy Walker, president; Kim Edwards, vice-president; Sheila Shows, secretary; and Dee Payne, treasurer.

The Board of Directors for 2024-2027 are Ray Wallace, past president; Tim Durr, Lynn Dilmore, Carolyn Trigg, Joel Ross, Ruth Walker and Kim Rayburn. Bo Blanks will serve as administrative appointee, with Kathy Denton serving as liaison officer.

Board of Directors Emeriti for 2024-2025 are Bill Bobbs, Jessie Buckley, Diane Croxton, Tony Gomillion, Daniel Elliot, Marilyn Garth, Betty Harpe, Jeannie Pittman, Gale Martin and Bobby Stephens.

Friends of Mississippi State Hospital is a non-profit, volunteer organization dedicated to educating the public about mental illness and improving the lives of those individuals living with mental illnesses. Mississippi State Hospital, a program of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health, was founded in 1855 and helps the individuals it serves achieve mental wellness by encouraging hope, promoting safety, and supporting recovery. The hospital is accredited by the Joint Commission.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Pictured (l to r) are Friends of MSH Board, front row: Administrative Appointee Bo Blanks, Marilyn Garth, Jessie Buckley, Jeannie Pittman, Betty Harpe and Joel Ross; middle row: Tim Durr, Vice President Kim Edwards, Diane Croxton, President Amy Walker, Carolyn Trigg, Lynn Dilmore, Gale Martin and Secretary Sheila Shows; and third row: Liaison Officer Kathy Denton, Ray Wallace, Treasurer Dee Payne, Bobby Stephens, Tony Gomillion, Bill Bobbs and James G. "Bo" Chastain. Not pictured are Ruth Walker and Daniel Elliott.

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1 "Medicare & You," Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2024. 2 "Aging changes in teeth and gums", medlineplus.gov, 4/17/2022. 3 American Dental Association, Health Policy Institute, 2020 Survey of Dental Fees, Copyright 2020, American Dental Association.

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New members, officers elected for Mississippi Main Street

All photos Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

A new executive committee, two at-large board members and a directors' representative have been elected to the Mississippi Main Street Association (MMSA) Board of Directors to lead the efforts of the statewide community and economic development organization for 2024-25.

Chris Hinton of Ridgeland, who currently serves as community development manager for Entergy Mississippi, has been elected to serve as MMSA board president.

"As president of the Mississippi Main Street Association, I believe in the power of community," Hinton said. "Together, we revitalize our downtowns, preserve our rich history and create vibrant spaces that inspire community pride and progress for generations to come."

Hinton serves as president of MMSA and continues to serve on boards for the Mississippi District Export Council and Jobs for MS Graduates. As community development manager for Entergy Mississippi, Hinton provides economic, community and workforce development support to forty-five counties. Hinton is a member of the Southern Economic Development Council, South Central MS Works and the Mississippi Economic Development Council. He holds alumnus status with Leadership Mississippi, Leadership Natchez, Delta Leadership Institute and the Harvard Kennedy School Authentic Leaders Program.

Other MMSA executive officers include Vice-President Kelle Barfield, owner of Lorelei Books and Delta Warren Properties in Vicksburg; Treasurer Chance McDavid, project director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development in Starkville; and Past President



Chris Hinton



Suzy Bowman

Marlo Dorsey, executive director of Visit Hattiesburg.

Newly elected at-large board members are Suzy Bowman of New Albany, who serves as director of Mississippi Programming for Junior Achievement, and Jim Rasberry of Laurel, who is with Rasberry Financial Services and managing partner of Canery Row.

Billye Jean Stroud, director of New Albany Main Street, has also been elected as a new Directors' Representative to serve District 3 by the directors of the forty-eight designated Main Street programs in Mississippi. She joins Cynthia Sutton, director of

Ocean Springs Chamber - Main Street - Tourism Bureau, who represents District 1, and Lisa Klutts, director of West Point Clay County Community Growth Alliance, who represents District 2.

Board members continuing to serve on the state board include Michelle Jones, owner of The Cottage Industry in Starkville;

Tomeka Durr-Wiley, commercial development project manager at Mississippi Power in Gulfport; Mandy Hegwood, vice president of Neel-Schaffer, Inc. in Laurel; Brent Fairley, senior vice president/market president at Hancock Whitney Bank in Gulfport; Brad Reeves, attorney at Reeves, Gentry & Vitart, PLLC in Jackson; Jean Kelly,

director of communications and public relations at Staplcoth in Greenwood; Chip Johnson, mayor of the city of Hernando; Steve Kelly, board member emeritus; Ken P'Pool, board member emeritus; Meredith Massey, chief of preservation planning at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Leah Kemp, director of the Fred Carl Jr. Small Town Center; and Tim Climer, manager at the Mississippi Development Authority.



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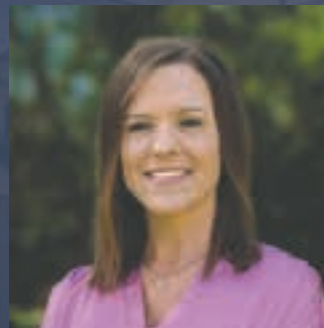
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Courthouses will soon have signs regarding rights to an interpreter



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

County Deputy Chancery Clerk Paige Dean (left) is pictured with Language Access Director Deenie Miller (right) in the Adams County Chancery Clerk's Office in Natchez.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Signs have been going up in courthouses around the state notifying limited English proficient people that they are entitled to have a free interpreter in court proceedings.

"Usted tiene derecho a un intérprete sin costo alguno. Acérquese a la oficina del Secretario para solicitar un intérprete. El Secretario llamará a un intérprete para que le ayude," one of the signs reads in Spanish.

In English, it says, "You are entitled to an interpreter at no cost to you. Please go to the Clerk's office to request an interpreter. The Clerk will call an interpreter to assist you."

The signs are written in Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, French, Arabic, Tagalog, German, Korean and Gujarati, the languages most frequently spoken besides English in Mississippi.

The first counties to receive the signs were Warren, Claiborne, Jefferson, Adams, Lee, Itawamba, Prentiss, Tishomingo, Alcorn and Tippah. All counties will receive the signs. Signs are being posted in Circuit Courts, Chancery Courts, County Courts (if applicable), Youth Courts, Justice Courts and Municipal Courts.

Deenie Miller, Director of Language Access for the Administrative Office of Courts (AOC), has personally visited with court personnel to deliver the signs and explain statutory changes regarding the rights of people with limited English proficiency.

"It has been a great experience visiting each courthouse," Miller said. "The judges, clerks and court staff that I have had the opportunity to meet with have been very appreciative of the signs and the in-person visits. I have been able to answer questions and offer guidance regarding some of the logistical issues that clerks face with finding and scheduling interpreters. I look forward to continuing my travels throughout Mississippi to visit each courthouse in the state."

State laws which went into effect a little more than a year ago, on July 1, 2023, require qualified language interpreters for people with limited English proficiency (LEP) in court proceedings, in order to provide access to assistance at no charge for those who are limited in their understanding of English or who speak English as a second language. Court appointment of a qualified interpreter is required in criminal and civil cases, with the cost borne by the county or municipality. Requirements for access to a qualified interpreter include any instance arising out of or pertaining to the individual's involvement in litigation, extending to litigants and witnesses in all phases of litigation, including hearings and depositions.

"The purpose of the new laws is to put LEP individuals on equal footing as those that are native English speakers," Miller explained. "This also pertains to assistance in the clerks' offices."

AOC and the Access to Justice Commission also have made progress in translating an array of civil forms and informational flyers that may assist those of limited financial means who seek to represent themselves without assistance of a lawyer. Forms have been translated in Spanish and Vietnamese, the two most frequently spoken languages behind English in Mississippi.

"Translating forms for LEP individuals is a goal the Commission has had for a long time, and now seeing it come to fruition is a huge step toward expanding access to justice for the state," said Executive Director of the Access to Justice Commission Nicole McLaughlin. "We are so proud of our partnership with the Administrative Office of Courts and the Language Access Director, Deenie Miller. We are pleased to assist in providing these resources to our LEP Mississippians."

Miller began collaboration with the Access to Justice Commission and the Mississippi Judicial College in 2022, starting with work to provide Spanish translations of fifty civil forms used in Justice Courts. The work expanded to Spanish and Vietnamese translations of some of the sample forms prepared by the Mississippi Judicial College for use in Justice Courts, Municipal Courts, Chancery Courts and Circuit Courts, as well as educational and instructional information regarding court procedures.

Topics of translated forms and material include child custody, divorce, domestic abuse, guardianships and conservatorships, paternity, termination of parental rights, wills, bankruptcy and eviction, among others. Forms and educational materials explaining some of the procedures are posted on the website of the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, www.MSATJC.org. The Mississippi Center for Legal Services also will use translated material regarding its services, as well as information about bankruptcy, services for victims of crimes, and Social Security.

The Access to Justice Commission focuses only on civil legal access for low-income people. However, an appropriation from the Legislature allowed the Administrative Office of Courts to expand the translation project to include sample criminal forms for Justice Courts and Municipal Courts, as well as documents for public defenders, including an affidavit of indigence, a waiver of arraignment form and information explaining certain criminal court proceedings. Petitions to enter a guilty plea have been translated into Spanish and Vietnamese, as well as Chinese and Arabic.

Alyce G. Clarke Center for Medically Fragile Children construction underway

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Children with complex medical conditions will soon have a place where they can live and their families can get the training needed to care for them at home.

Construction of the Alyce G. Clarke Center for Medically Fragile Children is now underway in a wooded lot off Eastwood Drive in Jackson. The first and only such facility in Mississippi, the home will serve patients younger than nineteen who need skilled care because of the complexity of their medical conditions.

The need for a facility for medically fragile children in the state was recognized in the late 2010s, when Children's of Mississippi had several patients with long-term complex care needs.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor
Dr. Alan Jones, associate vice chancellor for health affairs at UMMC

"For long-term residents, this will feel like a home," said Dr. Alan Jones, associate vice chancellor for health affairs at the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC). "They won't feel like they are in a hospital, even though they will be provided with the same level of care."

Children's of Mississippi is the pediatric arm of UMMC that includes the state's only children's hospital. Clarke, a former state representative and the first African American woman to serve in the Mississippi Legislature, was a key advocate for the project.

The twenty-bed facility will have two wings, with a common area that will serve as a living room space.

Patients at the center will range from newborns who may not have been able to wean off ventilators and need an additional sixty to ninety days to adolescents nineteen or younger recovering from accidents or living with conditions that require skilled nursing care.

Conditions of patients at the center will vary. Some who will live at the center have been injured in accidents, while others have congenital or genetic conditions. Other patients may be dependent on technology, such as ventilators or feeding tubes, to survive and may rely on wheelchairs.

The center will also be a place where parents can learn how to care for their medically fragile children before taking them home, Jones said.

"Babies leaving neonatal intensive care may require a feeding tube or a ventilator, and their parents will require training," he said. "Those patients can go to the center, while their parents learn how to take care of them."

The center can also be a bridge from pediatric inpatient care to home for patients and their parents.

"Parents need to be comfortable with their children's medical equipment, and troubleshooting will need to be done, so they know how to handle any issues at home," Jones said. "That can take time. Alarms on equipment may not go off every day or even every week. We want par-



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Artist's rendering of the new Alyce G. Clarke Center for Medically Fragile Children being constructed in Jackson

ents to be comfortable in any scenario that might arise."

In 2019, the Mississippi Legislature created the Alyce G. Clarke Center for Medically Fragile Children and issued \$12.5 million in bonds to the center the same year. An additional \$2 million in bonds were issued in 2020.

Ground was broken on the project in December 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed the project.

"The pandemic did affect our progress," Jones said. "There were supply chain issues and limited numbers of some resources, and then costs rose. We had to redo our original plans to make sure we had the necessary funds. After the pandemic, we got back on track."

The center's construction, which started this spring, is expected to be completed by fall 2025.

Dr. Christian Paine, chief of the Division of Pediatric Palliative Medicine, said the center has been a vision for patients and their care teams over the years.

"The completion of a new home for children with medical complexity in Mississippi will show that, together, children's dreams and caregivers' hearts have the power to change their world," Paine said. "For years, Children's of Mississippi and its staff have provided for the loving care of children with lifelong ventilator dependence when no other local facility was available. This meant allowing children to remain long-term near their families and communities here in our state despite Children's of Mississippi's acute care model and inadequate resource support from payors."

Now, with the new Center, children who are incapable, for one reason or another, of living at home on advanced respiratory support, will finally have a home of their own, he said.

"This new facility is designed to look and feel like each room is an individual home. In addition, children whose families are training to learn the skills necessary to eventually move home with medical technology will have a more home-like environment in which to learn."

Millions of dollars in lost life insurance policies found

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

In 2023, more than 1,600 Mississippians used the Life Insurance Policy Locator Tool to find more than \$46 million in lost policy benefits. The Locator is a free tool, maintained by the National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC). It has helped more than 4,400 Mississippi consumers claim more than \$99 million in benefits since its inception in November 2016.

"The policy locator requests are free and confidential," said Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney. "Any matches found are reported to insurance companies, and the companies then contact beneficiaries. The locator helps us to

meet our goal of protecting consumers.

Life insurance policies are designed to pay money to the "named beneficiaries" when the insured individual dies. The beneficiaries can be one or more individuals - or even an organization. In most cases, policies are purchased by the person whose life is insured, but life insurance policies can be taken out by spouses or anyone who can prove they have an insurable interest in the person. There are many different types of life insurance policies. Those who are interested in purchasing life insurance are encouraged to talk to an insurance agent about their options.

To use the Life Insurance Policy Locator, visit <https://eapps.naic.org/life-policy-locator/#/welcome>.



Abraham appointed as State Fire Coordinator

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Insurance Department (MID) recently announced the appointment of Reed Abraham as the State Fire Coordinator. Abraham will oversee the readiness and capability of over eight hundred fire departments across Mississippi, ensuring they are well-equipped to safeguard lives and property. He will oversee the fire safety education program and will administer the Rural Fire Truck Acquisition Assistance Program (RFTAAP), among other duties.

"I am delighted to appoint Reed to this crucial position within the State Fire Marshal's Office," said Commissioner of Insurance and State Fire Marshal Mike Chaney. "Reed's dedication to the safety and well-being of Mississippi's communities, combined with his extensive experience, makes him an excellent choice for this leadership role."



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Reed Abraham

Abraham joined the Mississippi State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) in July 2023 as the State Deputy Fire Coordinator. He succeeds Brad Smith, who retired in June after more than forty years of service. Abraham brings over twenty years of experience to the job. He began his career with the Bolivar County Volunteer Fire Department in 2000 and served until his retirement in 2023, as the County Deputy Fire Chief. He is a certified volunteer firefighter and fire instructor and is actively involved with the Mississippi Firefighters and Fire Chiefs Associations.

Before his tenure with the Fire Marshal's Office, Abraham spent more than fifteen years in higher education administration, fundraising, and marketing at both two- and four-year colleges in Mississippi. He holds both bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration from Delta State University.

TWISTED pretzel

PRETZELS

ORIGINAL FLAVORED PRETZELS

(Twisted Cinnamon, Almond Crunch, Sour Cream, and Onion)

BAKED CHEESE PRETZELS

(Three Cheese, Twisted Pepperoni, Jalapeno Cheese)

TWISTED YUM YUM

ADD ON PRETZEL DIP

- Cheddar Cheese
- Caramel
- Cream Cheese
- Honey Mustard
- Jalapeno Cheese
- Pizza Sauce
- Sweet Glaze
- Strawberry Cream Cheese

BITES

TWISTED BITES GOURMET BITES

(Twisted Cinnamon, almond crunch, sour cream, and onion)

TWISTED PEPPERONI BITES

TWISTED YUM YUM BITES

TWISTED DOG BITES

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FRESH LEMONADE
FROZEN DRINKS

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UMMC School of Nursing's traditional BSN track opens in Oxford

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

A four-year Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC) School of Nursing can now be earned in Oxford, as well as Jackson.

The first class of traditional BSN students recently started studies at the South Oxford Center near the University of Mississippi campus.

"We're excited that classes have begun for our first cohort in our traditional BSN track in Oxford," said Dr. Tina Martin, dean of the UMMC School of Nursing. "This is more than offering a program in a new location. It's allowing more students to enter the rewarding career of nursing at a time when Mississippi and the rest of the country has a shortage of nurses."

The UMMC School of Nursing has a traditional BSN enrollment of an estimated two hundred students at the Medical Center in Jackson. In Oxford, forty-eight students are in the first traditional BSN cohort, with plans to expand enrollment to seventy next year.

Enrollment growth will place more nurses by patients' bedsides, said Dr. Leigh Holley, associate professor of nursing and assistant dean for the UMMC School of Nursing's Oxford instructional site.

"We are hoping with the re-instatement of the traditional BSN program in Oxford, we can contribute more nurses to the workforce, thereby lessening the nursing shortage in Mississippi and nationally," she said. "In doing so, we believe this can contribute to positive patient outcomes and a healthy Mississippi."

The traditional BSN program follows the "2+2" model of students taking foundational academic courses during their freshman and sophomore years before moving into nursing courses at the start of their junior year.

The UMMC School of Nursing began in 1948 as the state's first baccalaureate nursing program in the state in Oxford. The nursing program then moved to the Medical Center campus in 1956, following the School of Medicine.

The classes now underway are the first traditional BSN classes in Oxford since 2014. The traditional BSN students join accelerated BSN students in Oxford. The accelerated BSN program allows graduates with four-year degrees in other disciplines to earn a BSN and take the registered nurse licensure exam in about a year.

The traditional BSN program being in Oxford as well as Jackson gives students more choices, Holley said.

"Some nursing students may not be able to move to the metro Jackson area for a traditional BSN program, but they still want the value and expertise of a UMMC nursing degree," she said. "Others may be involved in athletics and campus life at the University of Mississippi and want to complete their nursing degrees in Oxford. The traditional BSN program being available in Oxford as well as Jackson gives nursing students options."

For BSN student Laila Totten of Olive Branch, the best asset of the traditional BSN program in Oxford is the location.

"I'm familiar with Oxford, because I've been an Ole Miss student the past two years," she said, "and my friends are here."

Avery Wolf of Southaven found the new Oxford-based BSN attractive. "This way, it's easier to go home, and I could keep my apartment."

Elijah Barberi of Ocean Springs said a four-year BSN program made better financial sense than earning a four-year degree and then enrolling in an accelerated BSN program.

"I went to Pearl River Community College and then got a scholarship," he said. "The scholarship covers two years, but not three. Plus, the pace of a traditional BSN is preferable to me – it will give me more time to learn."

While UMMC nursing students are taking classes on the first floor of the South Oxford Center, construction is underway on the fourth floor to create more space for classrooms, simulation areas, faculty offices and a student lounge.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The South Oxford Center, formerly Baptist Memorial Hospital, was purchased by the University of Mississippi in 2017.

"It is a beautiful, state-of-the-art learning space that includes a large, high-tech classroom equipped for active learning, three additional simulation observation rooms, student lounge and private study rooms, and administrative offices," Holley said. "The space serves as a testament to a wonderful collaboration between the University of Mississippi and UMMC to educate students to transform health care in Mississippi and beyond."

The center, the former Baptist Memorial Hospital, also includes a simulation lab inside what once was an intensive care unit. There, nursing students learn by caring for manikins, including some high-tech models that have vital signs.

Because the simulation area still has the design of an ICU, nursing students learn in a space similar to where they may be working, Holley said.

"Having taught all over the U.S., I know many schools spend millions of dollars in attempts to replicate the authenticity of an acute health care environment," she said. "Students participate in highly realistic simulated nursing practice in the former intensive care unit of the hospital, our simulation lab. We are incredibly fortunate to achieve this level of reality organically and provide a learning setting for our students that is precisely what they will experience in their professional careers. It is a safe learning environment for students which equips

them for real-world nursing practice.

Mississippi, like the rest of the country, has a severe nursing shortage, Holley said.

"Current estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau are roughly 29,370 Mississippi nurses to care for 2,940,057 Mississippi citizens, translating to about one nurse for every ten patients. On the surface, this may seem a reasonable ratio. But imagine your loved one is one of three patients simultaneously experiencing a cardiac arrest, and there is only a single nurse to care for those three patients plus the other seven non-emergent patients," she said. "When framed through this lens, the nursing shortage becomes personal and devastating very quickly."

About a third of U.S. nurses plan to retire in the next ten to fifteen years, Holley said. "When these nurses leave the profession, they take with them decades of expertise and seasoned nursing practice. Given the nursing shortage also applies to qualified nurse educators, we are not able to admit and graduate enough nurses to keep up with the demand, despite millions of qualified applicants to nursing programs."



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Nursing student Earlie Garth practices taking vital signs in the UMMC School of Nursing's simulation center at the South Oxford Center. Looking on is classmate Allie White.

Mississippi State Fire Academy planning major upgrades



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Special to SW Rankin News

Mississippi State Fire Academy (MSFA) is set to undergo substantial improvements, supported by approximately \$2.2 million in legislative funding. MSFA representatives say the upgrades will greatly enhance their facilities and services, ensuring they continue to provide top-tier training and support to fire service professionals.

"The Mississippi State Fire Academy (MSFA) is the best in the nation and, to continue churning out the best firefighters, we must make improvements to the academy," said Insurance Commissioner and State Fire Marshal Mike Chaney. "Thanks to our friends in the legislature, we have the funding to move forward with these projects. The improvements will benefit the students at the MSFA and will benefit their communities when they return from training."

Improvements include enhanced burn training facilities, auditorium upgrades and a new advanced management platform.

Officials say plans are underway to upgrade and replace the primary burn facility training props, and potential sources are being evaluated to boost realism, safety and reliability while reducing maintenance costs and minimizing downtime.

Auditorium upgrades include a new roof and various other enhancements to the main facility for major events at MSFA, to provide a more comfortable and functional space for the wide range of activities and

events held on campus.

The Academy's new management platform is nearing completion and is just a couple of months away from going live. The system will streamline internal processes, improve training registration, simplify individual and departmental access to transcripts and certificates, and offer more effective invoicing solutions to align with City and County budgeting.

"We're committed to building on this momentum to better serve our fire service community," said MSFA Executive Director Kelly Elliott. "These enhancements are clear examples of our dedication to advancing fire service training. We are grateful for the legislative support that made these improvements possible, particularly the leadership of the House Appropriations Committee, chaired by John Read, and the Senate Appropriations Committee, chaired by Briggs Hopson, in securing the essential funding for these critical projects."

The State Fire Academy is located in Rankin County on eighty-five acres. Construction began in 1974 with ongoing additions. Some of the campus facilities include areas for fire research, high-rise ladder and rope training, hazardous material simulations, dive rescue training, confined space training, an arson lab, aircraft firefighting and rescue training, fire apparatus and vehicle training, classrooms, dormitory space, administrative areas, an auditorium and a firefighter memorial.

For more information, call 601-932-2444.



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Real Estate Tips:

Fall Home Maintenance Tips:

- Have your heating unit serviced and ready to use when cold weather gets here.
- Check your chimney for blockages and that damper is functioning properly. If you haven't had your chimney serviced and cleaned in more than a year. Now is the time.
- Continue to monitor that water is draining away from the home and not pooling around or going under your foundation.
- Ceiling fans should be changed to clockwise for optimal circulation.

Tips to ready your home for sale:

• **The importance of hiring an experienced real estate professional:** There are so many facets that go into selling a home. Hiring a seasoned agent to help you navigate this process is a worthwhile consideration. Duties include, walking sellers through the whole process from the initial consultation, pricing, listing, showings, contract negotiations, all the way to closing. I will help you through it all. Also, statistics show that hiring a REALTOR to sell your home increases your net by up to thirty three percent.

• **Curb appeal is so important.** It is your first opportunity to impress buyers.

• **Repaint/repair any areas that have paint peeling or is damaged.**

• **Placing fresh mulch/pine straw in flower beds always dresses up the property.**



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