

## An Update from the Mississippi Center for Justice

June 18, 2010



### Responding to the Oil Crisis

President Barack Obama's visit to the Mississippi coast this week brought welcome attention to the impact of the Gulf oil disaster on hardworking Mississippians. We are hopeful that his leadership will provide a new direction for the recovery efforts. Our focus continues to be on the needs of the low-income workers in industries that are being devastated by this disaster.

With the President's announcement of a new claims fund and administrative process for disbursing those funds, we are moving with heightened urgency to find funding and fill the role of a project director to oversee our efforts to ensure that low-wage workers affected by this disaster have full access to the claims process.

That the existing claims process is beyond repair is confirmed by this report from a Mississippi Center for Justice lawyer who visited a BP claims center in Hancock County, Mississippi, earlier this week. When he arrived, the receptionist told him the first step in making a claim is to call 800-440-0858. She informed him that the call center will tell people to visit the physical office 7-10 days later, but that people could really come into the office sooner, only 3-4 days after the initial call. Several lists outlining the documents that people making claims would need to bring in were taped to the desk, and our attorney asked for copies. The receptionist informed him that although everyone asks, she cannot distribute copies. She indicated that this is so the requirements can be changed at a moment's notice. She did offer a pen and paper, but our attorney took photos instead.

When leaving the claims office, our attorney noticed a nearby pawn shop with a bright digital sign inviting people to come cash their "oil checks" there. Predatory lenders see this as an opportunity to capitalize in yet one more way. We are committed to continuing our battle to curb those practices and hope this example will serve as further evidence that policy changes are needed.

Last week, legal aid advocates from the four Gulf states held our second convening, this time in New Orleans at the Loyola University College of Law. Working groups created at the Biloxi meeting advanced our agendas in the areas of training, pro bono outreach, and media and communications. We will meet again next week. On June 25, the Center will co-sponsor a community clinic to offer assistance with insurance and other claims related to this disaster focused primarily on the needs of the Vietnamese-American fishing community. We are partnering with Asian Americans for Change, Mercy Housing, the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies, Steps Coalition, and especially the Vietnamese American Bar Association of Northern California, which will send 10 Vietnamese-speaking lawyers to the clinic to ensure that all information is available in both English and Vietnamese, and that the most vulnerable of our coast residents have the access to information and legal advice that they need during this difficult time.

We will continue to use this forum, as well as our website and Facebook community, to keep you up-to-date on the real stories from the ground on Mississippi's Gulf Coast. I urge you to once again stand with Mississippi and support the small but strong legal advocacy team that is dedicated to ensuring racial and economic justice for the hardworking families hardest hit by this disaster.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions about our work on this or other campaigns.

Standing together for Mississippi and the Gulf Coast,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martha Bergmark".

Martha Bergmark  
President

