

# 'Project Second Chance' helps veterans gain workforce skills

## Press Release

Veterans returning from active duty or serving time in prison often face challenges that can hamper their ability to find stable employment. That's why the Mississippi Construction Education Foundation has launched "Project Second Chance," an innovative workforce training program designed to provide a pathway to success for veterans while addressing Mississippi's shortage of skilled workers.

"We believe veterans who have served their country with honor but have fallen on difficult times deserve a second chance at life," said Mike Barkett, MCEF president. "Returning veterans and those who are incarcerated are significantly disadvantaged in the job market. By teaching them a skilled trade, we are helping them become contributing members of society again."

"Project Second Chance" is a skills-based carpentry program that MCEF developed in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Corrections and Mississippi Veterans Affairs. Classes began Feb. 8 at MCEF's training center in Pearl, and participants must follow rules for attendance and punctuality and pass random drug

tests to stay in the 12-week program.

The program provides tools, clothing, steel-toed boots, hard hats and books, as well as lunch each day. Participants earn \$300 a week along with job placement upon successful completion. For incarcerated veterans, these funds are held in escrow until they are released from prison.

Graduates also receive level-one national credentials from the National Center for Construction Education and Research and can keep their program-issued tools and clothing.

By the 10th week of training, participants will have an opportunity to work on a Habitat for Humanity home-building project to gain hands-on experience.

Courses are led by a retired carpentry professional with more than 40 years of experience who agreed to donate his time to "Project Second Chance."

"We've received a great deal of support and encouragement from the construction industry," Barkett said. "Many contractors who are familiar with MCEF's rigorous training standards have voiced an interest in hiring program graduates."

In the future, MCEF will

seek funds from the Legislature to expand "Project Second Chance" to include plumbing, HVAC, masonry and electrical — all skilled trades in high demand.

"Mississippi needs more than 80,000 craft professionals to meet the needs of the state's growing construction industry," Barkett said. "We know veterans have the discipline, drive and commitment to get the job done. With 'Project Second Chance,' they'll be able to learn new skills that will benefit them in the future while helping strengthen our construction workforce."

In recent years, Mississippi Veterans Affairs has worked with the MDOC to assist incarcerated veterans. The Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County includes a housing unit for military veterans that offers counseling, job training and programs emphasizing discipline.

"There are many reasons veterans struggle with career and life stability," said Mississippi Veterans Affairs Executive Director Stacey E. Pickering. "Whether it's self-medicating through drug and alcohol abuse or mental health issues resulting from combat experiences, many veterans need help to

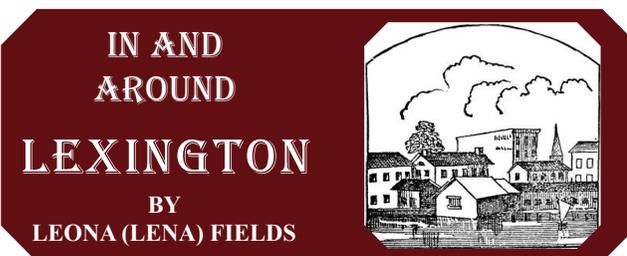
get their lives back on track. 'Project Second Chance' is one way we're investing in their future through training and workforce development."

B.R. Hawkins, director of the Mississippi Statewide Incarcerated Veterans Program — Housing Unit for Military Veterans (HUM-V) agreed.

"It may seem like a peculiar deal on the surface, but the concept makes perfect sense when you think about it," she said. "Project Second Chance is training incarcerated veterans in a way that will truly change their trajectory upon release. These individuals are not evil; they made some bad choices, are doing their time and will soon have an opportunity to start over."

MCEF is a non-profit educational foundation that provides NCCER craft training and credentialing in 112 career and technical programs across the state. The foundation's mission is to train individuals for the construction and manufacturing industries in Mississippi.

MCEF also offers workforce training and credentialing in construction, industrial maintenance and manufacturing trades. Learn more about MCEF at <http://mcef.net>.



Dominique Lewis Flemming passed recently. She was funeralized Friday, February 26. Keep Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Zenobia Cockrell and the rest of the Lewis family uplifted in prayer. Also keep the Flemming family on your prayer list.

All of you readers that are still out of water need to notify your supervisor. It might be enough people out of water to request that water be brought to the Multi-Purpose Building. One of my cousins' water did not come back on when the Lebanon Water Association turned the water back on. She went to town (Lexington) and did not find water at any of the stores. When you call your supervisor, leave your name and phone number. Do not call if you get water from your faucet.

Another one of the Rand brothers passed. I don't know which one. They lived in the New Zion Community. Re. Lenoria Meeky's brother James passed Tues-

day, February 23. He was funeralized Saturday, February 27. He lived in the Acona Community and were members of the Shiloh M.B. Church. Their mother passed when they were children. They were reared by their grandmother Mrs. Estella Carson. Uplift the Rand family in prayer. Also uplift the Meeky, Meeks and Carson families in prayer.

I found out Lexington did have a bus station. Mrs. Doratha Draine Wiley called me. She told me years ago on of her sisters rode the bus from Jackson to Lexington. She said she thinks it was in the old Lundy house near where Sunshine Cleaners used to be.

I talked to my sister-in-law Mrs. Katie Horton. She said the Lundy house was near where the Mallory Children's Clinic is now. She said the cleaners was a little further over. Anybody else that knows about the bus station can call 662-834-1489.

# Auditor's office arrests former Tunica County Housing Project Director, must repay over \$1 million

## Press Release

On Thursday, February 25, during a press conference State Auditor Shad White announced Special Agents from his office have arrested Mardis Jones after he was indicted for fraud and embezzling public money in Tunica County. A \$1,081,143.07 demand letter was issued to Jones upon his arrest. This amount represents the second-largest demand in a criminal case in the history of the Auditor's office and includes both interest and investigative expenses.

Jones was Executive Director of Tunica County Housing Incorporated (TCHI), an organization responsible for operating a program to rehabilitate dilapidated homes owned by low-income county residents. The program is funded by the Tunica County Board of Supervisors. The county called for Jones to take applications from local homeowners and connect them with contractors for home repairs. Jones then submitted funding requests to the Board of Supervisors to pay the contractors. Instead of making all the required payments to the contractors, though, Jones is accused of embezzling from the program. Investigators determined less than 20% of the nearly \$2 million trans-



MARDIS JONES

arm of government trusted a private organization to run a government program, and a large percentage of the program's spending was flat out stolen," said Auditor White.

Jones surrendered to Special Agents at the Tunica County Jail. His bond was set at \$50,000 by the court.

If convicted, Jones faces up to 40 years in prison and \$45,000 in fines. All persons arrested by the Mississippi Office of the State Auditor are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The case will be prosecuted by the office of Attorney General Lynn Fitch.

"These funds — hundreds of thousands of dollars — were meant to help the elderly, handicapped, and poverty stricken," said Attorney General Lynn Fitch. "But the funds never got to the vulnerable citizens who needed it most. My office is pleased to work with the Auditor's office to stand up for the people of Tunica County and protect the citizens of Mississippi from those that take advantage of their positions of trust and power."

Suspected fraud can be reported to the Auditor's office online any time by clicking the red button at [www.osa.ms.gov](http://www.osa.ms.gov) or via telephone during normal business hours at 1-(800)-321-1275.

# Atmos Energy addresses customer bills following historic winter storms

## Press Release

Atmos Energy understands customer concerns that the recent extreme weather may affect their natural gas bills, so we want to assure customers that bills in the near-term will not include any of the unusually high gas prices from the historic winter storms.

Atmos Energy does not set the market pricing for natural gas. There is no profit added to the gas cost. We have been and will continue working with regulators to find solutions that will minimize the impact on monthly bills. Until those solutions are identified, the gas cost portion of a customer's bill will reflect normal, seasonal gas prices.

February and March bills may still be higher than recent months based on the amount of gas used during the bitterly cold weather.

Atmos Energy offers installment plans that spread out payments of the total balance over time with no added charges or fees. To set up an installment plan, visit [www.atmosenergy.com](http://www.atmosenergy.com), log in to the Atmos Energy Account Center and select

the Payment Assistance tab, or call the Atmos Energy customer service team at 888.286.6700 Monday through Friday between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. central time.

Federal assistance funds are also available through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), in addition to Atmos Energy's Sharing the Warmth funds. Sharing the Warmth is a program that leverages the generosity of customer donations with additional contributions by Atmos Energy to amplify the amount of assistance offered. Atmos Energy then partners with local agencies to offer program funds to eligible customers.

Financial assistance is available on a first come, first served basis to eligible residential customers through a local energy assistance agency. To locate an agency, visit [atmosenergy.com/assistance](http://atmosenergy.com/assistance) or call 211. Customers needing solutions to keep up with their monthly natural gas expenses are encouraged to contact Atmos Energy's customer service team at 888.286.6700 or visit the ac-

count center at <https://www.atmosenergy.com/account-center/login/login.html>.

# Mississippi food service firm gets 4-year military contract

## Associated Press

A Mississippi company has a four-year military contract worth up to \$86 million for food distribution in Mississippi and Louisiana.

The Merchants Foodservice of Jackson was the only bidder on a competitive contract with the Defense Logistics Agency, according to a Pentagon news release on Friday.

Customers are the Air Force, Army, Navy and Coast Guard, and their ordering period will end Feb. 15, 2025, according to the Pentagon's daily list of contracts worth at least \$7.5 million.