



Let's get Mississippi to work

What do we do to improve Mississippi's economy? As I travel across the state, this is one of the questions that keeps coming up – and it's a fair one to ask. Given that Mississippi ranks 50th in employment and 46th in growth when compared to other states, the answer is fairly straightforward to me: We need to fight for every opportunity we can to get Mississippians back to work.



Despite the state's challenges, I'm optimistic. I believe in our work ethic and people, which is why I was disappointed by recent federal policies that did more to keep hardworking Mississippians at home than employed.

More specifically, the Biden administration extended a COVID-era policy that paid unemployed Americans an extra \$300 per week, meaning many recipients can earn more on unemployment than in a full-time, \$15-an-hour job. The consequences have been significant.

The National Restaurant

Association reported that April that full-service restaurants had 1.1 million job openings they were struggling to fill. Taco Bell had such a need to expand hiring they were interviewing candidates by the group in parking lots, and McDonald's reported the labor shortage could mean some locations will not be able to fully reopen in 2021.

On the Mississippi Coast, restaurant owners are sharing similar stories. Kevin Fish, who runs Half Shell in Biloxi, explained to WLOX that "getting customers is no longer the issue. Now the problem is finding people who want to work."

While the service industry was arguably the most directly affected by COVID, the labor-shortage impacts go well beyond a single trade. Today, job openings are at a 20-year high, making it all-the-more difficult for our supply chain to keep up with post-pandemic demands. Some companies are adjusting wages or benefits, but many are turning to automation to replace jobs with robots – that's a scary reality for the American worker.

While some economists deemed the unemployment bonuses necessary during the pandemic's height, few can argue our country is in the same place it was in 2020. Vaccines are widely available if workers want them, businesses have reopened, and consumers are hungry to reignite our economy. It's time to get back to work.

Our policies must reflect this new reality, which is why I applaud Governor Tate Reeves' recent decision to reject the federal government's unemployment bonuses. By doing so, he made it easier for Mississippians to get back to work and gain financial independence from the government. These steps are necessary if we are to build back stronger.

President Reagan once said: "The most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" Sure, the \$300 bonuses may have seemed like help on the surface, but in reality, they are holding us back, making recovery more difficult for both job creators and workers. With economic opportunity and our national supply chain at stake, I encourage more states to follow Mississippi's lead: Let's get America back to work.

Mississippi Treasurer

The Mississippi Against Obesity Foundation announces its Virtual Weight Loss and Wellness Program

Obesity is a significant problem within Mississippi and contributes to health burdens born by many of our state's residents. According to the 2018 Mississippi Obesity Action Plan, Mississippi had the second highest rate of adult obesity in the nation. The plan further states that adult obesity rates have steadily increased from 15% in 1990 to 23.7% in 2000 to the recently reported 37.3%. The CDC reports that more than half of all Americans live with a preventable chronic disease or condition. Many of these conditions are either caused by or made worse by obesity.

The 2016 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) showed that obesity was above 31.1% among Mississippians 65 y/o and older. These data show that those above age 65 y/o are at increased risk of death from

eWIC Benefit Cards Now Available Statewide

Jackson, Miss. – Through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) at the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH), participants statewide are now able to use eWIC benefit cards to get healthy food more easily.

eWIC benefit cards work like debit cards: simply swipe and enter your PIN. The cards are accepted at 275 authorized locations, including 160 grocery stores, 103 grocery stores with pharmacies, and 12 independent pharmacies across Mississippi.

Because WIC's emphasis is on healthy eating for mothers, infants and children, eWIC cards can be used to buy milk, cereal, yogurt, juice, eggs, cheese, peanut butter, beans, whole wheat bread, brown rice, whole wheat pasta, whole wheat and corn tortillas, fresh, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables, baby formula and baby food. Each participant has a unique food package and may not be eligible to get all food items.

"This is a dramatic increase in access from the 95 WIC food distribution centers we were operating. This change gives our clients

David McRae is the 55th Treasurer for the State of Mississippi. In this role, he helps manage the state's cash flow, oversees College Savings Mississippi, and has returned more than \$20 million in unclaimed money to Mississippians. For more information, visit Treasury.MS.gov.

more variety of food options and more flexibility in when and where they shop," said Diane W. Hargrove, Director of the WIC program.

WIC is a supplemental food program for pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children under 5. The program helps mothers and babies get healthy foods and healthy advice in the first years of life.

Each eWIC card will have a unique account number. WIC will use that number to send benefits to the account each month. Any WIC ben-

efits that are not used during the monthly cycle do not roll over. WIC will reload the card when the next benefit period begins.

For additional information about WIC and an updated list of authorized vendors, please check our website at www.HealthyMS.com/WIC, or call (601) 991-6000 or toll-free 1-800-545-6747.

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AG Lynn Fitch, Auditor Shad White announce \$55.5 million settlement with Centene

Attorney General Lynn Fitch and Auditor Shad White reached a \$55.5-million settlement with Centene, the largest Medicaid managed care organization in the United States. The settlement resolves allegations of overpayments as a part of Mississippi's Medicaid program.

"My Office is business-friendly, and I firmly believe that businesses that operate in good faith are good partners in meeting the needs of our state," said Attorney General Lynn Fitch. "However, I am in this Office to serve the people of Mississippi, and I fully intend to make sure they are not being cheated by Centene or anyone else. This settlement makes clear that the days of hiding behind a convoluted flow of money and numbers are over. And, I appreciate the work of Auditor White and his staff in helping achieve this success for the people."

"I do not care how large or powerful the company is, Mississippi taxpayers deserve to get what they paid for when the state spends money on prescription drugs, and we will stand up for the taxpayers if they do not get a square deal," said Auditor Shad White. "I'm grateful for the joint work between my staff, the data analysts, and the Attorney General's team for bringing this to a conclusion."

Pharmacy Benefit Managers, or PBMs, are corporations hired by health plans, in this case, Medicaid, to help manage the plans' prescription drug programs. In other words, they serve as middlemen, performing tasks such as contracting with and reimbursing pharmacies, creating preferred drug lists, and negotiating rebates with pharmaceutical companies.

Following suspicions that PBMs were inflating their bills, in 2019, the Auditor's Office launched an investigation to review invoices produced by a Centene-owned company. Contracts required payments be capped by certain industry-standard prices, and the PBM was charging Medicaid more than the allowed price cap.

The agreement represents one of the largest civil settlements following an investigation by the Office of the State Auditor in Mississippi history.

In addition to the \$55.5-million settlement, the agreement calls for Centene to "provide full transparency related to the adjudication and payment of all pharmacy benefit claims, including the provision of such information as is required to permit the Department of Medicaid to discern, on a claims level, the exact amount paid to the pharmacy for each pharmaceutical claim."