



ACLU Takes Civil Rights to the Community

June 8, 2016 - The Mississippi ACLU is teaming up with local NAACP branches to convince the public to back a proposed Mississippi Civil Rights Act as well as other progressive issues.

The group met in Tupelo last month and has been working with small organizations to host a series of town hall meetings, titled "Community Conversations." These town halls meeting have been conducted throughout May and early June in the cities of Biloxi, Hattiesburg, McComb, Natchez, Jackson, and other spots. The town halls provide an open space for concerned community members to ask questions and get answers. The forums also serve as a safe place to vent frustrations regarding the recent legislation that legalized religion-based discrimination.

"Are we preaching to the choir? Yes, we are," said ACLU Equality Advocate Todd Allen. "We're not so much trying to win over new converts as we are helping the choir get active and organize more choir members."

The group promoted the idea of a Mississippi Civil Rights Act to protect vulnerable populations and urged voters to push their representatives to favor such a bill. The state of Mississippi currently has no law explicitly protecting individuals from discrimination in housing, employment, or in the use of public accommodations. Both the ACLU and the MSNAACP supported bills during the 2016 legislative session that would have prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation, but the bills failed to survive the session.

ACLU Advocacy and Policy Director Erik Fleming said the failure should have sparked outrage considering that the majority of Mississippians are women, and an additional 37 percent of the state is African-American, with no state civil rights protections.

Fleming said the ACLU and its supporters will again push for passage of the Mississippi Civil Rights Act next year, but the probability of its survival depends on how vocal correct-thinking voters are next year.

"We need pressure on legislators to get it through. It only happens when we use our voices," Fleming said.

Had the Mississippi Civil Rights Act passed, it would have provided legal protection to successfully counter the recent state legislature launched attacks on individual rights. Legislation like "The Religious Freedom Bill" (House Bill 1523) would have been prevented from providing state protection to business-owners and government agencies that seek to discriminate against others based on religion or morality. Unfortunately, without the MS Civil

Rights Act, or a bill like it, to stop it House Bill 1523 was pushed through by the new Republican super-majority in the House. The law has already made national news by allowing businesses to deny services specifically to same-sex couples, transgender people, and single parents despite the national trend toward tolerance. The new law also allows an employer, government, or private school to restrict bathroom privileges to the gender specified on a person's birth certificate.

The Mississippi NAACP, like the ACLU and other progressive organizations, opposed the bill because it mirrored similar denial of service state sanctions imposed against people of color during the infamous Jim Crow era.

Rep. Steve Holland, D-Plantersville, who also attended the Tupelo meeting, slammed both the bill and the legislators who passed it.

"It was the deadest, most putrefied skunk of a bill I have ever seen leave the legislature, and I have served in the legislature for 35 years," said Holland. "It passed with no public hearing. It was out (of committee) at 1:30 and on the House floor for consideration by 2:00. They passed it because they could."

Holland said he was particularly disgusted at what he described as the militaristic, lock-step of the new Republican majority. Members, he said, ignore the will of voters and business interests and are completely beholden to their GOP masters, following them without question, even if the marching orders passed down from the House Speaker's office and the Lt. Governor's office ultimately embarrass the state and wreck the economy. Holland said he knew of at least 13 potential business prospects for the state that have evaporated since the bill's passage.

"The GOP loves Wall Street. They love the Mississippi Economic Council and the Mississippi Manufacturer's Association, all of whom hated this bill. But the GOP went ahead and voted to pass it anyway. Hell, they're crazy. There's no nice way to put it anymore."

The law takes effect July 1.

One of the attendees, Amory resident Judy Crump, lamented that there were no black residents in the audience even though the city is about 30 percent black. She fretted that both races had to meet on a united front in order to tackle new discriminatory laws emerging from the backwards state legislature. Unity was equally required, she said, to get rid of the state's racist flag, which still contains the Confederate battle emblem representing slavery and oppression.

Fleming pointed out that blacks are indeed strongly united behind progressive efforts and that similar meetings in towns like Holly Springs had just as many black participants as Tupelo had whites.

"I can't say African-Americans in Mississippi are in any way homophobic or discriminatory," Allen said in the minutes leading up to the meeting. "Keep in mind that almost every black Mississippi legislator united in opposition to the passage of HB 1523. That really says something right there."

Fleming and other leaders urged audience members to "get loud" and make their anger heard through "letters to the editor" and through localized efforts to pass city ordinances and referendums against discriminatory laws and symbols.

“Local government generally leads the way,” Fleming said. “You can be heard on the local level, but each community is different. You know your community better than we do. Get out there and organize.”

Crump, for example, approached the Amory City Board of Alderman to pass a resolution against discriminatory laws in the weeks following the passage of HB 1523 and easily succeeded in her effort.

“They were already open to it,” Crump told the MSNAACP. “It was hardly even a fight. Nobody wanted to be on the wrong side of that issue.”

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Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors. For more information about the Mississippi NAACP or news stories, call 601-353-8452 or log on to www.naacpms.org. Like us on Facebook by searching Mississippi NAACP and follow us on Twitter @MSNAACP.