

# ACLU Project EASSE: MURC Analysis of Five Focus Group Sessions

Focus Groups' Locations:

Natchez (05/13)   Jackson (05/20)   Greenville (05/22)  
Hattiesburg (05/29)   Gulfport (06/12)

Focus Groups' Facilitator:

Mississippi Urban Research Center

July 2025

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This analysis examined the experiences of a select group of Mississippi residents who are actively participating in one of four Mississippi public benefit programs under review by the ACLU of Mississippi (MS). Those four programs include Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needed Families Program (TANF), Child Care Program, and the Medicaid for Infants and Children Program.

### Methodology

Five focus group sessions were held across the state of Mississippi during the time period of May 13<sup>th</sup> through June 12<sup>th</sup>. The locations of the focus group sessions were Jackson, Greenville, Gulfport, Hattiesburg, and Natchez. Focus group participants were selected by the ACLU, working in conjunction with ACLU's community partners at the local level. Table 1 provides a listing of focus group participants by location:

Table 1

Location & Date	Natchez (05/13)	Jackson (05/20)	Greenville (05/22)	Hattiesburg (05/29)	Gulfport (06/12)
Number of Participants	13	7	4	7	9

Each focus group session followed a structured protocol which utilized approximately five core questions, along with additional follow-up inquiries, to gather deeper insights on participants' experiences with any (or all) of the four public benefits' programs. Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour and was designed to ensure respectful and concise communications while capturing comprehensive participant experiences. Participant responses (data) were captured via audio and then transcribed using Sonix transcription software. The analysis involved reviewing participant responses for recurring themes, issues, challenges, and/or unique insights regarding their participation in one or more of the four programs.

### Findings

Findings reveal both systemic challenges and location-specific barriers that hindered participants' effective access to SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and Childcare Payment programs. Key challenges identified during the focus group sessions included:

(1) Application and access barriers dominated discussions in all sessions, with participants struggling with online systems despite generally preferring digital applications. Processing delays, lost paperwork, and missed appointments due to poor notification systems affected participants regardless of location;

(2) Communication and service quality issues proved systemically problematic. Every focus group reported experiences with dismissive, unhelpful, or actively disrespectful staff members.

Participants consistently described feeling dehumanized by their interactions with benefit program staff. The lack of clear communication about eligibility requirements and available resources compounded those negative experiences;

(3) *Eligibility and income threshold problems* created barriers among all locations. The use of gross rather than net income calculations particularly disadvantaged working families, creating situations where small pay increases resulted in significant benefit losses;

(4) *Systemic inefficiencies* in the benefit delivery system indicated a lack of interagency cooperation which caused participants to often submit the same documentation multiple times to different programs. Inconsistent caseworker assignments also disrupted continuity of care, requiring participants to explain their situations to new staff members repeatedly.

## **Conclusions**

Common themes identified revealed variations in the quality of participant experiences across Mississippi and each of the four programs. The consistency of challenges articulated by focus group participants across diverse communities indicate the possible presence of systemic and localized barriers hindering effective participant interactions with those programs.

Due to the relative small number of focus group participants (n= 40 total) in comparison to the thousands of participants in all four public benefit programs under review, readers of this report's focus group findings should note that these findings are not statistically generalizable to the larger population of program participants, and therefore should be viewed cautiously when trying to reach wide-spread, definitive conclusions regarding barriers and challenges identified by focus group program participants. Additional research involving larger sample sizes and varying viewpoints are needed before reaching any such definitive conclusions.

## **Recommendations**

Based upon an analysis of feedback and insights derived from the focus group participants, the following recommendations are provided for consideration by the ACLU of MS regarding addressing challenges and barriers to accessing the four statewide public benefits programs:

1. Where not currently in place, establish an independent ombudsman's office to investigate complaints from program participants.
2. Require agencies to maintain updated, accessible websites with real-time application status.
3. Implement an inter-agency policy where any Mississippi public benefits agency can share with other agencies information related to application, eligibility, and program participation enrollments.
4. Where not currently in place, create transportation voucher programs for participants to attend benefit-related appointments at local and/or state program offices.

5. Encourage state public benefits offices to partner with local organizations (like Children's Defense Fund, Baldwin County Community Action, Springboard in Jackson)

6. Require annual program utilization audits examining program outcomes by demographics, geography, and other measures (e.g., employment, education, volunteer activity).

## Introduction

This analysis examined the experiences of a select group of Mississippi residents who are actively participating in one of four Mississippi public benefit programs under review by the ACLU of Mississippi (MS). Those four programs include Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needed Families Program (TANF), Child Care Program, and the Medicaid for Infants and Children Program. The ACLU of MS is currently conducting an evaluation of those programs focusing on identifying any potential challenges or barriers that may be impeding participation of eligible Mississippi residents. That evaluation has been named *Project EASSE*. The ACLU of MS has contracted with the Mississippi Urban Research Center (MURC) to assist with evaluating that project.

## Methodology

### Location and Participants

As part of the project's evaluation activities, five focus group sessions were conducted across the state of Mississippi from May 13<sup>th</sup> to June 12<sup>th</sup>. The locations of the focus group sessions were Jackson, Greenville, Gulfport, Hattiesburg, and Natchez. Focus group participants were selected by the ACLU, working in conjunction with the ACLU's community partners at the local level. Focus groups included beneficiaries with direct experience accessing Mississippi's public benefit programs. Table 1 provides a listing of focus group participants by location:

Table 1

Location & Date	Natchez (05/13)	Jackson (05/20)	Greenville (05/22)	Hattiesburg (05/29)	Gulfport (06/12)
Number of Participants	13	7	4	7	9

### Questions and Session Durations

Each focus group session followed a structured protocol developed by the Mississippi Urban Research Center, which employed approximately five core questions, along with additional follow-up inquiries, to gather deeper insights. Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour and was designed to ensure respectful and concise communication while capturing comprehensive participant experiences.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Participant responses (data) were captured via audio and then transcribed using Sonix transcription software. The analysis involved examining participant responses for recurring themes and unique insights regarding their participation in one or more of the four programs. The analysis of each focus group session included an AI-assisted thematic review that identified key themes, contextual connections, and synthesized insights. The analysis process involved a careful

examination of each location's thematic findings to identify commonalities and divergences. Additionally, to get a better understanding of the impact of challenges across locations, an informal severity gradient for key issues was constructed. That assessment was derived from participant ratings, the emotional intensity of their descriptions, and the frequency of specific complaints within each focus group. This approach revealed that while particular challenges were systemic, their intensity varied significantly by location.

### Findings

Findings reveal both systemic challenges and location-specific barriers that hindered participants' effective access to SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and Childcare Payment programs. Key challenge categories emerging from the focus group sessions included application and access barriers; communication and service quality issues; eligibility and income threshold problems; and systemic inefficiencies. Table 2 presents a listing of specific issues identified by the previously listed challenges:

**Table 2 - Challenges**

Challenge Category	Specific Issue	Jackson	Greenville	Natchez	Hattiesburg	Gulfport
<b>APPLICATION AND ACCESS BARRIERS</b>						
	Online Application Difficulties	Participants struggled with technical problems and system failures	Despite preferring online applications, participants faced consistent difficulties	Limited internet access compounded online application problems	Medicaid's online system worked better, though other programs had issues	Participants experienced digital paradox of preference versus functionality

Challenge Category	Specific Issue	Jackson	Greenville	Natchez	Hattiesburg	Gulfport
	Long Wait Times & Processing Delays	Applications taking weeks/months with no status updates reported	Long wait times explicitly mentioned in report summary	Significant delays in benefit processing discussed	Processing delays noted for most programs	Weeks to months waiting for decisions
	Lost Paperwork & Repetitive Processes	Extensive discussions of lost documents requiring resubmission	Documents disappearing, multiple submissions required	Participants reported having to resubmit same materials	Lost paperwork issues mentioned	Repetitive documentation requirements noted
	Missed Appointments Due to Delayed Notifications	Benefits denied for "non-compliance" when participants never received notice	Multiple participants reported missing appointments due to late letters	Letters arriving after appointments, no phone calls received	Late notifications causing missed meetings	Notification failures leading to missed appointments
<b>COMMUNICATION AND SERVICE QUALITY ISSUES</b>						
	Poor Customer Service Experiences	- participants felt "demeaned" and reported hostile treatment	Staff dismissive and unhelpful	Mixed - some helpful but many dismissive staff	Negative attitudes, participants want "more positive staff"	Poor treatment reported, less severe than Jackson

Challenge Category	Specific Issue	Jackson	Greenville	Natchez	Hattiesburg	Gulfport
	Lack of Clear Communication	Staff couldn't/wouldn't explain eligibility or requirements	Requirements not clearly communicated	lack of transparency about programs	Eligibility rules not explained clearly	Program information not adequately communicated
	Inadequate Staff Training	Workers gave conflicting information, suggesting poor training	Inconsistent information from different workers	Staff unable to provide accurate program information	Different workers providing different answers	Staff appeared inadequately trained on programs
<b>ELIGIBILITY AND INCOME THRESHOLD PROBLEMS</b>						
	Strict Income Requirements for SNAP	Working families falling just above thresholds	SNAP income limits specifically cited as too restrictive	Income requirements preventing access despite need	Participant suggested "increase in income limits for SNAP"	Income limits too low for cost of living
	Gross vs. Net Income Calculations	Gross income used, disadvantaging working families	Pre-tax income calculations creating unfair assessments	gross vs net income problems	Gross income calculations problematic	Benefits based on gross not take-home pay



Challenge Category	Specific Issue	Jackson	Greenville	Natchez	Hattiesburg	Gulfport
	Benefits Cliff Effect	Forced to work less to maintain benefits	Small raises causing large benefit losses	Wage increases led to worse financial situations	Elderly losing benefits due to lifetime savings	Economic advancement discouraged
<b>SYSTEMIC INEFFICIENCIES</b>						
	Lack of Interagency Cooperation	Same documents required multiple times	Repetitive applications across agencies	major systemic failure	Multiple programs requiring same documentation	Different programs don't share information
	Inconsistent Caseworker Assignments	Different workers each visit, no continuity	No consistent case management	Must re-explain situation to new workers repeatedly	Different caseworkers providing conflicting info	No continuity of care mentioned
	Limited Transparency	Programs and benefits not clearly communicated	Limited information about available resources	Criticized for hiding available programs /benefits	Participants unaware of programs they qualified for	Available benefits not transparently communicated

### Four Categories of Challenges

Four categories of challenges appeared consistently across all five focus group locations. The first category (*Application and access barriers*) dominated discussions in all sessions, with participants struggling with online systems despite generally preferring digital applications. Processing delays, lost paperwork, and missed appointments due to poor notification systems affected participants regardless of location.

The second category (*Communication and service quality issues*) proved systemically problematic. Every focus group reported experiences with dismissive, unhelpful, or actively disrespectful staff members. Participants consistently described feeling dehumanized by their interactions with benefit program staff. The lack of clear communication about eligibility requirements and available resources compounded those negative experiences. Participants also described instances where program staff did not clearly communicate major program changes such as changes in eligibility requirements and benefits calculations.

The third category (*Eligibility and income threshold problems*) created barriers among all locations. The use of gross rather than net income calculations, particularly for disadvantaged working families, created situations where small pay increases resulted in significant benefit losses. Also, mentioned by participants across the focus groups was the loss of benefits due to acceptance into other public programs; thus causing a “net decrease” in overall benefits received.

The fourth category (*Systemic inefficiencies in the benefit delivery system*) indicated a lack of interagency cooperation which caused participants to often submit the same documentation multiple times to different programs. Inconsistent caseworker assignments also disrupted continuity of care, requiring participants to explain their situations to new staff members repeatedly.

### Location-specific Challenges

In addition to the identification of system-related challenges, several location-specific challenges were also identified that included urban area participants experiencing more severe service quality issues and explicit concerns about discrimination; and rural area participants facing pronounced transportation barriers and funding disparities. Findings suggest systemic and localized reforms may be needed to address the multiple issues identified by the focus group participants. Without such reforms, Mississippi's most vulnerable residents will continue facing significant barriers to accessing essential support services.

### Other Notable Observations

Below is a listing of other notable observations that emerged from analyzing the feedback obtained from program participants across the five focus group sessions. These observations provide additional insight regarding the participants' experiences, along with factors affecting program operations:

- Jackson emerged as experiencing the most severe service quality issues, with participants providing the lowest ratings and most intense descriptions of feeling demeaned by staff.

- Uniquely, Jackson participants discussed feeling compelled to manipulate the system to overcome bureaucratic barriers, suggesting a possible lack of trust between beneficiaries and the system. Racial bias discussions were most explicit in Jackson, with participants directly attributing poor treatment to stereotyping and discrimination.
- When discussing the Greenville focus group, it is worth highlighting that this group benefited from a unique perspective, as it included one participant who had relocated from California. The participant's perspective was the first of a comparison of another state's public benefit programs to those in Mississippi. These individuals noted that while Mississippi had less overt systemic bias than California, significant challenges remained.
- Additionally, rural funding disparities emerged as a particular concern, with participants noting that smaller towns received limited resources. Greenville participants also demonstrated the positive impact of community organizations, with strong acknowledgment of support from the Children's Defense Fund and Bolivar County Community Action.
- Natchez participants emphasized transportation as their primary barrier, particularly for those lacking internet access. This location showed the most substantial criticism of interagency cooperation failures, with participants describing repetitive and contradictory requirements across programs.
- Interestingly, Natchez also showed the most polarized service experiences, with some participants encountering helpful staff while others faced extreme dismissiveness.
- Hattiesburg participants presented several unique patterns and, unlike other locations, multiple participants praised Medicaid's online application process, suggesting some programs function better than others.
- Hattiesburg also uniquely focused on elderly-specific concerns, highlighting how lifetime savings disqualified seniors from needed benefits despite their ongoing financial struggles.
- Gulfport's discussions emphasized community-wide solutions, particularly the need for youth employment opportunities and public transportation infrastructure.
- Gulfport discussions also included an example of how participants' TANF funds are subject to fraud whereby criminals have illegally withdrawn participant funds from their TANF debit cards.
- While sharing systemic challenges, Gulfport participants seemed more focused on systemic community improvements rather than individual program fixes (e.g., identifying the need for public transportation systems and youth employment opportunities as essential components for improving access to benefits and reducing dependence on assistance programs altogether).

## **Discussion**

There were consistent challenges identified across all locations, suggesting that problems exist in Mississippi's public benefit delivery system at the systemic and local levels. The

commonality of poor customer service experiences indicates possible issues with agency staff training, accountability, and organizational culture within those agencies.

The emergence of a “digital paradox” (that is, the greater use of technology does not always lead to expected improvements in performance, productivity, or other desired outcomes such as convenience and efficiency) warrants noting here because participants expressed a preference for online application modalities due to the convenience. However, the implementation of digital systems paradoxically generated additional barriers to access by creating service delivery challenges. This may indicate that effective access to benefit programs requires a multi-modal service delivery framework that combines functional digital infrastructure with traditional (“Human”) service channels, supplemented by digital literacy training support. This observation highlights the need for multiple access pathways and robust support systems to facilitate effective digital utilization by program participants.

The variation in the severity of challenges across locations provides insights regarding some of the issues and problems being experienced by focus group participants. Urban areas, such as Jackson (MS), expressed more explicit concerns about discrimination and more impersonal bureaucracies impacting their participation in the programs. Rural areas, which often face transportation and funding issues, highlighted the issues of how a lack of funding and transportation can hinder effective program participation. Subsequently, the positive Medicaid experiences expressed by Hattiesburg focus group participants suggest that successful agency-participant interaction models exist within Mississippi's current public benefits system. Understanding why Medicaid functions more effectively in specific locations could provide a blueprint for improving other programs.

This report’s focus group findings also revealed how Community organizations are serving as critical gap-fillers, particularly in locations like Greenville and Jackson, where they received strong recognition. However, the presence and utilization of these organizations also reveal potential service gaps being performed by those organizations instead of government agencies. While celebrating the contributions of those community organizations, state agencies and policymakers must also recognize that community organizations cannot be a long-term viable substitute for services that the public benefits programs should provide.

## **Conclusions**

This analysis of focus groups’ findings provides participants’ insights on the operations, services, barriers, and challenges encountered by four programs under review by the ACLU (i.e., *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)*, *Temporary Assistance for Needed Families Program (TANF)*, *Child Care Program*, and the *Medicaid for Infants and Children Program*). Common themes identified revealed variations in the quality of participant experiences across Mississippi and each of the four programs. The consistency of challenges articulated by focus group participants across diverse communities indicates the presence of possible systemic and localized barriers hindering effective participant interactions with those programs. Participants indicated that in some areas and public benefit programs, experiences have been positive. Hattiesburg's functional Medicaid online platform demonstrates that user-friendly digital services are achievable. Participants mentioned how community organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund, Bolivar County Community Action, and Springboard (Jackson) are helping to

bridge the service gaps between accessing government programs and receiving those services. Focus group participants also offered recommendations for improvement, demonstrating that those most affected by these public benefits' systems can also help identify solutions to improve them.

## **Recommendations**

Based upon an analysis of feedback and insights derived from the focus group participants, the following recommendations are provided for consideration by the ACLU of MS regarding addressing challenges and barriers to accessing the four statewide public benefits programs:

1. Where not currently in place, establish an independent ombudsman's office to investigate complaints from program participants.

\* **Addresses:** Poor customer service, disrespectful treatment, and no accountability for staff behavior

2. Require agencies to maintain updated, accessible websites with real-time application status.

\* **Addresses:** Lack of transparency, anxiety about application progress, frequent office visits

3. Implement an inter-agency policy where any Mississippi public benefits agency can share with other agencies information related to application, eligibility, and program participation enrollments.

\* **Addresses:** Lack of interagency cooperation, participants being shuffled between offices, limited program awareness

4. Where not currently in place, create transportation voucher programs for participants to attend benefit-related appointments at local and/or state program offices.

\* **Addresses:** Transportation barriers, missed appointments, rural access challenges

5. Encourage state public benefits offices to partner with local organizations (like Children's Defense Fund, Baldwin County Community Action, Springboard in Jackson)

\* **Addresses:** Lack of trust between agencies and communities, need for local support, cultural barriers

6. Require annual program utilization audits examining program outcomes by demographics, geography, and other measures (e.g., employment, education, volunteer activity).

\* **Addresses:** Disparities in service delivery, potential bias, unequal outcomes between urban and rural areas

## **LIMITATION OF FINDINGS**

Due to the relative small number of total focus group participants (n= 40) in comparison to the thousands of participants in all four public benefit programs under review, readers of this report's focus group findings should not that these findings are not statistically generalizable to the larger population of program participants, and therefore this report should be viewed cautiously when trying to reach wide-spread, definitive conclusions regarding the barriers and challenges identified by focus group program participants. Additional research involving larger sample sizes and varying viewpoints are needed before reaching any such definitive conclusions.

## Appendix

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: Core Questions for all Focus Groups

1. How would you rate your overall experience accessing public benefits programs in Mississippi? Please describe specific challenges or positive aspects you encountered during the application process, eligibility determination, or while receiving benefits.
2. How do you feel your personal characteristics (such as your race, disability status, family situation, or where you live) affected your experience applying for public benefits?
3. What has been your experience in applying for public benefits?
4. How would you describe the quality of service you received during your participation in the program?
5. Is there anything important about your experience that we haven't asked about that you'd like to share?

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: Supplemental Questions

#### **SECTION 1: APPLICATION PROCESS AND SYSTEM NAVIGATION**

##### **1. Opening**

- How would you rate your overall experience accessing public benefits programs in Mississippi? For example, have you encountered anything (*positive or negative*) during the application process or eligibility determination that created a memory that you would like to share?

##### **2. Program Coordination**

- If you applied for multiple benefit programs, how well did these programs work together? Were there redundancies or contradictions?
- How did differences between program requirements (like income calculations or documentation) create challenges for you?

## **SECTION 2: SERVICE QUALITY AND INFORMATION CLARITY**

### **1. Staff Interactions**

- How would you describe your interactions with program staff during the application process? Did these interactions create a barrier for you?

### **2. Information Clarity**

- Can you recall specific instances where program information was unclear or contradictory?
- What would make program information more understandable and accessible to you?

## **SECTION 3: PERSONAL IMPACT AND BARRIERS**

### **1. Emotional Impact**

- Did you ever feel embarrassed or stigmatized when applying for benefits? Can you share that experience?

### **2. Privacy**

- How comfortable were you sharing personal information required by the application?
- Were there questions that felt unnecessarily invasive?

## **SECTION 4: IDENTITY AND COMPARATIVE EXPERIENCES**

### **1. Intersectionality**

- How do you feel your personal characteristics (such as your race, disability status, family situation, or where you live) have affected your experience applying for benefits?
- What aspects of your identity or situation do you feel program staff didn't fully consider or understand during your application process?

### **2. Comparative Experiences**

- If you've applied for benefits in another state or county, how would you compare that experience to applying in Mississippi?
- Have you noticed any changes in the application process over time? What's gotten better or worse?

## **CONCLUDING QUESTIONS (10 minutes)**

1. Is there anything important about your experience that we haven't asked about that you'd like to share?

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### **Moderator Notes:**



## Focus Group Guidelines

*Moderator: Please read these questions aloud before any Focus Group sessions begin.*

- The time allotted for this session will be around 1 hour.
- Due to the small amount of time we have for discussion, we will moderate the length of answers.
- The moderator (person asking the questions) may sometimes have to *interrupt*, due to the short amount of time. We are trying to ensure that all questions are answered.
- Please wait your turn and try not to speak when others are speaking.
- There are no right, wrong, or perfect answers. It is perfectly okay if someone else has a different answer or opinion.
- We ask that you please be respectful to everyone, even to the person asking the questions.
- You do not have to answer any of the questions if you do not wish to answer.
- Your name will not be used in reporting or any documentation related to your responses.
- When you respond to the questions, please state your assigned number. For example, “I am number 4” and my answer is.....
- I will raise my hand or a sheet of white paper if someone is being disruptive or answering too long.
- Please refrain from using obscene or offensive language.