

Report on Voter Registration - Projected Program

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I.

We understand that several philanthropic organizations are donating money for a concerted drive to register Negro voters across the deep South. The money, as we understand it, is to be divided primarily among the following Civil Rights organizations: NAACP, SCLC, CORE, SNCC.

At this point each of the organizations is submitting programs to Mr. Wiley Branton, Director of the project, to designate the areas where they plan to work, and the type of program they plan to carry out. We also understand, from a reliable source, that most of the organizations are planning to concentrate their efforts in big cities. If this is true, then most of Mississippi will be excluded from the drive. Even if this proves false, we feel there is a necessity for coordinating the activities of the organizations to avoid duplication, confusion, and a general lack of direction.

To ensure that Mississippians will receive full benefit from the monies donated by the foundations and administered by the Civil Rights organizations, we propose that the following steps be taken:

1. A state-wide coordinating council be established, to be composed of individuals representing functioning organizations interested in promoting voter registration. (We envision that these organizations will be ready to receive and work with personnel from the various Civil Rights groups.)
2. That representatives of SNCC, CORE, NAACP, and SCLC, working in Mississippi, draw up a list of names of key people and organizations to call to an initial meeting as soon as possible in February.
3. A prospective program be drawn and sent to each of these persons and/or organizations with a letter of explanation and, if possible, a personal visit by some representative of one of the Civil Rights groups.

II. We offer the following suggestions for a tentative program:

A. Basic Goals:

Since the fundamental political unit in the state is found at the county level, one of the goals of the program should be the development of leadership at this level to ensure an on-going program in voter registration and in furthering the political aspirations and aims of the Negro.

We know, however, that in many rural counties such an organization is not feasible at this time; in this case a wider organization, encompassing several adjoining counties, including if possible one which contains a large urban population, should be established. For example, Jefferson, Franklin, and Wilkinson counties being rural and tough on voting, the leadership in these counties might find help and assistance from the leaders in Adams county, which includes Natchez, where Negroes are relatively free from pressure on the voting issue.

We must aim to unite the various leaders in a given area through personal contact and cooperation on a common program, in an effort to decrease chances of reprisals against those located in tough areas, and increase moral and effective organization.

#### B. Program in Urban Areas.

Again, following the political outline of the state and the concentration of Negroes, it seems natural to spend the heaviest efforts in the second, third, and fourth congressional districts, where the Negroes comprise 50%, 66%, and 45% respectively of the population; in the Gulf-coast area and cities such as Laurel, Meridian, and Hattiesburg outside of these congressional districts, and in isolated black-belt counties such as Jefferson-Davis, Jasper, Kemper, and Morehouse counties.

Cities such as Greenville, Clarksdale, Jackson, Vicksburg, and Natchez, where Negroes are allowed to vote without fear of physical violence or economic reprisals, but where apathy, ignorance, and long deprivation have dulled the appetite for the ballot, should be given special consideration and the type of long range program best suited for each city carefully spelled out in conjunction with the leaders of the city. It seems imperative that all groups now working on voter registration within a given city, coordinate their efforts and present a unified program for the people of their jurisdiction.

Cities such as McComb, Brookhaven, Hazelhurst, and Yazoo City will need student and adult volunteers to come in and conduct voting programs for a specified period of time, anywhere from a week to a month. In these places we need to work toward the point where local leadership, particularly the teachers, will be able to sponsor and develop the program.

County seat towns such as Tylertown, Liberty, and Fayette should be hit hard and fast and at unannounced intervals, or not at all as the local population is too easily exposed to pressures and threats of physical violence and therefore too easily frightened away.

#### C. Program in Rural Areas.

The chief institution in the rural community in which we may find leadership and support will be the church. We should not however overlook the possibility that we may find that we are forced to work with other organizations, and individuals who are somewhat free of economic pressures.

Preparation for project should include visits to communities to be worked in an effort to meet community leaders, and whenever possible to live with the people in the community so that a real relationship between all concerned may be realized.

Determine which community organizations will work with you in the project, by personal contacts. Call a meeting to orientate participants in the objectives of the project, being careful to give considerable weight to their observations and considerations in which general approach should be used.

Try to find some place where a local headquarters can be maintained, noting that it may be unwise to remain in the very small communities for more than a week or more at a time.

Attempt to recruit volunteer workers for a door to door campaign, in an effort to channel the persons contacted to the headquarters for specific detailed instruction in voting and registration procedures. Setting up church meetings may also aid in securing the same ends. If both of the above fail, it may become necessary to actually provide door to door instruction in the above mentioned procedures.

If at all possible, try jointly to organize several counties, in an effort to shift the pressures that might be exerted so that no particular persons in the area will be singled out.

Schools to teach the basic Three R's, should be set up to supplement the lack of efficiency in these areas whenever necessary.

#### D. Staff.

In the foregoing pages we have set forth a structure and a program wherein all of the organizations working can find common ground for a well coordinated effort in voter registration in Mississippi. To do this job effectively, staff people will be needed at the following levels:

1. To set up the program in detail, arrange for a meeting of the members of the coordinating council, and see that they have a copy of the proposed program in enough time to obtain the suggestions and comments of their local organizations. (Ideally, personal contact should be made with these people.)
2. At the initial meeting, a person should be designated to start correspondence with Wiley Branton, the civil rights groups, and keep the various members of the coordinating council abreast of developments.
3. Persons should be designated to solicit the support and cooperation of ministers and professional people at the state and local level.
4. Persons designated to make contacts with the leadership in specified communities around the state.
5. We envision the use of students as main workers in the rural areas and in towns where the adult leadership is unable, for some reason, to conduct the program; and as auxiliary help in those cities where adults can and will carry the burden of the program. We suggest that thirty-five students from Mississippi be recruited and trained across the Spring semester where possible, and all subjected to an intense week-long conference before taking the field for the summer. We should hope to enlist the aid of college teachers and administrators in making an intensive search for a high caliber of student.
6. The timetable for the students and the areas and people they will be working for should be spelled out in great detail; with an attempt made in advance to determine which areas will be "hard", "medium", or "soft", in regard to white opposition.
7. A field secretary, preferably a native Mississippian, should be hired full time and provided with transportation, to cover all the ground necessary to set up the contacts and making arrangements for the workers.