

"When you spend the long morning hours out in the dirt roads of this town, trying to explain the political process to poor and frightened people...when you have to tell at least one person a day that there is no more food...when you write pages and pages of police brutality and fear in yourself...then, by three o'clock on any afternoon, you are tired and sometimes, a little bitter. But, at three, the children come... if you should happen to be in some afternoon around three, you would see thirty children waiting in line for books...especially about rockets and jets and other children, and one little girl, about puppies. That is the Greenwood Center."

This was part of a report from the director of one of the 23 community centers that are now operating in Mississippi. The goal of the community centers is to encourage deprived Americans in their quest for human dignity and full citizenship. This is currently attempted through four major offensives: Fundamental Needs, Self Help, Youth Programs and Political Programs.

I. FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS

An adequate diet for the Mississippi Negro is available for brief periods only when they are recipients of government commodities and when the tenant farmer sells his cotton, or when credit is granted by landlords, during other periods they fare as best they can. The "best they can" most often equals slow starvation. Even when food is available it is in the form of meager poverty diets, high in starch and low in protein. It is planned that instruction in nutrition and the needs for a basic diet can be provided.

The infant mortality rate for the Mississippi Negro is more than twice as high as that of the white Mississippian. This is directly traceable to general conditions of poverty, ignorance, and inadequate medical services; it can be somewhat alleviated by community-wide programs of education and aid in prenatal and infant care.

Many children walk around barefoot, not because they want to put their feet in the Mississippi mud; but because their parents can not afford them shoes. And in the winter that Mississippi mud becomes hard frozen ground. One volunteer wrote of a Mrs. Jones, mother of eleven young children, who tried to vote and consequently lost her job. "What I could do for Mrs. Jones yesterday morning...was to help her find eleven pairs of shoes and, when she left, give her a bottle of vitamins and a box of aspirin. She was deeply grateful...for very little. Mrs. Jones has no work now. Because of automation and because of our voter registration drive, she and thousands like her will not have work for a long time, if ever. They will come to this office and we will have to be ready to supply their needs.

II. THE SELF HELP PROGRAM

Housing - The 1960 census showed that in Mississippi 66% of all Negro housing was "dilapidated or deteriorating" -- 71% in rural areas. More than 90% of rural Negro homes in Mississippi have neither flush toilets nor bathing or shower facilities. COFO does not have the resources to relieve these conditions; however, plans are being made to arrange a tool-lend bank where persons who want to borrow tools for house repair will be able to do so and minor supplies will be provided free. On Saturday mornings, a work corps of 17-19 year olds will make needed improvements such as painting, roof repair, etc., on the dilapidated homes of low-income families.

Literacy - Basic courses will be offered to all who want them. These courses will provide skills without which the large number of farm workers displaced by automation will not be able to take advantage of training programs. We hope to arrange re-training programs through the Manpower Development Training Act and local programs teaching useful trades such as mechanics, upholstery, clerical work, cabinet making, sewing, etc. Some programs will hopefully develop into small enterprises.

Federal Programs - Congress has passed legislation designed to help low-income rural people. There has been a tendency to leave administration up to local authorities in Mississippi. The results are that the benefits are not usually available to those whom the program was designed to help. The community center will inform the people of the benefits they should get, and attempt to help them obtain them.

III. YOUTH PROGRAM

In the context of a modern technological society, such as ours, the education provided many rural Mississippians is all but worthless. Massive reform in the entire educational system is imperative; but such action is unlikely in the near future. In many schools in rural Mississippi and for Negroes in the urban areas the student is merely attending school. He learns little and picks up not even the basic tools that one needs to obtain. He acquires no knowledge of the correct usage of the English language. This is shown by his speech and writing. His knowledge of math or even basic arithmetic is nil. The libraries of the "closed society" manage to avoid stocking books which would be considered challenging by normal standards. If Negroes try to assist themselves outside the school system, they find that over 90% of the public libraries in the state do not permit Negroes to enter.

The Youth Program will try to provide libraries with around-the-clock facilities. The ones already set up are used constantly and intensely. From reports in the existing community center libraries, few, if any, of the books distributed sit idly on the shelves. They are used with care and returned promptly, (even though no fines are charged). Reading clubs, book discussions, speech contests, current events discussions, drama groups, art groups, and movies provide a missing part of the education of the children - a part which is standard in any adequate school. The centers will also provide a place for special remedial programs in grammar, basic math, and other deficiencies in the public education. Special counselling services for school dropouts, and bright children who don't know what opportunities are open to them, is another necessity missing for the Mississippi Negro child.

Recreation, such as games, music, movies and social activities are also missing from most of their lives. This is usually the major function of more prosperous community centers in other parts of the country; but here in Mississippi it can only have a low level of priority.

IV. POLITICAL PROGRAMS

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee began its work in Mississippi in an attempt to get people registered to vote. Since the end of Reconstruction, any and all stirrings of Negro political organization have been deliberately and violently stifled. The State of Mississippi, through its White Citizens Council members, its State Sovereignty Commission, still attempts to follow the policy of suppressing Negro political activity. Encouraging political action in Mississippi among Negroes is a continually dangerous business, and it is often difficult to find even a private building willing to allow political meetings. The community centers will thus serve as a meeting place for all civil rights agencies and political groups. They will also be centers for voter registration programs, political education classes, and citizenship classes, providing education in U.S. history, economics, political history, training for registration tests and, most significantly, the forum for developing leaders from within the community.

The most desperate need for these community centers is for people to staff them. Many of the summer volunteers have remained on the job for the coming year. But the possibilities far outstrip the personnel or funds available. Getting a place ready for use as a community center costs as much as \$5000. This depends greatly on its original condition. About 3/4 of the community centers now operating are doing so in unsuitable surroundings. About a third have formulated plans for new buildings, and some buildings have already been completed.

The needs are great, ranging from buildings to file cards. Bordes, tables, chairs, filing cabinets, movie projectors, screens, films, art supplies, subscriptions to good newspapers and magazines, records, food, clothing, vitamins, tools, paints, nails and the thousand other odd things people need to begin learning how to work towards a better life.

For Further Information
Community Centers
MISSISSIPPI PROJECT
P. O. Box 1268
Jackson, Mississippi
(601) 352-9605, 9788