



In Our Do'ers Profile, we highlight some of the hardworking and talented individuals in public human services. This issue features Rickey Berry, Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services.

Name: Richard (Rickey) A. Berry

Title: Executive Director, Mississippi Department of Human Services

Years of Service: Eight years with the Mississippi Employment Security Commission, eight years in Human Resources in the private sector, and a total of 22 years with the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) serving in various capacities, including personnel officer, director of the JOBS Program and director of Resource Development. The last eight years, I served as the deputy administrator for Programs.

Rewards of the Job: I was adopted as an infant at seven weeks old. My parents provided me with a stable, nurturing, and loving environment. They also taught me values, to respect other people and—having grown up in the Great Depression and endured the hardships of World War II—they instilled a work ethic and sense of responsibility in me that laid the foundation for my life's success. My greatest reward is when our system works and we guide, assist, or influence our customers so that they can experience the positive elements of life. Reuniting families, helping a young mother obtain her first job or earn a degree, having non-custodial parents become active in their children's life, all give me tremendous joy. If seeing a sibling group or older child being adopted and having a real family does not bring tears to your eyes, you are in the wrong business. There are rewards every day that far outweigh the daily hassles and bureaucracy that we all experience.

Accomplishments Most Proud Of:

I have been extremely fortunate in my career to be involved in many new and innovative projects. Mississippi has had the highest TANF Work Program Participation Rate in the nation the past two years. I am proud to have been part of the team that designed the program back in the early 90s. It is truly a testament to our people at MDHS that a state with limited resources can perform at such a high level. Knowing that many of the people we once served are now productive citizens who no longer depend on the system is my proudest accomplishment. I am also very proud that through innovation and technological advances MDHS has been able to handle an almost 50 percent increase in the SNAP caseload without hiring any additional staff and while maintaining the integrity of the program. Our payment accuracy rate is one of the nation's best, which has resulted in incentive payments from the Food and Nutrition Service that are reinvested into the system to make it even more productive and efficient. I am also very proud to see the daily improvements taking place in our child welfare system. I feel very confident that in three to four years we will be recognized for our achievements in this area as well. There are many different careers that a person can choose. My choice to serve our citizens in the human service arena brings rewards every day. Not many people can drive home from their jobs each day knowing that their organization has touched the lives of one out of every four citizens in our state.

Future Challenges for the Delivery of Public Services:

In human services, I foresee our biggest challenge as the continuing trend to do more with less. The SNAP caseload in Mississippi has increased by more than 200,000 recipients in the past four years. We are seeing customers in our offices that have never had to apply for any type of government benefit before. The further breakdown of the family, teen births, and a lack of job opportunities, unless reversed, will continue to plague our state and make the need for our services even greater.

We do not intend to stand idly by. Mississippi is at the top of a lot of lists where we do not wish to be. I guarantee that we will be at the top of one list and that is “recognizing that we have problems and confronting them head on.” In his State of the State addresses, Governor Phil Bryant challenged us to come up with a plan to reduce teen pregnancy. We have developed a five-year goal of reducing the teen birth rate by 15 percent. We will continue to develop resources to nurture and strengthen families that will result in a better prepared workforce, so that the state can pursue the economic opportunities that are lacking in some of our communities.

Little Known Facts About Me:

I think that the thing that most people don't know about me is how fiercely competitive that I am. I talk slowly, even for a Southerner, and generally have a relaxed, laid-back demeanor, but underneath there is a burning desire to be the best at whatever it is that I do. 📧