Equitable Access to Social Services for Everyone (EASSE) Project

This project aims to identify and address barriers to equitable access to public benefits, particularly for vulnerable populations in Mississippi. Through a multi-phase approach involving research, evaluation, community engagement, and advocacy, we seek to create sustainable changes in state-administered social service programs. Mississippi has a distressingly long history of creating barriers to access for its social programs.

For many years, Mississippi was the only state left in the nation that required its enrollees to come in for face-to-face meetings to reenroll in the program. This caused a churn and loss of over 60,000 eligible children from the Medicaid and CHIP rolls during that time. The passage of the ACA eventually removed this barrier, but as Medicaid goes through the unwinding process from the COVID-19 expansion, we can expect many other eligible enrollees to lose coverage. The same can be said for the inaccessibility of the state's TANF program, Mississippi's approval rate was 7.1% and its denial rate was 92.8% in 2021. This low rate of TANF cash assistance approval supports the historically low number of individuals receiving direct cash assistance. State officials often point out that TANF dollars help support other programs such as the Child Care Payment Program. Mississippi does transfer up to the federally allowed maximum 30% of TANF funds into the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). However, these transfers fluctuate from year to year and are not always driven by demonstrated demand within CCDF, leaving critical gaps in child care support. This raises a critical accountability question: if TANF dollars are not reaching families through cash assistance or child care, where are those funds going and who is being helped?

Our goal is to influence policy reform, empower communities, and enhance public awareness of inequitable practices in public benefit programs, such as: Medicaid, CHIP, TANF, SNAP, and childcare vouchers.