



*The State Chapter of the Federation of Families*

## ***THE MISSISSIPPI LEGISLATURE: GUILTY OF CHILD ABANDONMENT?***

Families as Allies, the only statewide organization run by and for families of children with mental health challenges, stands with all Mississippians who are outraged that our legislature would balance the budget on the backs of our most vulnerable citizens - especially those with mental illness. That includes our children.

As parents and caregivers, we want nothing more than what all Mississippi families want - to raise our children and see them become responsible adults. The severe and discretionary budget cuts enacted today by the legislature not only will have an immediate impact on our children, but will also cause tax payers to very likely finance the high costs of unemployment, expensive residential care and incarceration for years to come. These avoidable cuts are an irresponsible use of our tax dollars, and are most assuredly not cost effective. They also leave Mississippi wide open to lawsuits.

But these cuts are both a symptom and the result of a much larger problem. Mississippi's mental health system fails our children. In fact, some of us have even lost our children because the services our children need don't exist.

Instead of working with us to develop a system of care that would actually help our children, Attorney General Hood, the Department of Mental Health and the Division of Medicaid have spent hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of taxpayer dollars over the past four years disputing the United States Department of Justice's (DOJ) findings that confirm what we live every day: Mississippi continually and systemically breaks federal law because it does not

provide what people with mental illness need. If people had these services, many more could live in the community and succeed. If our State had provided these services instead of fighting the DOJ and other advocates for better care, these budget cuts might have been averted.

Sadly, the State could have reached an agreement with the DOJ late last year to resolve some of these problems but did not because Attorney General Hood refused to consent to an agreement that could be monitored and enforced. As a result, Mississippi is likely to face multiple costly lawsuits, but more importantly, our children and other citizens affected by mental illness still will be denied the services they need until this is resolved. Other lawsuits, such as Olivia Y, have proven this can take years.

We, like all parents, know what helps our children. We also know how to build an effective system and have many local and national allies who can help. We have asked Attorney General Hood, Governor Bryant, and the leadership of the legislature and the Departments of Mental Health and Medicaid to partner with us and others to develop cost effective and beneficial services and supports for our children. No one, other than Attorney General Hood one week before the election, responded to our outreach.

Mississippians should know that the State already has expert assessments that describe how Mississippi can fix these problems. Yet, Attorney General Hood has spent even more tax dollars on lawsuits to insure that these assessments, wholly paid for by the taxpayers of Mississippi, remain hidden from the public. What is he keeping from us?

We believe that we speak for all Mississippians when we say that the cuts to the budget of the Department of Mental Health should be restored. But fixing the budget will be meaningless unless we fix our broken system.

It will take policy makers with great vision, strength and courage who are willing to face the truth and partner with all of us to create a Mississippi that cares about every child, including those with mental illness.

Who among Mississippi's leaders will be brave enough to answer this clarion call?

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