

# Mississippi LGBTQ Study

## Findings from Needs Assessment Phase One: Organizations and Networks

This report is the first in a series resulting from a statewide needs assessment of sexual and gender minority populations in Mississippi. The needs assessment was developed as a partnership between researchers at MSU and the LGBTQ Fund of Mississippi with funding provided by a grant from Out in the South, an initiative of the Funders for LGBTQ Issues. The needs assessment is structured to better understand the strengths, challenges, and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer populations in Mississippi.

### Methods

The research question guiding phase one data collection was: How do organizations serving LGBTQ communities understand the scope and nature of their work? Organizations were included in this analysis if they were: 1) active at some point in the past year (2017-2018); 2) included LGBTQ advocacy or service provision work as part of the organization's core mission; and 3) conducted significant organizational operations in Mississippi. In total, 28 organizations met these inclusion criteria. The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ organizations operating in Mississippi. This interview process was reviewed and deemed exempt by the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board. Multiple contact attempts were made with all identified organizations, resulting in a total of 9 completed interviews, representing approximately one third of all organizations. The team then used RQDA qualitative data analysis software to facilitate the

The overall goals of the assessment are multi-fold: 1. To better understand the needs of Mississippi's LGBTQ population; 2. To better understand the work and needs of advocacy groups and service providers serving Mississippi's LGBTQ population; 3. To determine priorities for the work of the LGBTQ Fund; and 4. To raise awareness about the needs, challenges, and successes of a marginalized community which is largely absent from the national and regional literature.

coding process and then used a line-by-line open coding approach to label segments of the data. The research team noted no new codes by the end of the coding process, indicating that the total number of interviews was sufficient for theoretical saturation. Axial coding was used to connect relationships between emergent codes, and finally theoretical coding was used to determine themes that emerged from the data. To better understand the landscape of LGBTQ organizing work in Mississippi, geographic and network analyses were included. Geographic location of organizations was determined through interviews or via organizations' available publications. Network connections between organizations, including direction of connections, were established via: 1) available interview data; 2) organizations' available publications; and/or 3) organizations' network connections as listed on public-facing web materials.

# Organizations' Needs and Challenges

Across the semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ organizations, major themes emerged with regard to the challenges and needs facing LGBTQ work in Mississippi. Coding processes revealed organizational challenges across three general themes describing the landscape of LGBTQ organizing in Mississippi: 1. a need for stronger coalitions and improved resource sharing, 2. backlash experienced in LGBTQ organizing, and 3. challenges associated with identifying and working with funding sources.

## Need for Stronger Coalitions and Improved Resource Sharing

Organizations frequently noted the shared scope of LGBTQ work and the need for stronger coalition building. A major point of success among organizations has been the development of the 'We are all Mississippi' Coalition:

- *"Who else is at the table of We are all Mississippi? Oh, its several organizations, several people - it's a really really wide campaign that stretches throughout Mississippi. That again pushes for inclusion when it comes to LGBT folks... It's just so many that have worked to push that campaign forward"*
- *"Once we were able to get a coalition going of all of the leaders within those organizations we saw that our efforts had been maximized and we were able to get more people involved in a lot of different issues"*

Other organizations reported the challenges of multiple organizations sharing similar scopes of work:

- *"Another challenge has been competing events with having so many nonprofit organizations, right, and everyone having the same constituents. Sometimes it is difficult to organize events um and have a huge turnout because other organizations and other businesses are having competing events...so it's putting people in positions to where they're having to choose between this organization or that organization."*
- *"I mean even considering the fact that in Mississippi we have 5 different gay prides...which would be more effective: having 5 small prides or having one big unified pride right that could be more visible on the national platform that can get more people involved and engaged as well?"*
- *"Everybody has a calling list, everybody does phone banks, everybody has events that cost money and fundraisers and this and that and a lot of people don't like being in positions having to choose"*

Relatedly, organizations also reported difficulty in recruiting and maintaining membership, which they understood as key to organizational sustainability:

- *"Uh the biggest issue is gaining a large enough population to make a stand. With it being approximately 15,000 people in Mississippi that identify as transgender, we need those 15,000 people to stand up with us and you know push for this different legislation or meet their legislator."*
- *"I think the...challenge is probably trying to continue on to attract people to join us and become a part of us and be faithful and consistent in helping us build and be a community of faith. We have a lot of visitors that many will come in for a period and they won't stay and be committed."*

## Backlash to LGBTQ Organizing

Organizations reported experiencing backlash to carrying out LGBTQ-specific work in Mississippi:

- *"And it is so such a hard battle to fight because...it's respectability politics is what it like boils down to. They're wearing suits and dresses and going to dinner at [university president's] house when we're boots on the ground having to deal with the fact that one of our gender nonconforming students was raped and they won't use the correct pronouns at the police station."*
- *"That's probably one of the things that we struggle with the most is the pushback...Not everyone thinks that [LGBTQ people are] a part of their population...they believe it exists, but you know that's not their patient population"*

- *“The biggest challenge I would honestly say is the Mississippi mentality. And what I mean when I say that is, you know, so many of us within the trans community have gained comfort in living stealth life - which means you know once we slip under the radar we have gained success. Like we are lucky enough to have a job, you know if we are lucky enough to have gone through whatever discrimination we have gone through whatever harm we have gone through and we can still live comfortably, we are ok with that”*

## Challenges in Funding Sources

A final primary theme among organizations was difficulty in finding or working with funding sources. Organizations reported:

- *“We try to do everything without money ... because being housed under the [funding source] has been a horrible experience ...so we try to make sure that they have no say in what we do and how we do things.”*
- *“I think everyone is so focused on retaining their grants, everyone is so focused on keeping all of their volunteers and supporters in their individual corner instead of collaborating and working collectively together for the greater good.”*
- *“If it something that’s LGBT related obviously we’ll try and coordinate with [other LGBTQ org] although they have - for their legislative agenda - they have their own lobbyists and, while we do work to promote their stuff...we don’t overlap in terms of writing legislation and promoting it because they are funded by their own national organizations.”*

## Summary

Organizations noted that shared goals and scope of work with other various organizations can pose both a strength and a weakness to their work. One challenge to successfully carrying out LGBTQ organizational work in Mississippi has been a fight for resources and committed members to carry out the work. For example, organizations regularly described planning a program or event that conflicts with a similar event from a different organization. This divides an already limited pool of volunteer time and constituent donations.

Some organizations noted that the development of coalitions and partnerships between LGBTQ organizations sharing similar foci improved their progress towards shared goals. Coalitions and partnerships allow organizations to share resources and maximize efforts. Five organizations identified through the needs assessment are involved in the “We are All Mississippi” (WAAM) campaign, the goal of which is to educate people about the need for equality in Mississippi and to secure full legal protections for all Mississippians. More information regarding the coalition’s goals and partnerships is available at <http://weareallmississippi.com>

LGBTQ organizations often reported experiencing backlash as a direct result of working on LGBTQ issues in Mississippi. Organizations described barriers to their work including the invisibility of LGBTQ populations in Mississippi and the perceived anti-LGBTQ ideology held by many Mississippians. Some organizations reported having to frame their work in particular ways to appease administrators, funders, and/or regulatory agencies. Furthermore, Mississippi currently lacks a number of protections for LGBTQ people, which creates and maintains a sense of fear within the LGBTQ community in Mississippi.

Finally, LGBTQ organizations regularly reported challenges in identifying and working with funding sources. Given the present lack of LGBTQ-specific funding, organizations have tended to either 1. work with funders outside of the state who may be unaware of the specific challenges and needs faced by LGBTQ individuals in Mississippi or 2. receive funding from a larger entity within the state whose goals are not LGBTQ specific.

## Types of LGBTQ Work

Among organizations in Mississippi, three primary strategies emerged for doing LGBTQ work. All organizations reported some degree of education or awareness work, generally coupled with either direct service or policy/legal/litigation work. Direct service work and policy/legal/litigation rarely occurred together within the same organization.

### Direct Service

Doing direct service work was the least frequently reported work strategy among organizations. This work strategy most frequently included issues of health care provision, including both physical and mental health.

### Education and Awareness

Providing education and awareness raising was the most commonly reported work strategy among organizations. This work strategy was implemented broadly across all LGBTQ issues, and particularly with community visibility and pride.

### Policy, Legal Issues, and Litigation

Using policy, legal issues, and litigation as a work strategy was most commonly reported by larger organizations. While most directly linked to specific policy goals, this strategy was also cited as relevant for pride, school advocacy, and violence prevention.

## Central Issues in LGBTQ Work

The current landscape of LGBTQ work in Mississippi is primarily organized around six key issues. Note that most organizations reported doing work across multiple issues from this set.

### Specific Policy Goals

Among the most frequently reported issues were specific LGBTQ-related state and local policy. Specific policy goals included opposition to HB1523, support for municipal non-discrimination ordinances, and continued support for marriage equality.

### Intersectional Social Justice Work

Organizations very frequently reported intersectional social justice as a key issue. Specific intersectional work included work that coupled issues of sexuality, gender identity, anti-racism, and/or anti-sexism.

### Community Visibility and Pride

Countering LGBTQ invisibility in Mississippi was a common theme. Organizations were divided on strategy for this issue, with some supporting multiple local visibility or pride events and others advocating for one, statewide approach.

### Education and School Advocacy

Education and school advocacy was an issue shared by many organizations. This issue was often divided between inclusion work that focused on children or high schools and inclusion work that focused on colleges.

### Violence Prevention

The violence prevention issue included reducing hate crimes and decreasing harassment. This issue was of particular concern among organizations doing trans advocacy or service provision work.

### Physical and Mental Health

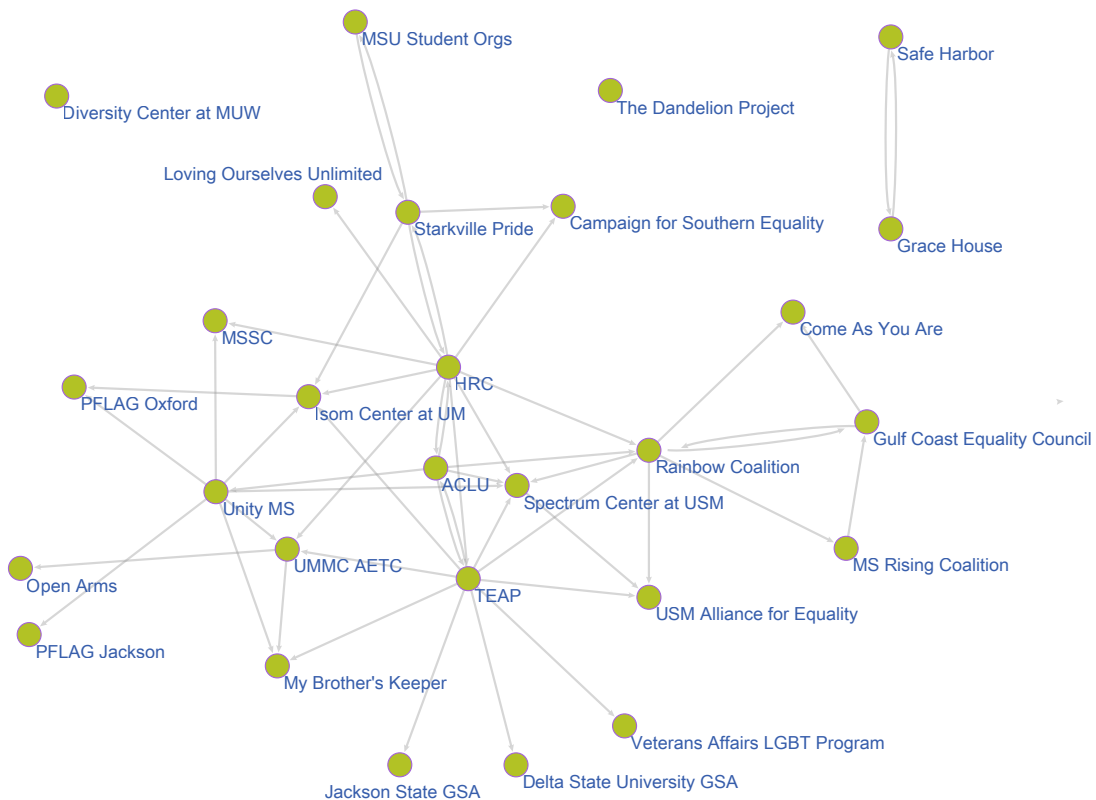
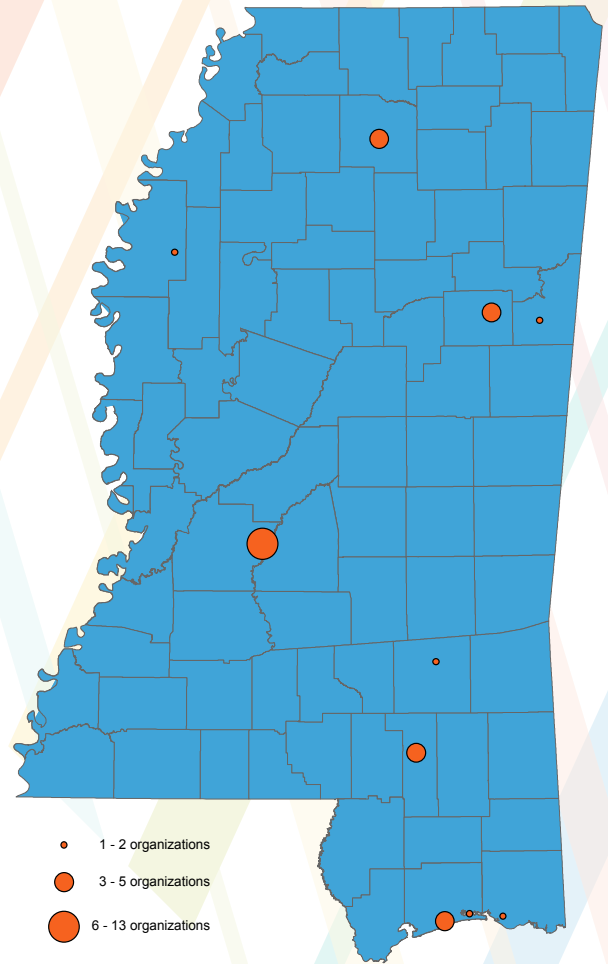
Physical and mental health was an issue most commonly reported by direct service providers. While there was some variation on this issue, HIV/AIDS prevention was the most common focus of health work.

## Geographic Distribution of Organizations

Data from organizational interviews were supplemented with information from organizations' materials and publications across all 28 identified organizations in order to map the geographic distribution and network connections between organizations. The map to the right illustrates the geographic distribution of identified organizations that serve or advocate for LGBTQ services. The highest concentration of identified LGBTQ organizations was in the Greater Jackson area, with 13 organizations reporting a Jackson address. Other notable geographic clusters include the Gulf Coast, Hattiesburg, Oxford, and Starkville.

## Network Map of Organizations

The diagram below illustrates network connections among identified organizations. Data from the network analysis is useful in examining potential for coalition building and for increasing organizational capacity by connecting organizations that may not currently be connected through LGBTQ work. Note that most organizations share a central network with relatively few isolated nodes. Geographic location is also a determinant of connectedness, with Northern and Coastal organizations connected to Jackson area organizations through a select number of gatekeepers. Potential connections to maximize network efficiency include building connections between student organizations, creating more connections between coastal and Jackson-area organizations, and building connections between isolated organizations and the primary network.





# Identified Organizations

ACLU of Mississippi	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.aclu-ms.org/">https://www.aclu-ms.org/</a>
Campaign for Southern Equality	---	<a href="https://southernequality.org/">https://southernequality.org/</a>
Come As You Are	Gulf Coast Area	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pg/CAYAMS">https://www.facebook.com/pg/CAYAMS</a>
Delta State University Gay Straight Alliance	Cleveland, MS	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/gsadeltastate/">https://www.facebook.com/gsadeltastate/</a>
Diversity Center at MUW	Columbus, MS	<a href="http://www.muw.edu/studentlife/diversity">http://www.muw.edu/studentlife/diversity</a>
Grace House	Jackson, MS	<a href="http://gracehousems.org/">http://gracehousems.org/</a>
Gulf Coast Equality Council	Gulf Coast Area	<a href="https://www.gulfcoastequalityfest.org/">https://www.gulfcoastequalityfest.org/</a>
Human Rights Campaign	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.hrc.org/">https://www.hrc.org/</a>
Isom Center at the University of MS	Oxford, MS	<a href="https://sarahisomcenter.org/">https://sarahisomcenter.org/</a>
Jackson State Gay Straight Alliance	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.spectrumatjsu.com/">https://www.spectrumatjsu.com/</a>
Loving Ourselves Unlimited	---	---
MS Rising Coalition	Gulf Coast Area	<a href="http://msrising.com/">http://msrising.com/</a>
MS Safe Schools Coalition	Jackson, MS	<a href="http://www.mssafeschools.org/">http://www.mssafeschools.org/</a>
MSU Spectrum and LGBTQ+ Union	Starkville, MS	<a href="https://orgsync.com/123582/chapter">https://orgsync.com/123582/chapter</a>
My Brother's Keeper	Jackson, MS	<a href="http://mbkinc.org/">http://mbkinc.org/</a>
Open Arms	Jackson, MS	<a href="http://oahcc.org/">http://oahcc.org/</a>
PFLAG Jackson	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://pflagjacksonms.wordpress.com/">https://pflagjacksonms.wordpress.com/</a>
PFLAG Oxford	Oxford, MS	<a href="https://www.pflag.org/chapter/pflag-oxfordnorth-mississippi">https://www.pflag.org/chapter/pflag-oxfordnorth-mississippi</a>
Rainbow Coalition	Gulf Coast Area	<a href="https://www.msrainbowcenter.org/">https://www.msrainbowcenter.org/</a>
Safe Harbor Family Church	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.safeharborfamilychurch.org/">https://www.safeharborfamilychurch.org/</a>
Spectrum Center at USM	Hattiesburg, MS	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/TheSpectrumCenter/">https://www.facebook.com/TheSpectrumCenter/</a>
Starkville Pride	Starkville, MS	<a href="http://www.starkvillepride.com/">http://www.starkvillepride.com/</a>
The Dandelion Project	Laurel, MS	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/projectdandelion/">https://www.facebook.com/projectdandelion/</a>
Transgender Education and Advocacy Program	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.aclu-ms.org/en/campaigns/teap-ms">https://www.aclu-ms.org/en/campaigns/teap-ms</a>
UMMC AIDS Education and Training Center	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.umc.edu/UMMC/Outreach-Programs/MS-AIDS-Education-Training-Center/Mississippi-AIDS-Education-Training-Center.html">https://www.umc.edu/UMMC/Outreach-Programs/MS-AIDS-Education-Training-Center/Mississippi-AIDS-Education-Training-Center.html</a>
Unity MS	Jackson, MS	<a href="http://unityms.org/">http://unityms.org/</a>
USM Alliance for Equality	Gulf Coast Area	<a href="https://www.usm.edu/gulfcoast/alliance-equality">https://www.usm.edu/gulfcoast/alliance-equality</a>
Veterans Affairs LGBT Program	Jackson, MS	<a href="https://www.jackson.va.gov/services/LGBT.asp">https://www.jackson.va.gov/services/LGBT.asp</a>

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