



2021 State of the State Response

Good afternoon. My name is Derrick T. Simmons. It is my great honor to represent the Mississippi Delta in the Mississippi Senate and I am delighted to speak to you tonight.

The last twelve months have been a time of significant change in Mississippi and the world. It was this time last year that Americans first learned of a virus that was perplexing doctors and scientists in Asia. Little did we know that COVID-19 would come to effect every aspect of life the world over.

As we talk tonight, nearly 6,000 Mississippians have died because of COVID-19 and more than a quarter million Mississippians have contracted the virus in the past year. This human loss has reverberated through every corner of our society. We have lost beloved family members, community leaders, pastors, teachers, health care workers, and colleagues. If you are mourning the loss of an irreplaceable friend or praying for the recovery of one of the hundreds of Mississippians receiving treatment in our hospitals right now, you are not alone.

To our healthcare workers—those doctors, nurses, and staff who have applied every ounce of your creativity and determination in treating us, we thank you. With your work spaces filled to capacity and at a great personal risk, you have come in to work every day. We will never forget your commitment to our communities.

With vaccines making their way to Mississippi, there is light at the end of the tunnel. When Mississippians are vaccinated, we will turn the corner. Of course, demand is high and after a year of keeping our guards up, patience is running thin. But we've come too far to give up now. New vaccine appointments are opening up each week. To see if you are eligible to receive a vaccine and to schedule your appointment, check with the Mississippi Department of Health by calling 1-866-458-4948 or visiting msdh.ms.gov.

The pandemic has also had a devastating impact on our work force, small businesses, and local governments. Tens of thousands of Mississippians have been laid off during the pandemic. These historic job losses have drained our state's unemployment trust fund and left families struggling to buy groceries and other basic necessities. We must provide support to individuals who have found themselves out of work through no fault of their own.

We must also make sure that the hundreds of millions of dollars appropriated to small business relief finds its way to Mississippi's main streets. If we are being honest, COVID small business dollars have moved too slowly and the Back to Business grant program has been embarrassingly inefficient. People struggling to keep their businesses open and take care of their employees need help now. Democrats in the legislature know that this economic crisis is real and stand ready to fight for additional aid.



Despite these enormous challenges, Mississippians have already begun to turn their eyes toward a brighter future. On November 3rd, nearly 3 out of 4 Mississippians voted to adopt a new state flag that represents all Mississippians. This has been a dream of Democrats in the legislature since Civil Rights hero and former state representative Aaron Henry filed the first bill to change the state flag in 1988. Since that time, Democrats have filed hundreds of bills to give Mississippi a more unifying state symbol. Until 2020, none of those bills made it out of a legislative committee.

While there is plenty of credit to go around to Republicans, Democrats, business leaders, and national athletic associations, Mississippi Democrats know that this change would never have happened if Mississippi's young people had not stood up to demand change. We are in debt to the teenagers and college students who organized for a new state flag. You have shown us that Mississippi is capable of doing hard and historic things and your creativity and courage in the face of enormous difficulty has inspired us all.

Mississippi's young people know that while a new state flag is a powerful and necessary step toward the future, it is only a step. Mississippi must live into the promises it has made to provide a great education to all of its students and a competitive salary for all of its teachers. We are not there yet.

In the words of Mississippi's "Education Governor" William Winter, "the road out of the poor house, runs past the school house." We lost Governor Winter late last year but we remain committed to his work. Governor, Mississippi has still not completed construction of the road out of the poor house but Mississippi Democrats have their hard hats on and we're going to keep following your road map.

If we are going to be a state worthy of our young people, we must also figure out a way to provide health coverage for our citizens. While the modern world has embraced healthcare innovations, Mississippi remains at the bottom in both health insurance coverage and health outcomes. The shortsighted politics of Mississippi Republicans have cost Mississippi billions of dollars and left our hospitals hanging on by a thread. If Governor Reeves will not expand Medicaid, it is past time for him and Republican leaders to come up with an alternative. Identity politics do not pay the hospital bills.

As we inch toward a more hopeful future, we must continue to look out for each other. This means being honest about our successes and our failures. Our politics have become corrosive. This is primarily the cause of politicians who would rather tell you what you want to hear than deal with harsh realities. As legislative Democrats we are recommitting ourselves to the truth. That means we will be honest when we get it wrong and we will make sure to show gratitude when Republicans get it right as they did on the flag vote this summer and the teacher pay raise last week. Because it is really not about us versus them. It is about all of us working together to find solutions to our biggest challenges.



Those of you listening tonight have a part to play as well. We can all look out for each other by continuing to wear a mask and looking for ways to help our most vulnerable neighbors. We can also seek out opportunities to develop relationships with people who are different than us. We have to break out of our information silos to ensure that we're not simply surrounding ourselves with the information we like. If we commit ourselves to being better neighbors and commit ourselves to the truth, we will force our politicians to be better.

Thank you for listening and thank you for all you are doing to take care of your community. I pray for a better year for you, the people you love, and for this state we love.