

Location:
East-Central Mississippi

Population:
77,966

Estimated median household income:
\$33,354

Estimated individuals below poverty level:
22.6%

Study Circle Participants:
50



"Tide is an ongoing process, as we assist people to empower themselves in order to build our community."

— Thomas Young,
Meridian Study Circle Participant

The Southern Rural Development Center's Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative has given Lauderdale County, Miss., residents the guidance and inspiration to become civically engaged in community and economic development.

"We are trying to raise the issue of poverty, not keep it under the bed," said Thomas Young, Study Circle participant and key facilitator. "To make institutional change, you have to work from the bottom up."

Eight Study Circles identified priorities for combating poverty in this county of nearly 80,000. By addressing what initially gets people into poverty and then what keeps them there, the group has been able to brainstorm ways to liberate people from this detrimental way of life. By starting at the root, Tide participants are making a difference.

■ COLLINSVILLE Farmers market

Tide participants in Collinsville, a town of nearly 2,000 residents, know that local farmers markets are one of the most effective sources for inexpensive, fresh produce. With 13.9 percent of its population below the poverty line, the town concentrated on providing a free place for local farmers to sell their produce to the public and an opportunity for residents to purchase healthful fruits and vegetables.

Conveniently located at the Collinsville Community Development Club Center on the town's main thoroughfare, the market runs throughout the summer. Ten families sold their produce and other goods at the market.



■ MERIDIAN Plant a Tree to Curb Poverty

Inspired by Tide, 93-year-old Felix Sutphin has initiated a tree planting program to beautify the community, engage civic support and decrease poverty in the county. Through "Plant a Tree and Curb Poverty," he hopes to make Meridian, Lauderdale's county seat, the Orchard of the South. With 29.2 percent of its 40,000 residents below the poverty line, Meridian must seek creative ways to fight the poverty problem.

Planting apple, pear, fig and nut trees, for example, will help feed people who are hungry. "The trees will come up on those lands and produce fruit, and the property owner will not only eat the fruit, but he will share it with his neighbors," Sutphin said.

Sutphin has also reached out to both elementary schools and community leaders to execute his plan. Because he realizes that children are the future leaders, he wants to help teach them early in life the importance of community involvement and helping others. With many local schools already involved, he believes the project has the potential to include nearly 450 children planting trees in the coming years.

Though planting trees is a subtle way to decrease poverty, Sutphin's plan represents a much more significant philosophy — working for the good of others.

In addition, three committees led by retired teachers and religious leaders have been formed with Tide's assistance to operate under the Beautification and Urban Gardening Council. They will focus on Tide's core issues including citizenship, landscape, rural beautification and development, and moral values.

Linking parents and schools

Tide participants have also developed an action plan geared toward improving the quality of public schools, as well as involving parents in their children's education.

Young and Becky Glover, Study Circle representatives, have been instrumental in executing the plan by working closely with the Meridian Housing Authority (MHA) to address the relationship between education and poverty. Together, they seek to improve parental involvement among families who live in MHA communities.

When students are better educated at home and in the classroom, graduation rates increase, drop-out rates decrease, crime rates decline and higher education opportunities emerge. In addition, teen pregnancies, another main contributor to poverty, decrease.

The Sowashee Courts Housing Community, an MHA community, hosted a successful event to give

families, school administrators and teachers the chance to get to know each other and openly discuss potential improvements. Such events will continue to create routes for improved communication and support.



Parent Leadership Institute

After initiating a plan to work with parents in MHA communities, several Tide participants became actively involved with Parents for Public Schools (PPS), a national organization founded in Mississippi in 1989 to promote high quality education in a diverse public school setting and to increase parental involvement.

PPS emphasizes that education is the way out of generational poverty. Children whose parents are involved in their education perform better academically and tend to have fewer behavioral problems in the classroom and at home. This not only benefits the child, but also the family, the school, the neighborhood and the community as a whole. PPS works at the local level to improve and support the school systems in Meridian and Lauderdale County.

During the spring of 2011, the Tide initiative joined with PPS to fill the Parent Leadership Institute

to capacity. During the program, participating parents learn how to navigate the school system on behalf of their children, gain leadership and communication skills necessary to work effectively with other parents and school officials, and build an action plan to become positive influences in their children's schools. Parents from the spring institute are now actively working hand in hand with the schools in their community to provide a seamless environment in which their children can prosper.

Parent Coach Becky Glover described their goal best: "We know that, ultimately, parents and schools want the same thing — children who succeed in the classroom and in life."

TIDE IMPACT

Although the Tide initiative has only been in effect for two years in Lauderdale County, one of two pilot sites in the state, residents and local officials realize the growing problem of poverty and seek to continue strengthening current projects and implementing new ones. Through their initial efforts, Tide participants are making meaningful changes for themselves and their neighbors.

Young summed it up: "We are embarking upon something new. It takes commitment to make this kind of change."

Note: Statistics based on 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates from www.census.gov.