

Location:
East-Central Mississippi

Population:
29,949

**Estimated median
household income:**
\$33,445

**Estimated households
below poverty level:**
16.3%

Study Circle Participants:
90



*"Tide allows us to bring
people together and better
utilize our community
resources to fight poverty in
our own backyard."*

— Karen Benson,
Area Extension Agent

The Southern Rural Development Center's Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative counts Neshoba County, Miss., one of two pilot sites in the state, as one of its most active areas. Under the direction of Mississippi State University Extension Service county and area agents, residents have proposed and followed through at the community and county levels with projects related to community outreach, education, food provisions, public policy and more.

Area Extension Agent Karen Benson credits Tide for allowing Neshoba Countians to realize local challenges and respond accordingly. "In Mississippi, because we are accustomed to seeing poverty, we don't realize what an emergency it is. It is eye-opening when it effects your neighbors," she said.

PEARL RIVER

Clothing provisions

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians is headquartered in Neshoba County, with more than 62 percent of the population and more than two-thirds of the reservation's land area in the county. Although gaming has dramatically improved the tribe's quality of life, many still live below the poverty line. As a result of a Study Circle held in the Pearl River community on the Mississippi Choctaw Indians Reservation, Green Hill United Methodist Church joined with two other churches to raise \$1,500 to purchase 430 school uniform shirts for needy students in the tribal school system. The group has also established God's Closet to gather and distribute used clothing in the community.



PHILADELPHIA

Food initiatives

Supporting a food pantry topped the list of action items for Study Circle participants. With Tide's help, the Neshoba Baptist Center's food pantry took the necessary steps to join the Mississippi Food Network (MFN), which allowed it to distribute fresh foods donated by the local Wal-Mart. Fruit, vegetables, meat, eggs and dairy products that previously returned to the discount chain's distribution center now stay in the county to provide healthful food for nearly 200 residents each week, 50 weeks per year. Officials estimate these Wal-Mart donations total \$1,000 weekly.

As an MFN member organization, the food pantry also orders bulk canned and packaged foods at low cost to supplement the fresh foods. The pantry has increased its distribution by nearly 40 percent, or \$7,040 per month, thanks to additional access to Wal-Mart fresh foods and MFN supplemental foods.

Mayor's Volunteer Corps

As is the case in many small, rural towns, the mayor's office often serves as Philadelphia residents' first call for help. However, it is an overwhelming challenge for the small staff to keep pace. In response, Tide organized volunteers to work five days a week in the county seat's mayor's office to help match needs to appropriate resources, assist their neighbors and build a better sense of community as they work. These volunteers may provide callers with immediate help, refer them to the new Community Resource Directory or work with them to develop long-range plans that Tide can address. Callers have their needs met, abilities and talents identified, and voices heard through this innovative program.

UNION

Share and Serve

Because the community of nearly 2,000 is located more than an hour's drive from its food network service center, Union wanted to establish a food pantry to aid residents who need extra food resources but cannot afford to make the trip. The local post office co-sponsored a canned food drive, providing nearly 500 nonperishable items to help establish the pantry. Inspired by Tide, a local faith-based organization hosted its first Share and Serve event in October 2010 to distribute food, clothing, personal care items and cleaning supplies to more than 30 families in need. Future plans include hosting this event at least twice each year.

Raised bed gardens

Designed to produce extra food, build self-dignity for the recipient and provide health benefits through daily exercise, 13 small raised bed gardens flourished in backyards across Union last summer. Garden recipients, chosen based on income guidelines, also received hand tools and gardening tips from the Extension Service and the Action Team who built the gardens. Lumber for the 4' by 8' beds was provided by anonymous donations and the team plans to expand the program in 2011.

COUNTY-WIDE

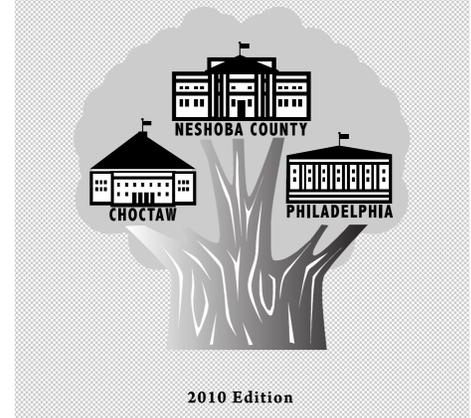
Resource directory

Unification is a common theme as communities move through the Tide process. A perfect example is the Neshoba Community Resource Directory, which provides contact information for local government, community organizations and services from Philadelphia, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians reservation and the county. Compiled in 2010 and available both online and in print, it unifies information that had previously been separated. The collaboration provides an all-inclusive resource guide for residents and newcomers to easily access needed services at www.neshoba.org.

TIDE IMPACT

Benson, who has watched Neshoba County's numerous Tide projects materialize from ideas on a chart to clothes on people's backs and food on

Community Resource Directory



their tables, said, "Tide allows us to bring people together and better utilize our community resources to fight poverty in our own backyard."

Across the county, residents understand the value of local voices employing local talents to make a difference for their neighbors. In an area remembered for civil rights injustices in decades past, Tide unites residents from different races, ages and economic standing to better not only their own communities but also Neshoba County as a whole.

Turning the Tide on Poverty has received positive media coverage from local newspapers and radio and television stations, encouraging residents to get involved, tracking their progress and following up on the initiatives. A blog keeps volunteers informed, and strong local leadership has been key to Neshoba County's progress.

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