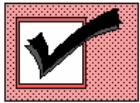


**Southern Echo, Inc.**  
**5-year Program of Work**  
**on**  
**Census and Redistricting**  
**2008 - 2013**

**About Southern Echo**



Southern Echo is a leadership development, education, and training organization working to develop new, grassroots leaders and community organizers in the African-American communities in Mississippi and the surrounding region through a comprehensive training, technical and legal assistance program. This work has carried Echo staff into 65 of Mississippi's 82 counties and has provided training for community organizations in 13 other states in the south and southwest. The underlying goal is to empower local communities through the development of *effective leadership* and *community organization* and to create a process through which community people can obtain the *information* and build the accountable leadership and organization needed to hold the political, educational, environmental and economic systems accountable to low-wealth grassroots communities of color. Echo's model of community organization is "*inter-generational*," with a special emphasis on the active inclusion of *young people* in this process on the same basis as adults.

Southern Echo's goal is to create and sustain a cadre of black-based black-led grassroots organizations across the State of Mississippi that can build unusual alliances across traditional barriers of race, class, geography and status to impact the formation and implementation of public policy at the local, county, state and federal levels. Southern Echo is also working with grassroots Latino organizations in the southwest and white working class organizations in Appalachia to build these kinds of alliances within the southern and southwest regions through the development of common ground in the work around fundamental public policy issues of mutual concern.

**What is the need?**



Southern Echo's work around the census and political redistricting has been the cornerstone of its efforts to empower grassroots low-wealth African American communities in Mississippi. This work really began in Mississippi in the early 1960s around the fight to enforce the right to register and to vote. Southern Echo was formed at the end of 1989 and began its work in 1990. It has had an impact on multiple levels:

- The work toward a full and accurate census count in 1990 and the community organizing work on the political redistricting in 1991-1992 at the state, county and municipal levels created the maximum number of electable black districts in the Mississippi legislature, and significantly increased the number of electable black districts on the county boards of supervisors, municipal governing boards and school boards.
- The community organizing work from 1990-1992 focused on providing for the first time training and technical assistance to grassroots African American communities and assisted them to build new broad-based community organizations in the Mississippi Delta, the east central and southwestern parts of the state that enabled community people to help shape public policy for the first time.
- The consciousness-raising and skills development during this process led to a record African American community turnout to vote in the regular 1991 state and county elections and in the special 1992 court-ordered election for the state legislature. As a result, with a statewide black voting age percentage of approximately 30%, the African American voters won 30% of the county

supervisor seats statewide, significantly increased the number of African American elected to other county positions, boards of alderpersons and county school boards. In addition, the Legislative Black Caucus doubled in size from 21 in 1991 to 42 in 1993 [there are 174 state legislators]. The Caucus increased again in 1995 to 45, in 1999 to 47, in 2007 to 50 [which is 28.7% of the state legislators]. In 2007 the Caucus in the House provided the Speaker with 56.5% of his votes for re-election to the top spot. The Caucus also holds the balance of power on appropriations and since 1993 black legislators have held key committee chairpersonships in both the House and Senate.

- In 1991-1992 the active, knowledgeable participation of community people from across the Delta prevented the state legislature from diluting black voting strength in the 2<sup>nd</sup> congressional district in the Mississippi Delta region from 58% black voting age population to 52% black voting age population.
- It should be noted that in the 2000 census work and 2001 redistricting fight, Southern Echo was able to bring back together the coalition of organizations at the state level that had mounted the fight in 1990-1992, and the local community organizations at the county level. As a result of the earlier successes, the community was better prepared to move quickly into battle in 2000-2001 and the resistance to fair districts, although not gone, was much weaker. In 2000 to 2002 Southern Echo expanded its training process around census and redistricting to include representatives from states in the southeastern region.

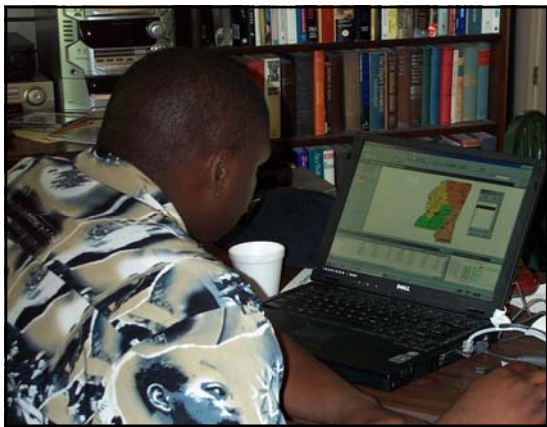
As a result of this process, the African American community has been able to provide significant leadership at the state and local levels on substantive policy issues and to create safe space for emerging moderate white leadership and organizations to join forces with African Americans in support of these issues. Prior to 1991 the Legislative Black Caucus had been too small to cause the passage of a single piece of

legislation other than the Dr. King birthday holiday. For example:

- In 1995 Mississippi ratified the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution. This symbolic gesture (in a state rooted in symbolism) demonstrated that the Caucus had the capacity to generate and succeed in moving progressive legislation.
- From 1995 through 1997 the Caucus, with active assistance from the black community, successfully blocked legislation, referenda and constitutional amendments pushed by the Republican Party and the MS Economic Council in an attempt to force a new redistricting of the state legislature and all county boards of supervisors, and to change the political process to eliminate the recognizable role of political parties in elections.
- In 1997 the arch-conservative Governor vetoed the MS Adequate Education Program which appropriated \$650 million new dollars to public education, the first significant education appropriation of new dollars in Mississippi history. The Legislative Black Caucus refused to compromise with the Governor or the white leadership in the legislature and fought to override the veto. The veto was overridden in the House by 3 votes and in the Senate by 1 vote. The MS Adequate Education Program is now the basic formula for funding Mississippi public education. In 1997 and 1998 the legislature also voted major increases in teacher salaries, which ranked lowest in the southeast region. This brought the total appropriations of new money for public education to \$1.2 billion. This could not have happened without the significant increase in the size of the Caucus and the active on-the-ground participation of hundreds of community people working to hold their legislative representatives accountable on this issue.
- The capacity of the Legislative Black Caucus, supported by the active presence of community on the legislative playing field, to impact policy formation and implementation has created safe space for state officials, and white moderates and conservatives, to work

together with leadership and activists from the black community, and to accept leadership from the black community, in the formation of public policy regarding education, juvenile justice, health care, tax reform and other issues of importance to grassroots communities. In 2003 this led to the creation of the MS Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse and in 2004 to the creation of the Education Stakeholders Alliance, both of which have built bridges across the traditional barriers of race, class, gender, political affiliation, geography and status.

- Notwithstanding the gains that have been made, Southern Echo recognizes that sustained vigilance is required to protect these gains. This can only be done effectively by continuing to build the capacity of community leaders and organizations to engage community meaningfully in the policy formation and implementation process and to hold public officials accountable through effective participation in the census and redistricting process.



### **5-year plan: 2008 – 2013**

With this background in mind, Southern Echo is undertaking a 5-year plan from 2008 through 2013 with regard to the 2010 census and the redistricting process that will begin when the census data is released in early 2011.

**2008 --** During 2008, while the census and redistricting organizing strategy, training design

and implementation timelines are being set, Southern Echo will reach out to a select number of social justice organizations in 9 states with whom it has worked in the past or are working with now. The additional states are Alabama, Arkansas, North Carolina South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and Nevada. This will require substantial substantive discussions and may involve travel to the individual states to make presentations about the training process. Training in Mississippi and the other states will begin in 2009. The design of these trainings will involve collaboration with the participating organizations in each of these states.

While in Mississippi and some states the constituencies involved will be primarily African American, in other states, such as New Mexico, Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Nevada, the organizational constituencies will likely be substantially Latino and Native American. Southern Echo will work with each state to create a framework of local technical and legal assistance to support their redistricting work after the release of the 2010 census data.

**2009 –**Southern Echo, working through local organizations, will train a cadre of community people in each of the states in the rules and regulations, tools and skills of census data collection, with particular reference to the complexity of the new demographic classifications. One goal will be to create a process for monitoring the census data collection process to ensure that the program is designed and implemented to generate an accurate count within the state. The goal is to ensure an accurate count of persons as a foundation for a fair



redistricting process and accurate voter registration rolls. The census count (and therefore, the degree of accuracy of the count) will establish benchmarks against which the issue of vote dilution of people of color and one person-one vote issues will be assessed.

**2010** -- During 2010 Southern Echo, working through the Mississippi Demography Group, will train an intergenerational cadre of demographers from different parts of the Mississippi Delta region. The training participants will learn:

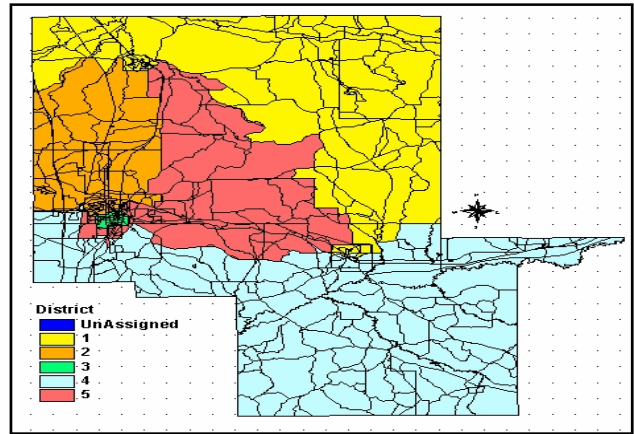
- the fundamental tools and skills of the redistricting process,
- how to apply key constitutional and legal principles to census data to draw fair and viable redistricting plans,
- how to understand and interpret the significance of census data as it impacts redistricting issues,
- how to work with grassroots community groups to understand local community priorities and how to utilize local community knowledge and expertise about the context in which the redistricting is being done,
- how to use GIS software to draw redistricting plans, and
- training participants will be assigned to assist specific communities at the county, school district, or municipal levels in the redistricting process and will receive on-going technical assistance from Southern Echo to support them in this work.

In addition, Southern Echo will hold workshops throughout the state with local grassroots community groups and public officials on:

- how the redistricting process works,
- the applicable legal principles that will govern the redistricting process in light of the most recent US Supreme Court decisions, and
- how to create plans that reflect the needs and interests of local grassroots communities.

The demographic and GIS training that participants receive will also have a continuing value in the development of maps and related materials for the work of communities regarding environmental and education issues at the state and local levels.

In 2009 and 2010 the census and redistricting training and technical assistance in Mississippi ought to reach at least 2000 persons. Southern Echo will work with social justice organizations in the other 9 states to track the participation in



workshops in those states. The intensive training of trainers in census and redistricting tools and skills in Mississippi ought to involve approximately 30 younger and older activists from the 10 organizations in the Mississippi Delta Catalyst Roundtable. The intensive training of activists from the other 9 states in the South and Southwest regions should involve approximately 30 activists. In both Mississippi and the 9 additional states Southern Echo will undertake a systematic tracking process to determine how many grassroots community people become involved in the work through this process.

**2011 - 2013** – From 2011 through 2013 Southern Echo will provide further training and technical assistance to the demographers and grassroots community groups at the state, county, school district and municipal levels:

- to assist them with the use of the new census data to create redistricting plans,
- to present plans to the appropriate governing bodies,
- to evaluate redistricting plans proposed by other demographers,
- to assess whether plans proposed to or adopted by governing bodies violate the rules regarding dilution of black voting strength or one person-one vote, and
- to assist presentations to the US Department of Justice whenever that may become necessary.

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