

# About Us

In Mississippi, programs authorized by the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act) empower individuals with developmental disabilities and their families to help shape policies that impact them. DD Act programs conduct important research and test innovative new service delivery models. They work to bring the latest knowledge and resources to those who can put it to the best use, including self-advocates, families, service providers, and policymakers. DD Act programs also investigate cases of abuse and serve as advocates for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.



## Mississippi's Developmental Disabilities Network



### Disability Rights Mississippi

As the state's Congressionally mandated protection and advocacy for people with disabilities, DRMS provides free legal advocacy services for Mississippians with disabilities who have had their rights violated due to their disabilities. From education to employment, DRMS ensures Mississippians are included and contributing to their communities. We also monitor for abuse, neglect, and exploitation in state-run and private facilities.



### Institute for Disability Studies

IDS's work is about enhancing quality of life for Mississippians with disabilities. Through programs and services focused on community living, education, and family engagement across the life span, IDS educates university students through interdisciplinary courses, internship experiences, and service-learning; promotes high-quality early childhood and school-age inclusion services and supports; and helps Mississippians reach their full potential.



### Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities

MSCDD promotes a better quality of life for people with developmental disabilities and their families. Improvement in quality of life is accomplished through programs which promote self-advocacy and leadership, develop new approaches or eliminate barriers for services and supports, and increase access to resources through education and collaboration, enabling individuals to exercise self-determination.

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# DISABILITY RIGHTS MISSISSIPPI (DRMS)

Carrying Out Federal Law to Protect the  
Rights of Americans with Disabilities



## ABOUT US

Disability Rights Mississippi (DRMS) is a non-profit legal advocacy agency empowered by federal law and created and funded by Acts of Congress to advocate for the disability rights of Mississippians with disabilities. DRMS's primary program is the Protection & Advocacy Program (Appropriated by Congress with underlying federal laws).

DRMS provides free, direct advocacy services. From legal representation, advocacy, and helping Mississippians to advocate for themselves, we help Mississippians achieve justice, live healthy and safe lives, and achieve independence and participation in their communities.

## MISSION

To promote, protect, and advocate for the rights of all Mississippians with disabilities and to assist them with full access in home, community, education, and employment.

## DRMS STOPS FRAUD AND WASTE OF GOVERNMENT DOLLARS AND INCREASES EFFICIENCY

Disability Rights Mississippi (DRMS) is designated by the State of Mississippi to be the official Protection & Advocacy (P&A) system. The P&A system was created by Congress and is enshrined in federal law. As the P&A in Mississippi, DRMS is empowered by federal law to protect and advocate for the disability rights of your office's constituents.

**DRMS works to ensure that federal, state, and local tax dollars designated to help people with disabilities are effectively serving those in need.**

DRMS does things like:

- Cut red tape and delays to help parents of children with disabilities make sure their kids get the special education and healthcare services they need to graduate.
- Cut more red tape for the constituents of your office so they can access the services and supports they need to be more independent, productive citizens, relying on government services less in the future.
- Help people with disabilities find jobs and stay in the workforce so they do not need to rely on public benefits.
- Make sure government workers are doing their jobs and get your constituents the services they need.
- Assist individuals with disabilities to move out of large, expensive, government-run institutions, into smaller, community-based or private homes that save taxpayer dollars.

# OUR IMPACT IN MISSISSIPPI



## PROTECTING VULNERABLE MISSISSIPPIANS, INCLUDING VETERANS AND THE ELDERLY

Stopping abuse and neglect of Americans with disabilities is a critical reason why Congress created the Protection & Advocacy system. Over the last several years, DRMS has intensified efforts to expose and address the ongoing crisis in unlicensed personal care homes. Our investigations have revealed widespread issues in facilities across the state that operate outside of licensure, putting vulnerable residents at risk. Unlicensed homes—largely unregulated by Mississippi state law—often fall below acceptable standards of care. These homes often house our state's most vulnerable, including older Mississippians with disabilities, veterans, and those with severe mental illness who lack nearby family to care for them.

In 2024, DRMS filed over 20 injunctions in various Mississippi counties, achieving significant court orders mandating compliance through licensure or closure. This legal advocacy has yielded positive results, with judges consistently granting injunctive relief, though many UPCH operators attempt to evade regulation. Despite successes in individual cases, DRMS faces an uphill battle, frequently returning to court to hold non-compliant operators accountable, while also regularly reporting severe violations to the Mississippi Attorney General's Office.

In January, DRMS released a detailed report to the State Legislature and the public, which can be accessed at [www.drms.ms/PCHreport](http://www.drms.ms/PCHreport). The report highlights systemic issues and advocates for stronger, enforceable regulations to safeguard residents in these unlicensed facilities. Our agency continues the fight to prevent abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and human trafficking in these facilities, and is working to build a coalition of Mississippi legislators to support changes in the next session.

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## SMALL CLIENTS, BIG WINS

A 6-year-old boy with a hearing and speech impairment was not receiving speech therapy even though he was eligible. DRMS's Advocate attended a meeting with the school's special education team and negotiated for him to receive the services that he is entitled to. He **now receives speech therapy twice a week**. In the client's evaluation report, it was stated that he needs an FM Sound System in the classroom setting to help him hear the teacher better. Since our meeting, **the school has installed a voice amplification device for him** to use in the classroom while they work on getting the FM Sound system ordered.

Another student's school day was shortened to only a partial day because his bus route exceeded an hour and put him at risk for epileptic episodes. DRMS's Advocate negotiated: a **return to full school days**, a modified bus route to less than a 20 minute ride, and the **development of a seizure medical plan**.

## MISSISSIPPIANS AT WORK

An individual with a disability was having issues with their reasonable accommodations at their job at a grocery store after management changes. Our Advocate was able to work with the grocery store to ensure all management understood accommodations and what the client needed. The individual and their family were so appreciative and the individual has been **succeeding at work with their accommodations in place**.



**INSTITUTE FOR DISABILITY STUDIES**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

# The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS)

Meeting the Needs of Mississippians with Disabilities and Their Families for 50 Years



## ABOUT US

The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) is Mississippi's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD).

Created by federal legislation in the 1960s, UCEDDs are associated with universities across the United States and its territories and promote independence, productivity and community inclusion for people with disabilities.

UCEDDs, like IDS, focus on training, technical assistance, service, research and information-sharing, and uniquely facilitate the flow of disability-related information between community and university.

IDS has provided interdisciplinary education, community services, information dissemination and research to Mississippians with developmental and other disabilities statewide for the past 50 years.

[USM.EDU/IDS](http://USM.EDU/IDS)

## MISSION

To positively affect the lives of Mississippi citizens with developmental and other disabilities and their families across the lifespan and to work toward increasing their independence, productivity, and community inclusion

## REAL MISSISSIPPIANS, REAL IMPACT

### MELVIN'S TESTIMONY: COMMUNITY LIVING/HOUSING

"I was homeless for over four years following my divorce. Last year, while I was still homeless, I gained custody of my two teenage sons. Through a contact at my boys' school, I was given information about the Rapid Rehousing Program at USM. Prior to that, I had applied for assistance from other organizations with no help. After getting the run around for months from the other organizations, I was skeptical, but I had to try something because it wasn't just me anymore. From the moment I spoke with the Rehousing program at USM, everything changed. The staff were so friendly and helpful, while understanding of our needs at the same time. They worked tirelessly to get us approved. Once approved, they worked with my potential landlord to get me and the boys off the streets. My boys have a place to call home. I know this wouldn't be possible had it not been for the ladies at USM. Since moving into our place, they've helped us with resources, including furniture. My boys now have their very own beds. I am very grateful to this program, as it has been and still is a tremendous help to my family. I'm glad that there's a program like this that helps those who are in need because life is hard, and it doesn't always go how you'd like it to go. Thank you for everything!"

### MATTHEW'S STORY: WORKING IN THE COMMUNITY

Matthew, an 18-year-old student at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, is a powerful example of how IDS's Transition of Teens to Adult Life (ToTAL) program helps young adults with disabilities transition successfully into employment and postsecondary education. Through participation in IDS's Summer Enrichment Academy, Matthew received hands-on employment readiness training, which included resume development, interview preparation, and workplace professionalism, all of which prepared him for a paid internship at AccuFab in July 2024.

Upon completion of his internship, Matthew was offered employment with AccuFab, transitioning from a paid internship to a part-time job position with flexible hours during the school year. Matthew has been guaranteed a job after completing his associate degree in welding.

Matthew, who has been diagnosed with Autism, shared, "I wouldn't have found them otherwise." His experience demonstrates the lasting impact of pre-employment training and meaningful work-based learning. His mother explained, "As parents, we worry about our children's future—but thanks to this program, we don't worry about Matthew's anymore. We're beyond grateful. This program opened doors and gave him purpose, confidence, and a clear path forward."

# OUR IMPACT IN MISSISSIPPI



## SUPPORTING VETERANS AND IMPROVING LIVES

The weight of the folded flag felt familiar, yet immense, in the hands of the young Wounded Warrior. LM was barely into his 20s when his active-duty career was abruptly cut short, leaving him bound to a wheelchair and locked in a daily battle to reclaim his strength, this moment – presenting the colors before a crowd gathered to honor veterans – felt both daunting and deeply significant.

His community support specialist, a vital link funded by the Wounded Warrior Program and managed by the Institute for Disability Studies, had been instrumental in his journey, offering steady encouragement through countless challenges. As he was given the flag, the expectation was a presentation from his seated position. But fueled by a quiet determination that belied his physical limitations, he did far more. With tremendous effort, he pushed himself upward, rising from the chair as a wave of hushed surprise rippled through the audience, quickly turning to supportive applause. Each slow, deliberate step he took navigating the stairs to the stage was a testament to his resilience. Reaching the center, he didn't just hold the flag; he carefully raised Old Glory high above his head, a powerful silhouette against the lights, and the clapping swelled into a heartfelt cheer. Then, with unwavering focus, he turned and planted the flagpole into its holder on the stage – the loud, solid thump echoing through the venue, answered by an eruption of unrestrained applause and pride.

It's for moments of profound courage like this, supporting the incredible journeys of young men and women overcoming adversity, that we proudly provide our community support specialists every day at the Institute for Disability Studies.

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## A Parent's Perspective

“Will was accepted into the RISE To The Top program at USM, and is about to finish his first year as a college student, something that my wife, Kacee, and I never thought would happen. Again, I refer back to the beginning where this is all God’s will. The fact that we live in a town that has a major university, and that university is one of only two in the state that offers programs for special needs students. That is not a coincidence. Will loves all things related to audio/visual production. USM has an awesome program for this. The staff and students have been exceptional with Will. He was able to complete his first college course in this field, and is enrolled to complete more next year. To see his excitement each day when he is picked up from class is the brightest part of our day. It never gets old. RISE is a tremendous program, not just for Will, but for all of those involved. **And I need to mention that the RISE program would not be available if it were not for the Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) at USM.**

The independence and confidence he now has due to these programs, and the people who oversee them, is nothing short of a miracle. Next year, he will even get to complete an internship as a camera operator at USM’s local TV station. In three more years, our son will complete his college education and get to walk/graduate just like a regular college student. This accomplishment will allow him to enter into the job world and pursue a career in a field that he absolutely loves (and is very good at).”

# Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities

Promoting a better quality of life for  
Mississippians with developmental disabilities  
and their families



## MISSION

Promoting a better quality of life with programs which promote self-advocacy and leadership, develop new approaches or eliminate barriers for services and supports, and increase access to resources through education and collaboration.

## ABOUT US

Councils on Developmental Disabilities are federally funded, self-governing organizations charged with identifying the most pressing needs of people with developmental disabilities in their state or territory.

The purpose of MSCDD is to engage in activities consistent with the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (PL 106-402) which contribute to a coordinated, consumer- and family-centered, consumer and family-directed, comprehensive system of community services, individualized supports, and other forms of assistance that enable individuals with developmental disabilities to exercise self-determination, be independent, be productive, and be integrated and included in all facets of community life.

## MAXIMIZING INDEPENDENCE THROUGH EVERYDAY ADVOCACY

### Comments from the trainings were as follows:

- “I thought (the workshop) was great and just having someone else to listen to and talk with us about our child was reassuring and hopeful.”
- “The sense of community is strong. The encouragement from today’s speaker that we are doing a good job came at a good time for us personally.”
- “I love the freedom and comfort in being able to communicate and that nothing is off the table.”
- “Great tips about what to do before this next school year.”

### College and Career Readiness:

“Most students don’t know the content that this course offers, and they don’t know where to find the information. Career Readiness should be a course all students should take to be an informed citizen.” “This is a great course for special education teachers to learn to grow in all areas.”

### Ready, Prep, and Play:

For one child, he had struggled with routines, often spending most of the day in tears for hours, requiring frequent breaks outside the classroom. By the end of the program, he had tremendous growth. He even started joining in for circle time and participating in center activities. He would often smile and play during these times and began engaging in parallel play activities with a peer. He successfully transitioned into a high academic skills course based on his progress. Another success story was when a child used the AAC device to ask for a favorite item all on their own meeting the goal of the program to increase independent communication.

### SuperAble Fitness:

One amazing outcome of SuperABLE Fitness is the large amount of high school volunteers on sports teams that participate. Some of those volunteers have experiences with individuals with IDD for the first time through this program.

### Summer Academic Clinic:

Two participants were in an intensive toileting intervention in addition to their other services. Both were 4 years old and were not toilet trained yet. By the end of summer, both were fully toilet trained during the daytime (independently requesting at home) and have since received report that both are successfully independently using the toilet in their public classrooms.

# OUR IMPACT IN MISSISSIPPI



## BETTER OUTCOMES, IMPROVED LIVES

### **Project Grow:**

A total of 69 individuals, including those with developmental disabilities, participated in hands-on demonstrations focused on preparing healthy meals for themselves and their families while staying within a limited budget. Staff observed a growing number of requests for food assistance, particularly in the days leading up to the monthly renewal of food stamp benefits. This was especially prevalent among households where parents have developmental disabilities. It became apparent that many of these parents lacked basic cooking skills and knowledge of how to shop for nutritious, cost-effective food items. As a result, food stamps were often depleted early in the month on expensive, convenience-based, microwavable meals and unhealthy snack items that did not support long-term nutritional or financial needs. To address this, participants took part in a six-week program where they learned essential skills such as how to read food labels, grocery shop effectively, modify recipes for better nutrition, plan meals, stock pantry essentials, and cook healthy, affordable meals from scratch.

### **No More Waiting:**

After a parent training session, the caregiver reported that instead of getting on the waiting list, as their doctor recommended, she was empowered to seek a more relevant therapy service for her child, which was highly beneficial and created more effective change. This parent stated she was “thankful” their family had received individualized resourcing instead of just being “put” on a waiting list for services that were not as relevant for her child as the ones they were able to access.

Another comment after a recent training session with a caregiver was “I’m so grateful you have taken the time to speak with me because no one has explained all of this before now.” The caregiver reported calling “several agencies” for help with no success and that their family had made the decision to “move to Mississippi because it seems there are more resources here.”

### **LEAPS Behavior Program**

Staff believe one of the students served, JZ, is the perfect case study in what can be achieved for a student with a developmental disability and co-morbid severe behavior when the right supports are in place. JZ was referred when he was in kindergarten and his school was pursuing an alternative educational placement for him at Mill Creek.

He has now been receiving support through the program for 4 semesters. In that time, he has gradually transitioned from 100% self-contained instruction, with no other students present in the room due to the severity of his aggression and disruptive behavior, to receiving instruction alongside peers in a general education classroom for approximately 5 hours per day. He not only participates in activities like art, music, recess, and meals in the cafeteria with his peers, but also completes grade-level work (e.g., math, reading) under his general education teacher’s instruction. Moreover, he is now able to ride the bus and attend all school field trips with his peers.

JZ’s parents are elated with his behavioral progress and seem to feel much more comfortable making suggestions and advocating for support for him during activities that he may find stressful.