

INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF MINORITY HEALTH

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Volume 5 Number 16 - FALL 2025



In This Issue:

- Baby Depot receives Donations
- World AIDS Day Observed

Mississippi's Unhoused Deserve More Than Sympathy—They Deserve Solutions

Homelessness in Mississippi is often invisible, especially in rural communities where people sleep in cars, abandoned buildings, or move between relatives' homes. But invisibility does not lessen the crisis—nor the responsibility we share to address it.



Sandra C. Melvin,
DrPH, MPH,
Chief Executive Officer

A Crisis Rooted in Inequity

Mississippi's high poverty rate, rising housing costs, and limited tenant protections leave many residents just one setback away from losing stable housing. For those already facing mental health challenges, disabilities, or unemployment, the risk is even higher. With few shelters—especially outside major cities—finding help can be nearly impossible.

Health and Housing Are Deeply Connected

Unhoused Mississippians face serious health challenges: untreated chronic illnesses, limited access to care, and worsening mental health. Without stable housing, even basic preventive healthcare becomes out of reach. Homelessness is not just a social issue—it is a public health emergency.

Punishment Is Not a Solution

Some localities rely on fines, arrests, or anti-camping ordinances to “manage” homelessness. These measures don't reduce homelessness; they push people further from stability by adding legal and financial obstacles to already difficult lives.

Real Solutions Are Within Reach

- Mississippi can make meaningful progress by investing in:
- Affordable and supportive housing
- Accessible mental health and addiction services
- Reliable transportation options
- Policies that prevent, rather than punish, homelessness
- Living wages and stronger tenant protections

These are not abstract ideas—they are proven strategies that work when communities commit to them.

A Call for Compassion and Action

Mississippi prides itself on resilience and community. Addressing homelessness is a chance to live those values fully. Our unhoused neighbors deserve more than temporary assistance—they deserve a path to stability, dignity, and health.

Sandra Carr Melvin, DrPH, MPH, MLS

Sandra C. Melvin

Suitcase Drive Provides Essential Aid to Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health, along with the Ebony Pearls Foundation and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated®, Rho Lambda Omega Chapter, collected and distributed rolling suitcases to two Jackson-area agencies serving unhoused residents.

Shower Power, located at 836 S. Commerce St., received 100 suitcases, while the Billy Brumfield Shelter, located at 1244 S. Gallatin St., received 50. The items were delivered on Friday, Nov. 20, 2025, to support individuals who rely on the agencies for daily services and assistance.

In addition to the donations, the Institute and sorority members served a pre-Thanksgiving Day meal to 150 clients at Shower Power and delivered more than 50 snack bags to residents at the Billy Brumfield Shelter. Volunteers also distributed toiletries, JTRAN bus passes and fast-food gift cards to help individuals meet immediate daily needs.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.®, and the Institute have collaborated on several initiatives addressing homelessness, maternal and child health, period poverty and veteran support. The suitcase drive was part of an intentional effort to reduce disparities by meeting practical needs that affect health, safety and stability.

The Institute and Rho Lambda Omega Chapter will continue partnering to support unhoused residents across the Jackson metro area. Community members and organizations are encouraged to support this work by making tax-deductible donations to the Institute's unhoused program at minority-institute.org/donations or by contributing to the Ebony Pearls Foundation at ebonypearlsfoundation.harnessgiving.org/donate.

Ebony Pearls Foundation, in collaboration with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated®, Rho Lambda Omega Chapter and the Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health

Community Suitcase Drive for the Unhoused

ROUND II

Drop Off Date
Thursday,
November 13,
2025
5:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.

Drop-Off Location:
The Ivy Pointe
5959 I-55 West Frontage Road,
Jackson, MS 39213
(Turn right between the two Devon storages facilities).



For more information, contact
Maya Thompson 769-300-6155
Markyel Pittman 662-520-8725

- New or gently used suitcases with wheels (for men and women)
- Wheels and handles must be in working condition
- All donated suitcases will be given to individuals experiencing homelessness.
- A rolling suitcase helps make daily travel easier, safer, and more dignified.



Due to the large number of suitcases collected, a U-Haul truck was used to transport the items.



Institute program manager Markyel Pittman is joined by Rho Lambda Omega members Tonya Spells Jones, Melissa Brown, Lindsey Newman, Dawn Magee, Ashley Malone, Jayla Davis and Rashida Jenkins after unloading the suitcases collected during the suitcase drive.

September 2025

Alzheimer's Awareness Support via Coalition Training

In recognition of Alzheimer's Awareness Month, the Tobacco Coalition hosted Kristen White of the Mississippi Alzheimer's Association for an educational session in September. Seventeen people were in attendance. During the session, White discussed the impact of Alzheimer's disease, early warning signs, strategies to reduce risk, and effective communication approaches for supporting individuals living with dementia. The presentation offered practical guidance to help coalition members better support families and community members affected by Alzheimer's.

September is recognized as Alzheimer's Awareness Month

Please join a virtual training presented by the ALZ Association and IAMH

Date: September 17 at 10 a.m.
Zoom Link: <http://bit.ly/3HNMIuR>

Alzheimer's and Dementia in Our Community
Learn about the impact of dementia, warning signs, risk reduction, communication strategies, resources and more.

presented by
Kristen White,
Program Manager
MS Alzheimer's Association

BLACK MEN'S HEALTH
Equity Council

Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health

NAACP
Mississippi State Conference

For more info, contact Shelethia Whisenton swhisenton@advancingminorityhealth.org

Expungement Clinic Provides Legal Relief and Health Resources to Community Members

“The event offered community members an opportunity to begin clearing past criminal records.”

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health served as a co-sponsor of a Free Expungement Clinic held September 20, 2025, at the Jackson Medical Mall. The clinic was hosted by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Rho Lambda Chapter, in collaboration with the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project, One Voice and the Mississippi Center for Justice.

The event offered community members an opportunity to begin clearing past criminal records while also connecting with vital health resources. Institute staff engaged with 17 participants and distributed 85 health and equity materials designed to support informed decision-making and healthier lifestyles.

The clinic served as a meaningful bridge between legal relief and overall well-being for residents seeking a fresh start.



It's Giving Connection:
Authentic Cultural Competency in Maternal Care
September 16, 2025
10:00AM-10:45AM CT

This session explores what it means to move beyond surface-level approaches to cultural competency and embrace authentic practices that strengthen trust, communication, and connection with mothers.



Marilyn Johnson, MBA

By centering authenticity, providers will gain tools to build stronger relationships, improve maternal health experiences, and foster equity within their practice.

For more information:
swhisenton@advancingminorityhealth.org Presented by Mom.Me



Register Here



Training Highlights Cultural Competency in Maternal Care

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health hosted a MOM.ME training session on September 16, 2025, at Hinds Community College in Ridgeland, Miss. The training focused on strengthening cultural competency in maternal care. The theme was *It's Giving Connection: Authentic Cultural Competency in Maternal Care*.

Drawing on the organization's direct work with women throughout pregnancy and postpartum, the session emphasized the voices and experiences of mothers. Presenters highlighted patient perspectives and real-world communication challenges that influence maternal health outcomes.

The session was designed for healthcare providers, birth workers, doulas, and others who work directly with expectant and new mothers. Organizers stressed the importance of culturally responsive communication to build trust and enhance patient experiences.

Nineteen participants attended the training.

October 2025

Institute CEO presents at Statewide Maternal Health Convening Conference

Dr. Sandra Melvin, CEO and Founding President of the Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health, was among the featured presenters at the Rooted to Rise: Maternal Health Mississippi Convening Conference held October 8-9, 2025, in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Hosted by the Women's Foundation of Mississippi and its partners, the conference brought together advocates, healthcare providers, policymakers, community leaders, and families to strengthen the state's maternal health ecosystem and address critical issues impacting Mississippi mothers and families.

During her presentation, Addressing Structural and Policy Barriers to Maternal Health: Tackling the Hidden Challenges Mothers Face in Health



Dr. Melvin was a keynote speaker at the conference in Gulfport, MS.

Care, Dr. Melvin spoke on policies, systems, and structures that shape what care mothers can access and how they experience care. Institute Program Managers Shelethia Whistenson and Latasha Rice were in attendance and participated in sessions aimed at improving maternal health outcomes statewide.

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health remains committed to advancing maternal health equity through education, advocacy, and community engagement.



Shelethia Whistenson, Latasha Rice and Dr. Sandra Melvin attended the Rooted to Rise conference hosted by the Women's Foundation.

Coalition Recognizes Breast Cancer Awareness

October is recognized as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and the October Tobacco Coalition meeting incorporated education and the link between tobacco use and breast cancer as part of the national observance. At 11 a.m., October 15, 2025, Dr. Ashley McKenzie, Southern Region program coordinator for the Mississippi State Department of Health's Office of Tobacco Control, delivered a virtual presentation on this topic. Seventeen people were in attendance.



Speaking the Same Language:
Cultural Competency & Communication
Training for Providers

October 16, 2025
11:00AM-12:10PM, CT

This training equips healthcare providers with practical strategies to improve patient-provider communication and deliver culturally competent care.

We'll explore the historical context of communication barriers impacting minority patients, learn how to leverage advocacy as a tool for systemic change, and discuss actionable steps to build trust and reduce disparities.



Register Here



Dr. Burse



Dr. McKnight



CHES CEU's will be offered for this training.



Virtual Training Builds Cultural Competency for Maternal Health Providers

The Institute hosted *Speaking the Same Language: Cultural Competency & Communication Training for Providers* on October 16, 2025. The training offered practical strategies to strengthen patient-provider communication and support culturally competent care.

Designed for healthcare providers, birth workers, doulas and others who work directly with expectant and new mothers, the session focused on improving communication, building trust and addressing cultural factors that shape patient experiences and health outcomes. A total of 46 participants attended the virtual session which was held via Zoom. The Institute believes the turnout reflects a growing need for tools that help providers better serve diverse patient populations.

Staff Supports Events at the Jackson Medical Mall

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health participated in the Annual Community Health Fair hosted by the Jackson State University Undergraduate Student Associations of the College of Health Sciences on Oct. 22.

Institute staff engaged with 48 attendees during the event and distributed 240 educational materials highlighting the Institute's programs and preventive health resources. Organizers said the fair offered a valuable opportunity to promote health awareness, connect community members with reliable information, and strengthen partnerships with future health professionals at JSU.



Staff engages with health fair participants.

CAB Meeting Offers Information and Fun

The Rural Maternity and Obstetrics Management Strategies (RMOMS) program held its virtual Community Advisory Board meeting on October 23, 2025. The meeting provided updates on efforts to expand access to prenatal, perinatal and postpartum care for mothers in the Mississippi Delta.

Program staff highlighted ongoing work to strengthen telehealth services, wellness support and transportation options for expectant and new mothers in rural communities. Several mothers participated in the meeting and shared feedback on their experiences. The meeting concluded with a raffle. Congratulations to raffle winner Kim Randle of Delta Health Systems in Greenville, Miss.

World Homeless Day Supports Unhoused Residents

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health staff supported World Homeless Day on October 10, 2025. Hosted by Stewpot Community Services, this event raised awareness about the homeless crisis in Jackson, Miss., and provided resources to those in need. Staff provided hygiene products and snacks to 30 attendees.

Institute Support for Men's Shelter Continues

The Billy Brumfield Homeless Initiative, a monthly outreach effort of the Institute's Men's Health Program, provides meals, health education and onsite screenings to men experiencing homelessness. In September, staff assisted 37 participants and 39 in October. Working in collaboration with St. Paul Church of God in Christ, the initiative reached a total of 76 men over the two-month period. Organizers said the effort continues to address critical health needs among vulnerable populations in the Jackson area.



Shelethia Whistenson and Markyel Pittman get ready to work during World Homeless Day



The Walk to End Alzheimer's is Personal for Staff

Institute staff hit the pavement and joined hundreds of community members in support of Alzheimer's research and awareness during the Walk to End Alzheimer's on October 18, 2025.

Held at Holmes Community College in Ridgeland, Miss, the event drew 780 participants and 145 teams. Over \$160,856 was raised to advance research and fund critical support services for individuals and families affected by the disease. Staff members Shelethia Whistenson, Miracle Vance, and Marilyn Reed were honored to stand alongside advocates, caregivers and families united in the fight to end Alzheimer's. During the event, staff helped distribute flowers for the flower garden and represented family members during the walk presentation.

Pictured right: Staff members were happy to support the Fight Against Alzheimer's. The fight is personal for Miracle Vance as she walked in support of her grandmother.



November 2025

Mississippi NAACP Convention Centers Health Equity

Men's Health Program Manager Markyel Pittman led the 80th Mississippi NAACP Youth and College Division State Convention, which brought together students from colleges across the state to discuss issues shaping their future.

Health equity emerged as the most prominent topic, with participants focusing on Medicaid and Medicare expansion and their impact on young people and underserved communities. The convention concluded with a Health Luncheon led by Health Chair Dr. Sandra Melvin and Co-Chair Pittman, highlighting the importance of youth engagement in advancing health-related policy and advocacy efforts.



CEO/Founding President Dr. Sandra Melvin received the Dr. Aaron Henry Award during the MS-NAACP Convention.



December 2025

JSU students and Converge support Baby Depot

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health is grateful to Converge and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated® Gamma Rho Chapter (Jackson State University) for their generous donations of infant formula, diapers, and wipes to support our Baby Depot program.

These essential items help us meet the growing needs of families across Mississippi, especially new and expectant mothers facing financial hardship. With community partners like Converge and the Gamma Rho Chapter, we can continue providing critical supplies that promote healthier starts for babies and greater stability for families.

Pictured below: Converge staff members J'Bria Iyalla, clinic manager, and Renata Chatman, MSN, RN, WHNP-BC, vice president of clinical services, presented 27 boxes of infant formula to the Baby Depot. Diapers, wipes, and a monetary donation were delivered from Shelby Hudson. Hudson is a Jackson State University student and president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Gamma Rho Chapter.





Institute Board Member Honors Essay Contest Winner

Institute Board Member Tracey Rosebud and Grenada City Manager Dr. Trina George recognized Roderick Parker, the winner of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., annual essay contest.

Parker, a senior at Amanda Elzy High School, earned top honors for his outstanding essay and was celebrated for his academic excellence and leadership potential. He plans to major in mechanical engineering at the University of Memphis.

Policy Luncheon Focused on Healthcare Access and Affordability

With Mississippi facing some of the highest health barriers in the nation, Care4Me Mississippi convened leaders from across the state for a powerful Healthcare and Affordability Policy Luncheon aimed at tackling the crisis head-on. The luncheon was held on Tuesday, December 9, 2025, at Table 100 in Flowood, MS. The event featured expert panelists John Dillon Harris, MPH, Senior Policy Advisor, Center for Mississippi Health Policy, Sandra Melvin, DrPH, CEO and Founding President, Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health and Kaylan Szafranski, Senior Policy Analyst, Community Catalyst. The panel was moderated by Sylvia-Nicole Cecchi, Chair of Care4Mississippi.

Panelists discussed policy concerns such as the Affordable Care Act Marketplace premium tax credits, H.R. 1 provisions, Medicaid expansion, access to care, and affordability and transparency.



Belzoni Paints the Town Red for World AIDS Day

The Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health's HIV Prevention Team Painted the Town Red for World AIDS Day in Belzoni, Miss. The Paint the Town RED! community testing event expanded HIV prevention resources in the Delta and provided free, accessible health services to residents.

During the event, the team administered 51 HIV and STI (Sexually Transmitted Infections) tests and offered blood pressure and glucose screenings, along with educational materials focused on sexual health and wellness.

Community partners included the MS Shine Project, Mississippi State Department of Health (Sunflower County), Canopy Links, The Spot, One Voice, Delta Health Alliance and the Reserve and Respond Project. Each organization helped connect residents with resources and ongoing support. IAMH staff also distributed prevention materials, condoms and risk-reduction tools, while providing individualized guidance to meet participants' needs.

Paint the Town RED! reflects the Institute's commitment to expanding HIV awareness, reducing disparities and increasing access to testing across the Mississippi Delta.

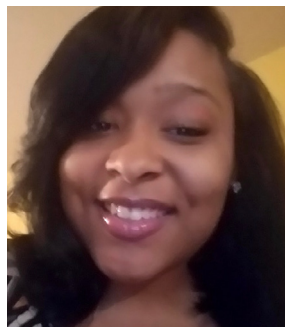
Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health Staff



Sandra C. Melvin,
DrPH, MPH,
Chief Executive Officer



Akita Campbell
Office Manager/
Executive Assistant



Chasitie Webster
Human Resource Director



Ra'Shad Jones
Accounts Payable
Specialist



Mya Hayes
Grant Management Specialist



Marilyn Reed
Director of Communications



Frederick Smith
Webmaster/Social Media
Manager



Kendria Barnes,
Epidemiologist II



LaTasha Rice
Program Manager



Shelethia Whisenton
Program Manager



Markyel Pittman
Program Manager



Warren Jones, MPH
Epidemiologist



Miracle Vance
Program Specialist



D'Anah Evans
Program Specialist

Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health Board of Directors



Rep. Chris Bell



Nicholas Lott



Dr. Michael L. Jones



Cassandra Hawkins



Dr. Talya Straughter



Luis Espinoza



Allytra Perryman



Rep. Tracey Rosebud



Tanya Funchess



The Community Connection is a quarterly snapshot of the work happening at the Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health. Each issue is designed to keep our partners, stakeholders, and community members informed about our mission, vision, and impact.

From the MS Delta to Central Mississippi and beyond, our programs tackle critical health issues such as maternal and child health, chronic disease and health equity, men's health, and infectious disease.

We invite you to join us in this important work. By volunteering your time, partnering with our programs, or contributing resources, you become part of a collective effort to uplift underrepresented voices and empower families across Mississippi to live healthier lives.

Visit minority-institute.org/donations to support our mission. Click the icons below and follow us on all social platforms to stay connected.

