

24 Copiah County

Workforce Development

Project: Aspire to Achieve

With a focus on preparing high school seniors for meaningful career opportunities, Copiah County launched "Aspire to Achieve," an initiative designed to introduce students to career pathways that do not require a four-year degree. The event, hosted at Copiah-Lincoln Community College, offered participants a hands-on experience by allowing them to explore two priority programs and one alternative program of interest.

Beyond program exploration, students received valuable support through resume-building workshops and professional guidance on interview attire, equipping them with practical skills for entering the workforce. By addressing the diverse career needs of its students, Copiah County aims to inspire a new generation to pursue fulfilling careers while strengthening the local economy. This initiative reflects the community's commitment to providing pathways to success and ensuring students are prepared to seize opportunities beyond high school.

The Aspire team intends for "Aspire to Achieve" to be an annual event that will ensure students are equipped with the knowledge to pursue in-demand, high-paying careers after high school with the bonus of receiving skills training at home in Copiah County.

Franklin County

Site Development

Project: Site Selection for Economic Development

Recognizing the importance of industrial site readiness to drive economic development, Franklin County initiated a process to identify and prepare potential locations for future growth. The effort began with identifying 19 potential industrial sites across the county, each with at least 150 acres. While smaller sites in the 20- and 50-acre ranges will be considered in later phases, this initial focus on larger tracts lays the foundation for significant investment opportunities.

To ensure a structured approach, the team developed a step-by-step task list for site development in collaboration with the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA), Entergy, and Cooperative Energy. These efforts have positioned Franklin County to move forward with confidence in its site readiness initiatives. Although maps of the sites have been created, they remain confidential until landowners can be approached, ensuring a careful and respectful approach to community engagement.

This groundwork marks a critical step in Franklin County's commitment to economic growth, paving the way for future development and investment in the region.

Project: Small Business Development Resource Exposition

Understanding the vital role small businesses play in sustaining rural economies, the Greene County Aspire team initiated a project to promote small business development within the community. Despite being the backbone of the economy, small business growth is often overlooked in favor of pursuing larger industrial projects, leaving rural communities vulnerable to economic stagnation. In response, the team is planning a Small Business Development Resource Exposition aimed at connecting local business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs with valuable resources. The event will bring together small business development professionals to share expertise and guidance, all in one central location. The team's immediate goal is to encourage community participation and provide insight into available resources, while their long-term vision is to foster the establishment or expansion of small businesses in Greene County. Scheduled for early 2025, the exposition marks an important step toward revitalizing the local economy by empowering small businesses to succeed. Lessons learned from the event will guide future initiatives to ensure continued support for entrepreneurs in the community.

Sunflower County

Organizational Development

Project: Building Bridges for Progress

Sunflower County's Aspire team chose to address the critical need for improved communication and collaboration among local elected officials as the foundation for future progress. After identifying many needs and wants, the team determined that fostering better relationships between county and municipal leaders was the first step toward meaningful development. The team knew the only way to break the stalemate was to bring all parties together in small groups to build connections and trust that had not previously existed.

To achieve this, the team developed a plan to hold at least three events annually, complemented by smaller gatherings that include at least two board members from each municipality. An external facilitator will guide the larger meetings, while state elected officials will help moderate the smaller group discussions. Additionally, the program will emphasize principles from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* to encourage better communication, increased levels of trust, and more collaborative leadership among local leaders. The first larger group meeting was held at the B.B. King Museum and Interpretative Center, bringing together 30 to 35 elected officials. This productive meeting generated the excitement and momentum needed to move Sunflower County forward with the intended goal of leading to greater economic development outcomes.

Tippah County

Workforce Development

Project: Why I Chose to Live in Tippah County

Tippah County's Aspire team worked to counteract high school students' negative perceptions of staying in the county after graduation by showcasing diverse and uplifting local stories, aiming to support talent retention and attract future professionals. The team carefully selected 10 community members, ensuring the group reflected the community's diversity and included individuals who had never left the county, those who left and returned, and those who moved to Tippah County after graduation. This mix of perspectives provided a well-rounded view of the opportunities and successes within the community.

The team developed a standardized set of interview questions with interviews conducted by the Ripley High School Career Coach. . The interviews were recorded, professionally produced, and posted on YouTube to maximize accessibility and reach. To further engage the community, the videos were also broadcast during halftime at three county high school football games, ensuring the message reached a wide audience of students and families. Through this initiative, the Aspire team hopes to inspire students to see Tippah County as a place of opportunity and growth for years to come.

23 Amite/Wilkinson County Infrastructure/Transportation

Project: 4 for 24

Amite and Wilkinson Counties are strategically initiating a project with a primary focus on fostering industry growth and enhancing transportation safety. This endeavor involves the establishment of a formal coalition known as "4 for 24." At the commencement of the Aspire year, the team identified their core concerns, prioritizing their role as a catalyst for industrial growth while ensuring safer communities for residents. The overarching goal of this coalition is to serve as a catalyst for crucial components contributing to economic prosperity. The formation of the "4 for 24" coalition underscores the team's dedication to addressing the urgent need for a four-lane highway, seeking support from stakeholders at both regional and state levels. This initiative encompasses engaging citizens, developing a unified message, and executing various tasks to raise awareness and advocacy for an improved transportation network in the region. Through these coordinated efforts, the team aims to instigate positive changes that will benefit the entire region, fostering a more prosperous and economically sustainable community for its residents.

Bolivar County Workforce Development

Project: Today's Initiatives for Tomorrow's Workforce

Bolivar County identified several opportunities for impactful projects. With a particular emphasis on workforce development and site development, these were deemed the primary areas of focus. The site development team dedicated significant effort throughout the year to ensure their site was adequately prepared for future development by educating local leaders and engaging appropriate utility providers, so they understand what an effective "shovel ready" process looks like. Simultaneously, the workforce development team actively participated in numerous meetings to address and overcome challenges pertaining to local workforce issues. They began to strategically address workforce challenges by focusing on future employer needs by convening local stakeholders ensuring that everyone hears the same message and participates in the same conversation. With a decline in workforce participation observed in recent years, the county is actively seeking ways to strengthen its current and future workforce. The seminar, Today's Initiatives for Tomorrow's Workforce, was held on January 30th at the Cleveland Country Club. It showcased initiatives from local workforce experts within the WIN Job Center, K-12 school systems, community colleges, and Delta State University. Attendees received valuable insights into the strategies and programs implemented by these organizations to ensure the success and growth of existing businesses while fostering the recruitment of new businesses. This event served as the first step in a collaborative effort to launch a new trajectory of Bolivar County's workforce and contribute to its economic prosperity.

Project: Unity in Vision

The Hinds County Aspire team, through open and honest conversations, reached a shared understanding that "we are all in this together," with a unified approach to economic development as the primary goal. Recognizing the importance of reshaping the narrative, building trust, and fostering collaboration, the group set out to achieve this collective vision. Hinds County's focus centers on enhancing organizational efficiencies and strategically positioning itself for economic development success. The overarching aim is to be intentional and relevant in its pursuits, emphasizing adaptability and foresight in a rapidly evolving landscape. Aspire Mississippi played a pivotal role as a catalyst, sparking significant conversations within the team regarding the optimization of their strategic planning efforts, led by VisionFirst Advisors. The inclusive approach, fostering open and honest conversations among stakeholders, proved instrumental in gathering diverse perspectives and contributing to a more successful strategic planning process. The project's emphasis on organizational efficacy and strategic relevance underscores Hinds County's dedication to fostering sustainable growth and development as the hub of the metro Jackson area.

Pearl River County

Workforce Development

Project: Elevate PRC: Empowering Workforce Prosperity

At the beginning of the Aspire year, Pearl River County recognized the need for its project to positively influence the community's economic landscape, aligning with the team's mission and goals. The decision was carefully considered to ensure a meaningful impact. Pearl River County's project centers on workforce development, specifically targeting the enhancement of the local workforce. This initiative involves the creation of specialized workshops tailored for surrounding businesses and educators. The primary objective is to meet the evolving needs of the community and facilitate collaboration between the business sector and educational institutions. Through these workforce initiatives, the county aims to equip participants with essential skills and knowledge, contributing to the growth and success of existing businesses and creating opportunities for new enterprises. The project underscores the significance of proactive engagement with both employers and educators, fostering a skilled and adaptable workforce that positions Pearl River County for sustainable economic development.

Union County

Tourism

Project: Prosper Union: Innovating Economic Resilience

The Union County Aspire team convened regularly to deliberate on suitable projects. In these sessions, a comprehensive approach was used to evaluate the merits and potential impacts of each proposed project. Union County has directed its efforts toward improving organizational efficiencies and redefining economic development strategies. The team's primary goal is to elevate the county's effectiveness by streamlining internal processes and embracing intentional and holistic approaches to local economic development. Through a focus on these initiatives, Union County aims to establish itself as a dynamic and forward-thinking community. The emphasis on organizational efficiencies and a commitment to relevance underscores the county's determination to cultivate a resilient and thriving economic environment. This strategic approach aims to attract new businesses, support existing ones, and promote tourism, thereby benefiting both residents and visitors and contributing to the overall prosperity of the region.

Project: Workforce Training

Since education is a key driver for better and more jobs, the Covington County Aspire Mississippi team determined that improved job and work skills training for 10th-grade students in all county schools was essential. The importance of “soft skills” training would increase students’ business and entrepreneurship training and create more opportunities for Covington County youth.

The team worked with the Covington County School Board and Families First for Mississippi, breaking the training into two segments during which they focused on

Importance of Soft Skills

Communication

Teamwork

Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

Dressing for Success

Resume Writing

Enthusiasm and Attitude

Networking

Professionalism

Lawrence County

Tourism

Project: Whirl on the Pearl

To increase recreational activity and tourism in Lawrence County, the team created a fun event around one of their natural resources—the Pearl River, which runs adjacent to Monticello, the county seat. “Whirl on the Pearl” highlights fun on the river by offering airboat rides, with interesting facts about the naturally occurring features, as well as history surrounding the river and Lawrence County. The date was set for November 9, 2019, but after heavy rains and subsequent flooding, the date was changed to June of 2020.

Leake County

Tourism

Project: Prosper Union: Innovating Economic Resilience

The Carthage Coliseum is sited on 18 acres and was built in 1972. Nearly 50 years later, the Leake County Aspire team is working toward a renovation of the facility. The team held a community-wide gathering to give all citizens an opportunity to communicate preferences for the facility, with staff members of the architecture firm that has been hired. The improvements include replacing the existing dirt floor with one of concrete, creating an additional outdoor arena, and a parking area for recreational vehicles.

Up to this point, most activities at the coliseum have been rodeo-related, and the Aspire team hopes to attract other events and increase tourism in the area.

Panola County

Workforce Development

Project: Made in Panola

Panola County’s team uncovered an industry need and created “Made in Panola,” a county-wide job fair for 340 participating students from North Delta School, and North Panola and South Panola high schools. The job fair was held in September and featured a session called “Necessary Skills” to learn life skills that are important in the workplace.

The students also met with 38 employers and organizations from Panola County to learn about employment, internships, and apprenticeships, as well as representatives from various branches of the military. Made in Panola will occur again in September 2020.

Project: Deep Delta W.O.R.K.S.

(Workforce Opportunities through Resources, Knowledge, and Skills)

The Sharkey County team created an opportunity for ninth- through 12th-grade students from three schools—South Delta High School, Sharkey Issaquena Academy, Deer Creek School—to learn more about employment opportunities in the area and the education necessary to pursue the occupation. Students also attended a class on interview skills, personal presentation, and learned about careers in the finance industry.

Walthall County

Project: Four Star Square

The goal of the Walthall County team is to make Centennial Square more attractive and cultivate an atmosphere conducive to shopping and dining. The plan includes physical enhancements, education and awareness, and the creation of activities and events to engender a livelier downtown community.

Attala County

Project: It's Worth It

Attala County realized some of their young adults had a need to learn soft skills, which matter when entering the workforce.

The team has been working with Tony Holder, director of the Career Technical Center in Kosciusko and has developed a series of 30 to 45-minute classes called "It's Worth It." Each session of the seven-week course focuses on one soft skill with a short video, activities and reasoning on why the skill is important, as well as incentives to make each session an interactive discussion. In the first session, they conduct mock interviews to see how well students respond. At the end of the program, they will provide a final interview to see who has gained the most knowledge and reward the student with the highest marks.

- The sessions include the following topics:
- Session 1 – Overview of Program/What Are Soft Skills?
 - Session 2 – Communication
 - Session 3 – Enthusiasm and Attitude
 - Session 4 – Teamwork
 - Session 5 – Networking
 - Session 6 – Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
 - Session 7 – Professionalism

Project: Track on Over to Ackerman

This Aspire project targets an increase in business revenue in the town of Ackerman. Team members are devoting efforts to capitalize on tourists and visitors who visit Choctaw Lake, Little Mountain, French Camp, and travel the Natchez Trace. The goal is to attract and engage visitors by encouraging them to shop and dine in Ackerman. Another draw for the project is to facilitate a welcoming committee to support the mountain bike race at Choctaw Lake over Labor Day weekend. The 2017 event drew cyclists from six states. The committee will provide 500 welcome packets to this year's visitors and detail unique amenities in Ackerman. Additionally, a digital campaign has been created for the project: #TrackonOvertoAckerman and website: www.trackonovertoackerman.com.

Marshall County

Workforce Development

Project: Soft Skills Training

Marshall County's Aspire project aims to provide high school students with essential soft skills training to help them secure and maintain employment. Alongside soft skills, the program emphasizes practical life skills, such as balancing a checkbook and changing a car's oil. The initiative has secured support from local manufacturers and approval from the local school boards. Currently, they are finalizing location options and organizing transportation for students. Upon completion of the training series, Marshall County hopes to secure internship opportunities for at least 20 students.

Simpson County

Workforce Development

Project: Create Your Own Shadow

Simpson County's Aspire team decided to focus on soft skills, as they relate to employability among high school students. The project, "Create Your Own Shadow," is a job-shadowing and placement program that will result in improved job and work skills for 30 participants, with a minimum of 10 of the students earning an internship/employment.

The team, with support from the local business community, will conduct a series of trainings and workshops with Simpson County students to introduce them to the basic skills needed to secure employment in the area. This effort will also include gaining internships and full-time employment at the completion of the program.

Webster County

Workforce Development

Project: YES

Webster County's Aspire team chose to focus on community member gains by providing high school students with improved job and workforce training skills with Project YES (Youth Empowerment Skills). Project YES is designed to give high school students personal and professional development skills. Through student-mentor sessions, the students will be taught soft skills. In the first session, a baseline of work skillset knowledge will be determined, and by the close of the sessions, the students should have garnered enough information to complete post-tests. Some of the areas of focus will include: resume writing, knowledge of employment opportunities in Webster County and in contiguous counties, salary components and how to locate and apply for jobs in the county.

Projects: Marion County Business Spark: Igniting Entrepreneurship and Growth

The team believed there was a dearth of entrepreneurs and new business openings in Marion County, and their data suggested the community could support more businesses.

Their solution was to provide classes in entrepreneurship. They hired a successful serial entrepreneur from the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Twenty-one students attended up to eight sessions of the class. One new boutique opened, one vacant building was filled; five new jobs were created; several new business plans were completed, and downtown buildings are being renovated or rehabilitated. In addition, existing business owners learned new skills and new business techniques.

Pike County

Projects: ACT Work Ready Community and Polishing Pike County

The Pike County Ambassador team led by Jill Busby, executive director of the Pike County Economic Development District, has undertaken a multi-goal project for their program.

Their first goal, which they are currently working towards, is becoming an ACT Work Ready Community. Their second goal is to form a coalition of local organizations to identify and improve blighted property within the community, an initiative they branded as "Polishing Pike County." They are steadily fulfilling their ACT goal.

Tate County

Project: Livability in Tate County

Tate County's project involves several groups of people coming together on multiple levels. Their goal is to attract more families to the area and to enhance quality of life for the families that are already a part of Tate County.

The team's leaders, Tim Climer and Jamie Sowell, returned to recommendations made in the Asset Mapping report, provided by MDA's Asset Development Division in 2010, and made contacts with major players in the area and sold them all on getting involved to make improvements in the community. They are slowly but surely moving forward.

Washington County

Project: Create Videos about Washington County's Workforce and Business Climate

Their project was to produce videos showcasing their assets and workforce training and availability. The workforce is ACT-certified. The videos have proven to be a great tool in the successful recruiting of several new industries and the expansion of existing industries. They have been successfully led by Cary Karlson, Executive Director of the Washington County Economic Alliance and his Deputy Director and Project Manager Will Copping.

Project: Prentiss on the GRID

This team wanted to focus on career pathways for better employment opportunities for its citizens.

The program, "Prentiss on the GRID," highlights the careers available in modern manufacturing that differ greatly from manufacturing in the past.

The target audience is high school upperclassmen who will not pursue a four-year degree at a university, as well as the unemployed and underemployed. The goal is to help these young adults to a pathway that will lead to a career, not just a job, within the county. Local employers helped by providing a list of skillsets necessary to be successful. Prentiss County Development Association (PCDA), with extra support from the Board of Supervisors, has received funding for testing in all three school districts. Students in Baldwyn and Booneville have been tested. After encouraging initial results, the team hopes to increase the number of students tested.

Winston County

BR&E

Project: Road Improvements for a Manufacturer

A major manufacturer needed better access to and from their plant – which would result in more goods being shipped and would negate the need for large trucks to rumble through downtown Louisville – the Winston County team wanted to make a major impact for economic development, existing industry, as well as for quality of life.

The team assembled stakeholders from the manufacturer, city and county government, MDOT and citizens to develop a process whereby all impacted entities would have a voice in what was needed. The team has completed engineering plans and has secured title to all the property in the area needed for the access road.

The community received \$500 thousand from a recent special session of the legislature from the BP settlement. Whereas the project has a price tag of approximately \$2 million, the team is working to utilize current funds to get the project going. Progress is being made, and the task force remains optimistic the project will create more interest from partners to secure the additional funding.

Alcorn County

Workforce Development

Project: Become an ACT Work Ready Community

Alcorn County knew the value in becoming an ACT Work Ready Community.

They had meetings with other economic development directors and workforce experts in Mississippi, and soon they were engaged in the ACT requirements, which included attending classes in Nashville and testing high school students and other residents.

Since their certification, more existing employers have become much more interested in the initiative. More and more have come to the organization seeking more information.

Project: Grenada Graduates to Work: Bridging Students to Local Careers

Due to a lack of immediate employment after high school graduation, as well as a leakage of recent graduates, who seek work outside the county, the Grenada team created a program to boost the hiring of recent graduates in Grenada County.

The team partnered with the Grenada Manufacturers Association and created a marketing campaign using informative and entertaining videos that were produced to appeal to students and were shown in the high school. The videos highlighted Grenada County manufacturers, who explained what they manufacture, the various aspects of the process and the work satisfaction of the other workers.

The end results were that after exposure to the companies, students could join an intern program with specific companies, and upon graduation, they could be hired.

Pearl River County

Organizational Development

Project: Project: Form an Economic Development Organization and Hire a Director

Although they have many first-class assets, Pearl River County has not had solid footing in the world of economic development because they have lacked an organization. The team decided to form an economic development organization, adopt bylaws, appoint a board of directors, secure funding and hire an executive director. In the winter of 2019, they are in the interviewing process for a director, having completed most of their ancillary goals.

Rankin County

Asset Investment and Recovery

Project: Sixteenth-section Land Trade

Rankin County saw a potential in swapping or selling 16th-section land in locations that were prime for commercial or industrial uses. After all, there was a similar swap of land in Hinds County that helped the Continental Tire project become a reality. The team had conversations with the Mississippi Attorney General's office and with other local entities. Now, the pump is primed to explore these opportunities in case the need arises.

Warren County

Tourism

Project: Open Old Mississippi River Bridge to Recreation

The team realized the Old Mississippi River Bridge could be an asset to the community and have endeavored to pedestrian and cyclist traffic. This project is to increase the quality of life in Vicksburg, as well as Madison Parish, Louisiana, and to create a tourist destination. The team has encountered many obstacles, but over the course of many months, they have persisted. Resolutions have been obtained from the following entities—City of Vicksburg, the Warren County Board of Supervisors, which owns the bridge; the Warren County Bridge Commissioners, the Madison Parish Port Commission and the Village of Delta, Louisiana, all of which support of the project. They have also received a favorable opinion from the Mississippi Attorney General's office. Through all the hurdles, they remain optimistic their goal will be achieved.

Project: Committee of 100

Because the City of Meridian and Lauderdale County border the State of Alabama—land many residents on both sides of the state line travel back forth to find employment and entertainment—the team wanted to create a process by which the region could come together to address issues that had an impact on everyone.

Through the Alliance for Growth, the Committee of 100 was formed and is made up of business leaders from a five-county area. They began to meet regularly to discuss common concerns and ways they could all benefit from the success of one another.

Since its formation in 2016, the Committee of 100 has achieved buy-in, resulting in pooling resources to hire a regional consultant and holding their first annual meeting. The work of the committee is also credited with assisting in the search and hiring of the new president of Meridian Community College – considered to be a major win for the region.

Neshoba County

Tourism

Project: Clean Up and Beautification of Philadelphia and Surrounding County Areas

What began as a plan solely for Aspire Mississippi the team, rapidly grew into a larger team of city and county participants. Under the leadership of David Vowell, executive director of the Community Development Foundation of Neshoba County, the following results have taken place:

- The abandoned Doctors Quarters (three buildings) on Indian Hospital Road were torn down and the site cleared
- A city building official has become involved and has been working on tearing down abandoned houses and clearing the sites within the city limits
- A city building official pushed a local business to clean up areas around his business for safety and beautification of the area
- Assisted in having a ditch near an existing business stabilized from erosion
- Worked with the city and East Central Community College on establishing phlebotomy, truck driving and small-engine repair classes in the former U.S. Motors Building

Because of the ditch stabilization project, the business is investing over \$500 thousand in an expansion project, which includes a 100,000 square-foot facility adjoining their existing facility, and will add an additional 10 jobs.



JOHN C. STENNIS INSTITUTE OF
GOVERNMENT & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

