October 27, 2004

Governor Haley Barbour
P. O. Box 139
Jackson, MS 39205-0139

Dear Governor Barbour,

We want to thank you for maximizing federal child care funds for our state. We are pleased and grateful that under your leadership Mississippi will fully match the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and will continue to transfer 20% of our state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) grant to CCDF. This means that over $14-million more CCDF dollars and nearly $20-million in TANF dollars will be available in Mississippi's child care subsidy program. These additional dollars could allow thousands more children to receive child care.

Unfortunately, the Department of Human Services has made two rule changes in the child care subsidy program that are having a devastating affect. As of 10/1/04, all single parents applying for child care certificates are required to apply for child support through DHS, and full-time students will no longer qualify without also meeting a 25 hour/week work requirement. Both these rule changes place hardships on low income parents who need child care in order to remain employed or to continue to go to school.

Increased education levels increase parents' earning power, so eliminating eligibility for parents who are full-time students prevents families from becoming economically self- sufficient. The child support requirement costs $25.00 and discourages many eligible mothers from applying for child care. Some single mothers are opting not to pursue child support due to fear of violence from the absent father and others find that informal payment arrangements result in more money from the absent father on a more immediate and regular basis than would be the case if they sought child support through DHS.

These rule changes have had an immediate adverse impact on a large number of families. Primarily as a result of these rule changes, many hundreds of parents have opted not to continue their participation in the program and approximately 40% fewer children are now being served in the child care certificate program, than were served last year. A survey of 144 child care centers conducted in the last two weeks by the MS Low Income Child Care Initiative shows that;

1. 1284 children have lost their child care certificates because of the new requirement that parents apply for child support.
2. 659 children have lost their child care certificates because parents who are full time students now have to also work 25 hours a week.

Clearly these rule changes are having a negative impact on children's access to child care. This is an urgent situation. We have heard and continue to hear daily from parents who have lost their child care and from child care providers who have lost child care certificates in such numbers that they are being forced to close down their businesses. Hundreds of calls for help have come from families and providers all across our state.

At your recent early childhood summit in Tupelo you stated very clearly your support for early childhood educational experiences in order for children to do well in school and to grow into productive adults. Additionally, your administration supports workforce development and economic development both of which will only succeed if we have a well-educated workforce. Therefore, we urge you to reverse these recently enacted DHS policies so that children can get the early childhood education they need and parents can become employed and remain at work.

Sincerely,

Carol Burnett
Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative
P. O. Box 204
Biloxi, MS 39533

Claiborne Barksdale
Barksdale Reading Institute
1003 Jefferson Ave.
Oxford, MS 38655

Oleta Fitzgerald
Children's Defense Fund
P. O. Box 11437
Jackson, MS 39283

Sister Donna Gunn
Catholic Charities
530 George St.
Jackson, MS 39202

Dr. Cathy Grace
1502 Winter Valley Drive
Tupelo, MS 38801

Angie Williams
Children's Coordinating Council
Mississippi United Methodist Church
P. O. Box 1147
Jackson, MS 39215-1147

Dr. Bettye Ward Fletcher
Mississippi Commission on the Status of Women
P. O. Box 5711
Brandon, MS 39047

CC: Jim Perry