

FWD.us: Mississippi Criminal Justice reform

Challenge

In 2020, Mississippi was facing an incarceration crisis. The state had the second highest imprisonment rate in the nation, and when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the human impact was compounded, with overpopulation and crowding of prisons becoming a matter of life and death. During the 2021 legislative session, FWD.us – an RTI client since 2013 – undertook a two-pronged advocacy and awareness campaign targeting key legislators, Mississippi’s governor and lieutenant governor, and media and opinion leaders in the state capital of Jackson.

Our approach

Our goal was to educate these audiences and ensure bills aimed at reducing prison populations in Mississippi by expanding parole and ending habitual sentencing moved through the Mississippi House and Senate and were not vetoed by the governor.

We developed and executed a multi-channel media campaign designed to directly reach decision-makers, while simultaneously activating thousands of Mississippians to put grassroots pressure on state leaders.

Outcome

- Our campaign drove over 10,000 calls to the governor, legislators, and the parole board at a \$10 cost per call.
- In a live radio interview, Gov. Reeves was asked a question posed by one of our billboards present in the state.
- Most importantly, on March 30 the Mississippi House voted to pass SB 2795 to expand parole eligibility and ensure more people have a meaningful opportunity for release — thereby reducing Mississippi’s dangerously high prison population. On April 22, Gov. Reeves signed the bill into law.

The campaign included:

- **Geofenced preroll and social video ads** around the state capitol in Jackson and the state parole board
- **Search ads** targeted to people searching criminal justice related terms, to make them aware of Mississippi’s aggressive and archaic minimum sentencing laws and the urgent need for legislative action
- **Print and digital ads** in the Mississippi Sun Herald and Clarion Ledger
- **A direct buy with Y’all Politics**, an influential and widely read Mississippi political website, targeted to Jackson and Biloxi
- **Radio ads** targeted at political radio listeners in Jackson
- **Billboards** around Jackson encouraging Governor Reeves to sign SB 2793 and end habitual sentencing in Mississippi
- **A patch-through call campaign** connecting pro-reform Mississippians with the offices of the governor, legislators, and parole board, asking them to support these bills



Daily Journal

Gov. Tate Reeves signs parole reform bill, making some prisoners eligible for early release

2022 REED AWARD **Best Cross-Channel Ad Campaign**