



## Workforce

**Yes,** on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

### *A Proactive Approach to Housing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*

Since his appointment by Governor Haley Barbour in late August, Mississippi Gulf Coast Housing Director Gerald Blessey has been dedicating his time to working with local residents, nonprofit agencies, government officials, advocates and other organizations to expedite the development of affordable workforce housing in the three coastal Mississippi counties, Hancock, Harrison and Jackson.

Billions of dollars in housing recovery funds have been allocated to the Mississippi Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina, and the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) and other groups have been working diligently to maximize the use of the funds. Blessey said that while MDA has many great people working for the organization, in the past there was no one person to coordinate the efforts in South Mississippi. That led to many frustrations and delays.

Blessey was chosen by Barbour to help facilitate the overall process and make recommendations on how to make it work faster and more effectively. Blessey said, "He wanted eyes and ears on the ground here on the Coast. I wake up every day thinking about how we can make housing work better."

Communication has been key in Blessey's months on the job. A series of meetings with cities and counties has allowed him to listen to ideas on what's working, what's not working and how the remainder of the housing money should be spent. Equipped with valuable input from the meetings, Blessey has already started looking into programs to solve some of the issues.

In addition to the "town hall" meetings, MDA has developed an extensive campaign to notify the public of the housing assistance that is available to them. Print ads, informational seminars and website updates are among the ways that MDA has been getting out the word that there is help for housing. And, it seems to be working.

MDA's Long Term Workforce Housing Program (LTWHP) awarded 16 grants within its first round for a total of 5,850 proposed housing units. In the second round, 24 grants were awarded with a total of 2,528 proposed units. Eligible activities within the LTWHP include homebuyer assistance, new construction, rehabilitation of single/multi-family housing and revolving loan programs. An additional \$100 million remains for workforce housing, and the input gathered by Blessey will help determine how to best use the money.

One recipient of MDA's LTWHP assistance is the Gulf Coast Renaissance Corp., who used the funding to help establish the Regional Employer Assisted Collaboration of Housing (REACH) program. REACH is assisting businesses in providing housing for their employees. Employers have the option to put up \$5,000 to \$10,000, money that will be tripled through the program and used for housing down payment and closing costs. Northrop Grumman in Pascagoula, Mississippi has already joined, enrolling 175 of its employees.

Blessey said, "Housing is an essential element of economic development and vice versa. We are strategically working to locate housing near economic development and new employment. "

For more information on the housing recovery efforts on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, visit [www.mississippi.org](http://www.mississippi.org).



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