



A Conversation with Lesley Davis on Center for Public Policy

October 1, 2020

Lesley Davis was recently named interim chief executive officer of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy (MCP) and is currently leading the organization as it searches for a new CEO. Davis is a graduate of Mississippi State University, where he received a degree in political science and served as president of the College Republicans. She earned her law degree from the University of Baltimore School of Law, and afterwards remained active in politics and law in Baltimore and in Washington, D.C., before returning home to Mississippi. She and her husband John have three sons. Davis recently spoke to Sun Senior Staff Writer Anthony Warren about her role, the MCP's efforts to curb government regulation and the group's efforts to find a new leader.

Are you in the running to be the permanent CEO?

“No. I am committed to finding someone who will build upon what prior CEOs have done and take the organization to the next level. We are currently conducting a nationwide search and that has already produced incredible candidates.”

How soon do you hope to have a new CEO in place?

“I cannot give you a definitive answer but know we are diligently working as quickly as possible, as thoroughly as possible. It is one of our top priorities, and we dedicated to this process and to finding the best person to lead MCP and our talented staff to the next level.”

When you say taking the organization to the “next level,” what exactly are you talking about?

“As our purpose is to fight for freedom for Mississippians. We will continue to sue the government when they violate the constitutional rights of Mississippians. We will fight any barriers that prevent the people of Mississippi from making a living, and will work to free up entrepreneurs to take risks, especially in the area of health care, where we are working to remove unnecessary burdens like the ‘certificate of need’ laws. Another area we’re helping to free up is the tech field. One thing that will really resonate with your audience is our work on deregulation. We have 118,000 regulations on the books. We are the most regulated state in the South and the fifth in the nation. The Cato Institute rates Mississippi 35th in the nation in economic freedom and 46th in fiscal freedom, which is taxes and government spending. And these regulations are holding Mississippi back.”

What do you mean when you talk about economic freedom?

“Being free to pursue the job that you want and being free to not have overburdensome licensure regulations. Almost 20 percent of Mississippians need a state license to work. That number was only five percent a few decades ago. One-hundred years ago, Meridian and Charlotte were the same size, with similar economies. North Carolina deregulated and put economic freedom policies in place that were conducive to growth. It has flourished and Charlotte is now 17 times larger than Meridian.”

Could there have been other factors that played into Charlotte’s growth?

“It does have an educational triangle with their universities. They have three within that close proximity that help bring in not only academia, but other businesses that go along with supporting a college town. That could be one.”

How is MCPP funded, and how much is your annual budget?

“We are a nonprofit and are completely funded by donations. Our revenues will be around \$1 million by the end of the year.”

Going back to something you said earlier, why is the state requiring more people needing occupational licenses now than just a few decades ago?

“That is a good question. It’s something you need to ask the people writing the regulations ... some don’t make sense at all. We have worked with key legislators on the Military Family Freedom Act, which gives universal recognition of licenses for military family members. If you have a military family move here, the spouse does not need to have to go through the burdensome occupational licensing requirements or pay fees to practice their skill in Mississippi. That’s one area we’ve worked on.

What rules don’t make sense? Can you give me an example?

“You have to have 1,000 hours to shampoo someone. That doesn’t seem to make much sense. What seems to make better sense than regulating on the front end is, if the government needs more oversight, is to do inspections after the fact, but don’t prevent people from pursuing their dreams, jobs, creativity and businesses.”

Who sets all of these regulations?

“They’re mostly administrative regulations. Some are legislative; some are within agencies.”

Did the Military Family Freedom Act Pass?

“Yes, it did. That was with Sen. Chuck Younger.”

Let’s go back to the larger issue of government regulation. What is MCPP doing to cut out some of the government red tape?

“We’re doing it in a number of ways. Go to our website, mspolicy.org, and we’re getting the word out in thought leadership and educating our citizens. We’re educating the public in telling stories about how Mississippians have been burdened by regulations. We have examples of people pursuing fields in the cottage food industries. We’ve highlighted hairdressers whose

pursuit of a job has been hindered by regulation. We've focused on bringing food freedom to Mississippi."

Food freedom?

"We've worked really hard on an area – goat milk. We have brought to light the fact that there are so many regulations out there that prevent goat milk from being sold. The regulations say if I want to buy milk from one of our great Mississippi farmers and want to buy it directly, I can't."

How can the state even enforce that?

"This happens all the time. I have friends who want to start cottage food industries. I have several who have amazing cake baking businesses and they've received notices from the Mississippi State Department of Health to desist in promoting it. We did have some success in that area this past year, in the sense that we were able to raise the cap on how much they could earn, from \$20,000 to \$35,000."

So now, I can make up to \$35,000 a year baking cakes before I am regulated by the health department?

"Correct. But the problem is, I talked with friends two weeks ago, and they're still nervous about posting anything (about their businesses) on Facebook. Those letters from state agencies have chilling effects."

What's really interesting in all of this is that Mississippi is a Republican-dominated state. How could so many regulations be in place when the party that claims to be for "small government" is in charge?

"That is the question to ask. The big problem I see is that most of us see our state and government as way more conservative than it actually is. I think it's because we're strong on pro-life and Second Amendment issues, and we assume that we're conservative in every other way. Unfortunately, we are not. State government overregulation and overreach are economically holding Mississippians back and preventing us from prospering like our neighboring states.

"Last year, we created a publication called 'The High Road to Freedom.' It is a guidebook that lists conservative policy on almost every issue you can imagine. It is a guidebook not only for our donors and the citizens of Mississippi but is a guidebook for lawmakers who may be tempted to follow economic policies that are not based in freedom. It's a great publication."

Have all lawmakers gotten a copy?

"They have."

Let's switch gears for a moment and talk about COVID-19. What is MCPP's stance on government policies related to slowing the spread of the virus?

"We've not taken an official position on either the national or the state COVID regulations. However, we have highlighted numerous small business owners and how those regulations have

affected them, their families and their businesses. Those are listed on our website as well. One that really resonated with the public was the Little Yazoo Bar, outside of Yazoo City, Miss. COVID regulations have caused him to lose 50 percent of his income, but he still has 100 percent of his bills.”

With so many unknowns about the virus, it could be years before we know what could be considered overreach and what isn't.

“I think you're right. We have to rely on the experts. I'm certainly not an epidemiologist. When we have experts differing, it's hard to know where to land. That's what's caused confusion and even anger in the public.”

Also, I want to ask about certificates of need. Several years ago, St. Dominic Hospital wanted to relocate beds to Madison County, but CON rules prevented that from happening. Have efforts to change CON laws been successful?

“They haven't been that successful to date. But that is something we are working on.”

How would you like to see CON rules changed?

“I'm not an expert on that, but we have someone working on it.”