



# An Unwilling Partnership With the Great Society Part II: Physicians Discover Malnutrition, Hunger and the Politics of Hunger



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## ABSTRACT

The civil rights and social legislation of the Great Society following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was slow to provide relief for black in the South. Mississippi Senator James Eastland led an effort to defund Head Start, including his state's program, Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), a program with a strong medical component. A senatorial committee, including Robert Kennedy, came to investigate CDGM in 1967. The unimaginable poverty, hunger, malnutrition and chronic disease found in black families was vehemently denied by Eastland. Visits of physician groups then corroborated the findings. The Mississippi delegation made sure that food relief never came and funding for CDGM ceased. Health services were lost to 6000 impoverished children. The epic television documentary, *Hunger in America*, soon premiered on network television. It triggered ongoing efforts to address health disparities, including implementation of the National Nutrition and Health Survey (NHANES). Similar physician leadership is needed to address the lasting health disparities in our country.

**Key Indexing Terms:** Medical Committee for Human Rights; Health disparities; Health legislation; Social determinants of health; Hunger. [Am J Med Sci 2016;352(1):120–127.]

“Geiger began writing prescriptions for food. When some government bureaucrat objected... , the physician responded, ‘the last time we looked in the book, the specific therapy for malnutrition was food’.”  
H. Jack Geiger, MD as quoted by John Dittmer, PhD.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

After 1964, the actions of a small group of black and white physicians active in civil rights efforts for black Americans expanded from medical support of the civil rights protest movement to involvement in political action and social policy to address health disparities.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, the physicians of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) were joined by other physicians who became aware of an epidemic of hunger among black children and their families in the fertile farmlands of the vast Mississippi Delta.<sup>2</sup> Aided by the involvement of Senator Robert Kennedy, whose trip to Mississippi exposed the nation's closely kept secret of poverty-related malnutrition and hunger in the United States, events in Mississippi continued to shape domestic policy during the Vietnam era of American history.

## MARIAN WRIGHT, THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE AND SPECIAL REPORT: HUNGRY CHILDREN

In March 1967, a 27-year-old National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attorney and Freedom Summer participant, Marian Wright,

was still at work in Mississippi's state capital, Jackson. She was inundated with litigation on violations of the new Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Acts, and problems with the new Head Start programs.<sup>2</sup>

Using their positions and seniority, Mississippi's powerful congressional delegation and their southern Democratic allies assailed funding of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty programs at every opportunity. Mississippi's large and successful Head Start Program, Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) and its focus on black “community action” was problematic for them. The white power structure to include its congressional delegation perceived the program as a threat to the white supremacy and plantation economics that had strived so long to protect.<sup>3</sup>

Led by 41-year-old New York Jewish psychiatrist and MCHR member, Tom Levin, MD, CDGM provided early education, health screenings, referrals for medical care and 2 meals a day for 6,000 impoverished children at more than 80 sites in 24 Mississippi counties. But CDGM had 2 problems. Their centers promoted black empowerment and voter registration and Levin had used a loophole to obtain federal funding that bypassed the signoff of Mississippi segregationist governor, Paul B. Johnson, Jr., on the CDGM grant application.<sup>3</sup>

Democratic Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania, a civil libertarian who defended War on Poverty programs through the bipartisan Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty he chaired, asked Wright to testify in Washington hearings in March 1967, on



**FIGURE 1.** Marian Wright before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty, Monday March 15, 1967. Washington, DC. The testimony of this young NAACP attorney and Freedom Summer participant led to the visit of a Senate delegation to Mississippi, which revealed previously unreported malnutrition and health disparities among rural black farm families. (Credit: James Lucas Estate.)

reauthorization of funding for programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), including Head Start (Figure 1).<sup>4,5</sup> She eloquently reported that CDGM and other OEO programs were active and successful in their attempts to address the needs of impoverished families in Mississippi and deserved ongoing funding.<sup>5</sup> At the end of her testimony, she dropped a bombshell and challenged the subcommittee to come to Mississippi to see the “suffering of Negro children and adults caused by the Delta Revolution.”<sup>6</sup> She then disclosed a large, unreported epidemic of hunger in the state, most severe in the Mississippi Delta. This epidemic resulted from the combined effects of mechanized cotton farming, layoffs of farm workers by Delta planters because of a new minimum wage of \$1.00/hour, a cutback in cotton production because of federal subsidy programs to Delta planters, the phasing out of commodity food programs for the poor to food stamps and the rising battle for Negro civil rights. The result was large numbers of black tenant farm families without homes and employment with some living in dilapidated shacks with no glass in the windows and others living in homemade tents.<sup>6</sup> The subcommittee accepted her invitation.

## THE TRIP TO THE DELTA

The congressional delegation composed of Democratic Senators Clark and a fatigued Robert Kennedy, Republican Senators Jacob Javits and George Murphy and a large media contingent arrived in Jackson, Mississippi on April 9, 1967 to hoots from the local crowd.<sup>7,8</sup> Dr. Jim Hendrick, a risk-taking, progressive white Jackson pediatrician and a Head Start program medical director was on the welcoming committee at the Jackson airport. Kennedy took Hendrick up on his offer for a

nap at his nearby home.<sup>8</sup> Later in the day, the subcommittee heard testimony about widespread malnutrition, poor housing and sanitation, hunger, limited access to healthcare and children with growth retardation, parasitosis and skin infections (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

The next day, Kennedy, Clark and Wright traveled to the Delta towns of Greenville, Cleveland and Clarksdale, accompanied by reporters including Jackson Bureau Chief for the New Orleans Times—Picayune, Bill Minor, Daniel Schorr from CBS television and camera crews from CBS, ABC and NBC (Figure 3).<sup>9,10</sup> Kennedy and Clark visited the Delta shacks of disenfranchised farmworkers and as Wright reported, “Looked into the deadened eyes of hungry children... many people did not believe could exist in America.”<sup>5</sup> Clark and Kennedy split into 2 teams. Wright, support staff and several reporters and photographers accompanied Kennedy.<sup>11,12</sup> They saw the typical “shot gun” houses of impoverished Mississippi farmworkers, most of whom were unemployed. At each location, Kennedy sought to confirm what he was being told (Figure 4). At one location, Minor followed him as he walked directly through one shack to the shack behind it and, out of camera range, found a listless baby with a bloated belly lying on the floor with a few grains of rice. The baby responded poorly to Kennedy’s attempts to communicate with him. He was deeply touched and tearful away from the cameras.<sup>12</sup> The New York Times reported that, “Two senators (Kennedy and Clark) investigating the antipoverty program saw the evidence of extreme deprivation if not extreme malnutrition.”<sup>10</sup> Minor and others present kept Kennedy’s tears to themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Peter Edelman, Kennedy aid and future husband of Marian Wright, said Kennedy concluded from meetings with black families that, “The white power structure in

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