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Drinking water gets clear marks

City of Hattiesburg earns perfect score

Hattiesburg American
USA TODAY NETWORK

The City of Hattiesburg has earned a perfect score on the Mississippi State Department of Health's annual inspection of its drinking water system for the seventh consecutive year.

The city received a score of 100 out of 100, demonstrating continued excellence across all areas, according to a community announcement.

The inspection evaluates drinking water systems in three core categories: technical, managerial and financial. Despite the increased level of detail in the new rat-

ing system, Hattiesburg received full points in each area.

New scoring system provides more detailed evaluation

This year, MSDH shifted from a 5-point scale to a more detailed 100-point evaluation, providing a fuller picture of operational performance in technical, managerial and financial categories.

"Having a long-standing perfect record is significant on its own, but earning a 100 out of 100 under a more rigorous scoring system speaks volumes about the professionalism and dedication of our team," Mayor Toby Barker said. "Our water and sewer staff continue to deliver high-quality operations and through thoughtful investments in our infrastructure,

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When a child is unhoused, lacking a fixed stable nighttime residence, it can lead to developmental delays, health issues and barriers to education. This photo illustration was shot in Madison on Friday, Sept. 5, 2025.

BARBARA GAUNTT/CLARION LEDGER PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Mississippi healthcare gets boost from feds

More than \$200M to go toward rural communities

Ross Reily
Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves announced on Monday, Dec. 29, that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has awarded the state more than \$200 million through the Rural Health Transformation Program for healthcare in rural communities.

The \$205,907,220 award is the result of the state of Mississippi submitting its plan in November 2025.

Mississippi's plan was developed with broad input throughout the state. The plan is focused on improving healthcare and patient outcomes for Mississippians, strengthening the state's rural health workforce and ensuring sustainable access to care for those who need it most.

"This is our state's official response to The Trump Administration's call for rural health transformation program proposal," Reeves said in a press conference on Nov. 5.

Earlier this year, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Dr. Mehmet Oz said they wanted to address the issue. Despite higher rates of chronic disease in rural areas vs. their urban counterparts, they said rural America's healthcare infrastructure is collapsing. Since 2010, about 150 rural hospitals have closed or been converted to other facilities and fewer than four in 10 rural hospital beds are typically occupied — substantially less than in urban areas.

When fully implemented, the state said the goal of the plan is to ensure that by 2031, every rural Mississippian will have reliable access to high-quality healthcare services, both in-person and through telehealth, supporting increased access points and healthier

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Students struggle with homelessness

Thousands of kids dealing with unstable situations

Pam Dankins Mississippi Clarion Ledger | USA TODAY NETWORK

For thousands of Mississippi students, back-to-school season involves more than shopping for clothes and supplies — it means grappling to meet basic needs like a nutritious meal, clean shower and stable housing, all while striving for academic success.

Records obtained by the Clarion Ledger show that 7,694 students in 132 Mississippi public school districts were classified as homeless during the 2023-2024 school year, based on a federal definition.

This is an increase from the 2022-2023 school year, when 6,397 students in 128 Mississippi public school districts were identified as homeless.

Jackson had the highest number of homeless students in the state and a graduation rate for those students far below the state average.

The data is based on the two most recent school years available, as full data for the 2024-2025 school year was not yet available at the time of the

request. Since then, some school districts may have been created, dissolved or merged.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, passed in 1987, federally requires school districts to report the number of homeless students and provide respective support and resources.

According to data from the 2023-2024 school year, the largest groups of students were in 1st grade (730), 9th grade (712), and kindergarten (667), together making up over a quarter of all reported students. The smallest group was preschool, with just 144 students.

Black students accounted for the majority of homeless students, making up 64.3% (4,946) of the total.

Homelessness is often thought of as living on the streets without a home. But, under the law, a homeless student is also defined as someone

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