

2019 Regular Session

SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 58

BY SENATOR MILLS

SENATE. Commends the Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. on 50 years of working for social and employment equality.

1 A RESOLUTION

2 To commend the Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. on fifty years of working for social
3 and employment equality and refusing to surrender its dream of a country that lives
4 up to the lofty aspirations of the Declaration of Independence and the preamble to
5 the United States Constitution.

6 WHEREAS, the Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA) was founded in the
7 summer of 1969 to be an agent for change amid, arguably, the time of greatest racial discord
8 and division the country had faced in more than one hundred years, during and at the end of
9 the Civil War, leaving a country battered and scarred and many issues unchanged; and

10 WHEREAS, the racial strife of the 1960s is symbolized by the cowardly and
11 unconscionable murder of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, on a
12 Memphis, Tennessee, motel balcony; and

13 WHEREAS, the specific factors that led to the founding of the SMHA, included the
14 broad issue of various oppressive societal constructs and, personally for the founders, were
15 their individual experiences in Iberia Parish, Louisiana; and

16 WHEREAS, the conditions on sugarcane plantations at the time, which affected over
17 one hundred thousand people across the state, were not generally known outside the specific
18 areas of cane farming; and

1 WHEREAS, the founders, Anne C. Bizalin, Henry Pelet, and Loma Bourg, were
2 buoyed by a judicial victory in 1969 in a case in which a three judge appellate panel ruled
3 that SMHA had the right to "free assembly" with farm and plantation workers as guaranteed
4 in the United States Constitution; and

5 WHEREAS, the founders had been encouraged also by the passage of the national
6 "War on Poverty" and the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act by President Lyndon Johnson,
7 which appeared to bode well for change, but, despite incremental progress, that change
8 remained elusive; and

9 WHEREAS, frustration grew in the rural communities when public officials did not
10 adhere to the ideals of the "War on Poverty" or the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act; and

11 WHEREAS, the mission of the organization, as the founders saw it, was to help
12 people develop strong, healthy, prosperous rural communities in Louisiana, and the special
13 focus of SMHA is distressed rural communities whose livelihood is interdependent with the
14 land and waters, and they are committed to finding fair and innovative solutions for
15 challenged rural communities; and

16 WHEREAS, within a year of its founding, SMHA initiated a program of self-help,
17 low income housing efforts, including the first neighborhood, called "Rabbit Hill", in
18 Abbeville, Louisiana, where thirty homes were successfully renovated; and

19 WHEREAS, because of the successful renovation of these homes, Abbeville obtained
20 the first federally funded Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for rural
21 communities, and soon the success in Abbeville was duplicated in dozens of other small
22 rural communities in Louisiana; and

23 WHEREAS, utilizing their own self-help housing strategy, SMHA went on to build
24 forty-nine individually-owned new homes for sugarcane farm worker families; and

25 WHEREAS, substandard housing was not SMHA's only focus, with adult education
26 being a vital, but unmet need, the organization began adult basic education and job training
27 classes with culturally adapted materials specifically aimed at plantation workers; and

28 WHEREAS, as an example of the success of this program, a graduate of the first
29 SMHA adult education program went on to earn a master's degree in rural development at
30 the University of Massachusetts, and after serving as executive director of a community

1 action agency and organizing farm workers around legal issues, this graduate returned to
2 SMHA as the housing director and was eventually honored at the White House as an
3 example of needed, extraordinary, community involvement; and

4 WHEREAS, in the 1980s SMHA won another major legal battle with the United
5 States Supreme Court decision in a case filed by SMHA involving the "Itinerant Workers
6 Law", in which, under the authority of state law, St. Mary Parish enacted an ordinance that
7 required all of the persons applying for a job in the parish to be photographed and
8 fingerprinted, answer personal questions, and pay a ten dollar fee; and

9 WHEREAS, the Supreme Court declared the St. Mary Parish ordinance
10 unconstitutional and ordered the state and the parish to pay compensation to the people who
11 were plaintiffs in the case and had been adversely affected by the ordinance; and

12 WHEREAS, not content with the status quo, SMHA continues today to be true to its
13 original purpose of being an agent of change without the organization changing its mission
14 and goal, delivering service in a way that does not demean, as a tool for growth and
15 empowerment, and to train other leaders in development skills so they may be useful to each
16 community and its unique characteristics; and

17 WHEREAS, the SMHA of the twenty-first century continues to pioneer new
18 approaches to challenges facing Louisiana's rural communities, standing strong against the
19 root causes of poverty, sexism, and class divisions while creating new institutions, policies,
20 leadership, learning opportunities, and new wealth in communities and building and
21 leveraging new partnerships; and

22 WHEREAS, the vision of the founders of the Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc.
23 remains clear and the commitment, especially to being an agent of change in rural Louisiana,
24 is unwavering, understanding that the work is ongoing and that the leaders being sought and
25 trained today will continue protecting the environment, fostering economic development,
26 developing rural housing, and developing community capacity for change, all in an era of
27 the internet, social media, and instant gratification; not an easy task, but the tasks that were
28 present in 1969 were no less daunting than those set before them today.

29 THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Senate of the Legislature of Louisiana
30 does hereby commend the Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. upon the occasion of the

1 fiftieth anniversary of the organization's founding.

2 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a copy of this Resolution be transmitted to
3 Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. at its headquarters in New Iberia, Louisiana.

The original instrument and the following digest, which constitutes no part
of the legislative instrument, were prepared by Mary Dozier O'Brien.

SR 58 Original	DIGEST 2019 Regular Session	Mills
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Commends the Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. on 50 years of advocacy and action on behalf of rural communities in Louisiana and their residents.