

SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 58

BY SENATOR MILLS

A RESOLUTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, as an example of the success of this program, a graduate of the first SMHA adult education program went on to earn a master's degree in rural development at the University of Massachusetts, and after serving as executive director of a community action agency and organizing farm workers around legal issues, this graduate returned to SMHA as the housing director and was eventually honored at the White House as an example of needed, extraordinary, community involvement; and

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

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

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

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

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

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Senate of the Legislature of Louisiana does hereby commend the Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc. upon the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the organization's founding.

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

---

PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE