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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

## A voice for minority communities, Coast lawmaker takes job with Southern Poverty Law Center

By Justin Mitchell

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Rep. Sonya Williams Barnes is always reachable. Whether she's helping grieving families at her Gulfport funeral home or taking phone calls from constituents at 2 a.m., the state legislator prides herself on being available for her community.

"I know nothing but a life of service," Williams Barnes, the daughter of two school teachers and United Methodist preachers, told the Sun Herald on Monday. And after a decade as an elected official, the Mississippi Coast woman will resign from her post and take on a new role as state policy director for Southern Poverty Law Center, an Alabama-based nonprofit that battles racial and social injustice in the Deep South.

Williams Barnes will resign from her House District 119 seat on Sunday and start her new job the next day, May 9. "There's no break," she said. "The need is there, and my service continues."

### Helping change the Mississippi state flag

Williams Barnes was elected into the State House seat in 2011, and began serving in the role in 2012. She's served in 11 regular Legislative sessions. The Democrat's district serves mostly minority neighborhoods within Gulfport's city limits.

Some of Williams Barnes' proudest accomplishments in her time as a lawmaker involve being a voice for residents in underserved communities.

As chair the the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus, she led the largest legislative boycotts in history calling to change Mississippi's state flag. She worked on a bill that allowed incarcerated women to have access to sanitary items and banned restraints during labor and while giving birth. She also fought for voter restoration and voting rights protections across the state.

"During this tenure we have had some successes, we fought to change the state flag, we voted to protect many of Mississippi's most vulnerable citizens, and our efforts continue in fighting to create better educational opportunities and outcomes for Mississippi's youth," Williams Barnes said in a news release.

"The Legislature has basically allowed me the opportunity to do all of these things, and this same type of work goes hand in hand to the work that the Southern Poverty Law Center does."

Williams Barnes has formed relationships with lawmakers across party lines throughout the state to get things done for her district in Gulfport and beyond. In her role, all statewide SPLC policy will be under Williams Barnes' direction. She said her new job will allow her to continue to serve marginalized communities with a greater statewide impact.

"Working with each other ... is key," She said. "I look forward to taking on all of the experience that I've had and use it in this new position to continue to do work for those that I've been working for over the last decade, plus."

### Gratitude for Gulfport residents

Williams Barnes said she is forever grateful for the support of her constituents who have voted time and time again for her as their voice at the Capitol in Jackson.

"Any time I ever called for a civic community meeting, they were there and got involved, and I encourage them to continue to be engaged," she said. "Although I'm leaving the position, I'm not leaving the work."

Williams Barnes said being in the public eye is not always easy, and she credits her constituents for holding her accountable and engaging with her when she called upon them.

"They've always encouraged me when I needed encouragement," she said.

Williams Barnes wants her constituents to know that even in this new role, she's always a phone call away, no matter the time or day.

"I look forward to continuing doing what I know God has called me to do, and that's to serve people , especially those whose voices are often muffled.

"My heart remains the same, and that is serving all of God's people, especially those who come from underserved communities."



Rep. Sonya Williams-Barnes, D-Gulfport, wants colleagues to 'wise up and roll back discriminatory legislation.'  
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