

Chief Justice calls for statewide county court system

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Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. and the Commission on Children's Justice are calling for legislation to create a statewide county court system.

The proposal would provide uniform youth courts and relieve some of the caseload in state circuit courts.

Chief Justice Waller said that if adopted, "This is going to be a great step to bring our juvenile justice system up to the standards we expect."

"The quality of youth court services can be dramatically different based on an imaginary line – the county line," said Adams County Court and Youth Court Judge John N. Hudson, who worked extensively on earlier proposals for uniform county courts.

Efforts to create a statewide county court system were undertaken in the 1990s, but failed to gain legislative approval.

Rankin County Court Judge Thomas Broome, chair of the Council of Youth Court Judges and co-chair of the Commission on Children's Justice, said, "Having the uniformity of a full-time judge would certainly be of benefit to the people who need it the most – our children and families."

Currently, 21 individual counties have a separate county court. The proposal offered by Chief Justice Waller would create 20 additional county courts by grouping 61 counties into districts comprised of no more than four counties each.

The state currently has a patchwork quilt youth court system. In the 21 existing county courts, a county court judge also presides as youth court judge, handling proceedings in cases involving abuse, neglect and delinquency. In 60 counties, youth court cases are heard by part-time youth court referees, who are attorneys appointed by a chancery judge. Chancery judges also are authorized to preside over youth court matters. Carroll County is the only county in which a chancellor currently presides in youth court. The city of Pearl is the only municipality which has its own youth court.

In addition to handling youth court matters, county courts hear civil actions with a jurisdictional limit of \$200,000, appeals from municipal and justice courts, and preliminary criminal matters.

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