

Access to Justice Commission will meet Wednesday, Sept. 13

September 12, 2006

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission will begin to develop a unified strategy to improve poor peoples' access to the civil courts in a meeting scheduled for 9:30 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 13, at the Mississippi Bar Center at 643 North State Street in Jackson.

Members of the judiciary, a representative of the Governor, legislators, business and community leaders, members of the clergy and others are expected to discuss civil legal access for the poor in Mississippi and short-term and long-range goals for the Commission.

Members of the media are invited. Participants will gather at 9:30 a.m. The first half-hour will provide an opportunity for informal discussions and interviews. At 10 a.m., Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr. will welcome participants and formally convene the meeting. Discussions are expected to last until 2:30 p.m.

Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Jess H. Dickinson, the Court's liaison to the legal services community, said, "We want to take a look at where we are in Mississippi in terms of access to justice by the poor and determine where we want to go, how we want to get there, and what role the Commission will play in that process. The starting point is to develop projects, things that need to be done, things these Commission members will be positioned to help us do."

The Commission is headed by Hinds County Chancery Judge Denise Owens and Mississippi Bar Immediate Past President Joy Lambert Phillips, who serve as co-chairs.

Judge Owens as a chancellor regularly sees the struggles of poor people to gain access to and navigate the courts. In domestic disputes, it's common to see at least one of the opposing parties come to court without an attorney and attempt self-representation. That presents difficulties for a judge in trying to direct the pro se litigant through the proceeding without giving advice and counsel. Occasionally both sides to the dispute show up without an attorney. Judge Owens on Monday dealt with two unrepresented divorced parents in a dispute over child visitation rights.

"I see a great need in the domestic area from litigants who cannot adequately represent themselves. They are pro se. They come to court without any assets, any resources, and it puts them at such a disadvantage," Judge Owens said.

That's if they get into court at all.

Chief Justice Smith, acting on behalf of the entire Court, established the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission by an order filed June 29. The order says that "this Court is committed to the principle that justice should be available to all persons without regard to economic status and...this Court recognizes that a substantial number of Mississippians live at or below the federally-established poverty threshold, and face substantial barriers to the justice system."

Mississippi is the twenty-third state to form a state-wide commission which brings together representatives of organizations dedicated to the legal rights of the poor. The Commission meeting will look at what other states have done. Bob Echols, a consultant for the American Bar Association, will discuss civil legal assistance initiatives in other states.

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission will address civil legal representation of the poor. It will not deal with indigent criminal defense.

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The 24 voting members of the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission include: former Supreme Court Justice and former Mississippi Bar President Reuben Anderson, Jackson; Court of Appeals Judge Donna M. Barnes, Tupelo; Rep. Ed Blackmon, Canton; Rev. Stan Buckley, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Jackson; Bill Bynum, President and Chief Operating Officer of Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, Jackson; Circuit Judge Margaret Carey-McCray, Greenville; Supreme Court Justice Jess H. Dickinson, Gulfport; Sunflower Mayor Betty Fowler; Supreme Court Justice James E. Graves Jr., Jackson; U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr., Gulfport; John Hairston, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Hancock Holding Company and Hancock Bank, Gulfport; Rev. Hosea Hines, pastor of College Hill Baptist Church, Jackson; Paul Hurst, Chief Counsel to Gov. Haley Barbour, Jackson; Mississippi NAACP President Derrick Johnson, Jackson; Amanda Jones, Immediate Past President of the Young Lawyers Division of the Mississippi Bar, Jackson; *Sun-Herald* President and Publisher Ricky Mathews, Biloxi; Hinds County Chancery Judge Denise Owens, Jackson; Mississippi Bar Immediate Past President Joy Lambert Phillips, Gulfport; Carlton Reeves, President-Elect, Magnolia Bar Association, Jackson; Constance Slaughter-Harvey, civil rights attorney and former Assistant Secretary of State, Forest; Sen. Gray Tollison, Oxford; Rae Nell Vaughn, Choctaw Tribal Supreme Court Chief Justice, Choctaw; Kenneth W. Williams, President, Refreshments Inc. and Refreshments of Tennessee, Corinth; and Mississippi Economic Council President Blake Wilson, Jackson.

Non-voting ex-officio commission members appointed by virtue of their offices include: Martha Bergmark, President and Chief Operating Officer, Mississippi Center for Justice; Sam Buchanan, Executive Director, Mississippi Center for Legal Services, Hattiesburg; Jayne Buttross, Chair, Mississippi Legal Services Foundation, Jackson; Ben Cole, Executive Director, North Mississippi Rural Legal Services, Oxford; Dean Samuel M. Davis, University of Mississippi School of Law, Oxford; Jaribu Hill, Executive Director, Mississippi Workers Center, Greenville; Ben Piazza, Chair, Board of Directors, Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project, Jackson; and Dean Jim Rosenblatt, Mississippi College School of Law, Jackson.

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