

## **Hinds Justice Court offers early intervention for drug offenders**

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The Hinds County Courthouse was open late Tuesday, with Drug Court programs running simultaneously on two floors.

While Hinds County Justice Court Judge Nicki Martinson Boland presided over her court's first graduation Tuesday evening, Hinds County Court Judge William Skinner gathered participants in his program for felony offenders one floor away for a regular reporting session.

"Our main goal is to intervene before they commit felonies," said Judge Boland, who founded the misdemeanor Drug Court in October 2005.

Getting help at the misdemeanor level means people are less likely to progress to felonies, former Hinds County Court Judge William Gowan told the Justice Court program graduates.

Judge Gowan, who previously served two stints as head of the felony Hinds County Drug Court, said, "It became quite apparent to me that often times an earlier intervention would limit the number of participants we have upstairs tonight."

Hinds County Justice Court Judge Steve Pickett, who was appointed in January, said he is also sending offenders to Drug Court. "I have already joined you in utilizing this as a tool and alternative," he told the Justice Court Drug Court graduates.

Seven people graduated from the Hinds County Justice Court Drug Court program Tuesday night.

The Hinds County Justice Court is the only justice court in the state to operate a drug court.

There are a total of 18 drug courts operating across the state. Four of the courts deal with juveniles; 12 are felony adult courts; two deal with misdemeanor adult offenders.

Drug courts seek to rehabilitate drug-using offenders through drug treatment and intense supervision with drug testing and frequent court appearances. Drug courts offer the incentive of a chance to remain out of jail, and the sanction of a jail sentence if participants fail to remain drug-free and in compliance with all program requirements.

Hinds County Justice Court Drug Court participants include people charged with, among other things, first and second offense driving under the influence of alcohol, reckless driving, public drunkenness, possession of less than an ounce of marijuana, petit larceny and shoplifting.

Judge Boland started to introduced the graduates, but one was missing. He was taking an exam. Judge Boland explained that the young man and his mother are enrolled at Hinds Community College.

Another program graduate proudly told the audience that he recently won first place in automotive technology competition at Hinds Community College. Several others are enrolled in college courses. Another earned a General Education Development (GED) degree. Several had gotten better jobs. One had regained custody of his children.

Judge Boland said drug courts are problem-solving courts, and their effects reach beyond the graduates themselves. Cleaning up their own lives means better lives for their families, especially the children, Judge Boland said.

Judge Gowan said, "We've reunited families.... The drug court initiative is something that is so important to this community. The community has a stake in the success of these programs."

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