

## **Supreme Court appoints two special judges for Hinds County Circuit Court**

July 11, 2008

The Mississippi Supreme Court has appointed two new full-time special judges to assist the Seventh Circuit Court of Hinds County with its criminal case docket.

The special judge appointees are Melvin V. Priester, now serving as a Jackson Municipal Judge, and William A. Gowan Jr., now serving as undersheriff of Hinds County. The orders of appointment, signed July 11 by Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr., are for two-year terms beginning Aug. 1, 2008, and lasting through July 31, 2010.

Funding for the two special judges and support staff will come from a \$3.5 million federal law enforcement grant announced by Gov. Haley Barbour on Jan. 7. Chief Justice Smith expressed appreciation to the Governor for securing the grant funding, which is intended to address violent crimes and drug crimes.

Approximately \$1.3 million of the grant is expected to pay for judicial salaries and court support staff positions. The annual salary of a circuit judge is set by state law at \$104,170.

The grant will also pay for an assistant district attorney position, a public defender position, a court administrator, a court reporter and bailiffs for the special judges.

The appointments bring to six the number of court-appointed special judges assisting the Hinds County Circuit Court. Four special judges previously appointed by the Supreme Court are serving terms which are scheduled to last through the end of the year. They hear criminal cases part-time in Hinds County Circuit Court.

Chief Justice Smith said, "Hopefully these two special judges will enable the Hinds County court system to catch up and eliminate the criminal backlog. Although we have made a tremendous dent in the backlog, it remains, especially with the absence of one permanent judge."

Gov. Barbour said, "Earlier this year I announced federal law enforcement grants designed to help speed judicial consideration of criminal cases in the Seventh Circuit Court of Hinds County. I am pleased Chief Justice Jim Smith has appointed two new full-time special judges whose expertise and experience will be tremendous assets in this important effort."

Judge Priester, 57, has served as a Jackson Municipal Judge since October 2005. He has been in private law practice since 1987. His firm has engaged in civil practice, representing clients in health law, civil litigation, corporate law, employment law, personal injury law, domestic and family matters, and real estate. Priester served as a special assistant attorney general assigned to health law matters from 1985 to 1987.

Priester earned his law degree in 1985 from the University of Texas Law School in Austin. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education in 1972 and a Master of Education in rehabilitation counseling in 1973, both from Boston University.

Before entering law school, he worked in the mental health field for 10 years. He was a rehabilitation counselor and program director at a residential treatment program for emotionally disturbed adolescents in Dorchester, Mass. He worked as a psychiatric social worker at a Houston, Texas, psychiatric hospital, as an assistant unit director of a Houston out-patient mental health clinic, and as unit director of a residential mental health treatment program in Houston.

Gowan, 65, previously served twice by gubernatorial appointment to fill vacancies on the Hinds County Court, first in 2002 and again in 2006. As Hinds County Court judge, he also presided over the Hinds County Drug Court, which enrolls adult felony offenders. He concluded

his last term in December 2006 and returned to his former position as Hinds County undersheriff. He has worked for the Hinds County Sheriff's Office approximately 10 years. He was in-house counsel for about six years before taking on additional duties of undersheriff approximately four years ago.

Gowan served as an assistant city prosecutor in Jackson 1978-1990; as city prosecutor 1991-1994; and as assistant city attorney 1994-1998.

Gowan earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from the University of Mississippi in 1964 and a law degree from the University of Mississippi School of Law in 1966.

The four previously appointed part-time special judges are:

- Former Assistant Hinds County Prosecuting Attorney Trent L. Walker, appointed Feb. 4, 2008;
- Retired Hinds County Circuit Judge L. Breland Hilburn, first appointed July 26, 2004, with appointments extended.;
- Retired Hinds County Circuit Judge William F. Coleman, appointed Feb. 1, 2008;
- Retired Court of Appeals Judge Billy G. Bridges, first appointed Aug. 29, 2007, with appointments extended.
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