

# Forrest County Youth Court joins Model Courts Project

September 15, 2008

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Courts has selected the Forrest County Youth Court to participate in a program which will examine the local court's practices, find ways for improvement, and offer the improvements as a model for other state courts.

Forrest County Court Judge Michael W. McPhail was notified in late August that the local court has been accepted into the Model Courts Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges-Permanency Planning for Children Department.

Judge McPhail said, "For more than 10 years, the Model Courts project, supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the Department of Justice, has been guiding and supporting courts nationwide in implementation of systems reform to improve outcomes for children and families. Our court team is excited about this new endeavor to establish best practices and system reform in our jurisdiction."

A Model Courts trainer will work with local Youth Court staff, the Forrest County unit of the Department of Human Services Division of Family and Children Services, and the University of Southern Mississippi School of Social Work. The Model Courts program will also provide technical assistance.

At issue is the protection of abused and neglected children who come into the jurisdiction of the Youth Court. The Model Courts program will look at how the local court, DHS and other entities work together as a system for protecting children. The review will examine the system and the step by step processes.

Judge McPhail said, "I'm going to accept their critique and make sure that I can modify and change and help improve our approach....We are going to see where our problems are, where we have issues, where we have gaps in service."

Judge McPhail said, "The goal of the Youth Court is to make sure that all children's health, safety and well-being are taken care of....The goal is to make reasonable efforts to keep families together, or if the children have to be removed from the parents, to see that the Department of Human Services and the court make reasonable efforts to get the children back to a safe home."

Since 1992, the National Council's Model Courts Project, with funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, has been striving to improve outcomes for abused and neglected children and their families. National Council Model Courts serve as both advocates of change and models for change in child protection cases. Model Courts identify impediments to the timeliness of court events and delivery of services for families with children in care, and then design and implement court- and agency-based changes to address these barriers.

More information about the Model Courts program is available on the web site of the National Council for Juvenile and Family Court Judges at <http://www.ncjfcj.org/content/view/81/145/>.

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