

Access to Justice public hearing is April 8 in Oxford

March 31, 2009

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission will conduct a public hearing about the unmet civil legal needs of poor people on April 8 in Oxford. The hearing is scheduled for 6 to 8:30 p.m. at the University of Mississippi Lamar Law Center in Moot Court I, Room 321.

First District U.S. Congressman Travis W. Childers will host the public hearing. Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Jess H. Dickinson will serve as moderator.

The hearing is open to the public.

The hearing is the third of a series of regional public discussions about the need for civil legal services for the poor. Public hearings are expected to be conducted in each of the state's Congressional districts. U.S. Congressman Gene Taylor hosted a hearing April 18, 2008, in Gulfport, and U.S. Congressman Bennie Thompson hosted a hearing Oct. 20, 2008, in Greenwood.

The purpose of these hearings is to create a record detailing the magnitude of the problems faced by low-income Mississippians as a result of their lack of access to legal assistance in a broad range of civil matters.

Justice Dickinson, a member of the Access to Justice Commission, said, "Hundreds of thousands of our fellow Mississippians are poor. Many of these are children, the elderly, and the disabled. No one can honestly conclude that the unrepresented poor actually stand equal in our courts to the rich and powerful. If we truly mean it when we place our hands over our hearts and claim to be 'one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,' then we simply cannot allow our justice system to continue to discriminate against the poor. Every citizen has a constitutional right to equal justice and equal access to our courts, and we have a legal and moral obligation to provide it."

The hearing will seek testimony regarding the difficulties faced by low income Mississippians who do not have access to civil legal assistance in matters such as housing, domestic violence, child custody, child care, health care and disabilities assistance. Among those expected to testify are people who have appealed wrongful denial of eligibility for public assistance, faced foreclosure and loss of a home, and sought help in obtaining disability benefits.

The Access to Justice Commission will issue invitations to speak to 12 to 15 people from around the First Congressional District. Speakers are expected to include low income people who have received legal assistance, attorneys who provide legal assistance to the poor, a law professor and a student who work in one of the University of Mississippi legal assistance clinic programs, representatives of non-profit organizations which serve the poor, a domestic violence shelter program representative, clergy, community and civic leaders and judges.

Justice Dickinson will question the speakers. A listening panel of 12 to 15 people, including judges and other public officials, bar leaders, business people and community leaders, may also ask questions.

At the end of the program there will be approximately 30 minutes for public comment from the audience. A sign up sheet will be available at the start of the hearing. The Commission will listen to as many people as may be accommodated in the time set aside for public comment. Members of the audience are asked to limit their presentations to two minutes.

The hearings will be transcribed. The Access to Justice Commission will use the testimony as part of the basis for recommendations to the Supreme Court, the Mississippi Legislature and the Mississippi Bar to increase the availability of legal assistance in civil matters.

The Supreme Court created the Access to Justice Commission in June 2006 to investigate the need for civil legal services to the poor in Mississippi, and to evaluate, develop and recommend policies, programs and initiatives which will assist the judiciary in meeting the need for civil legal services to the poor in Mississippi. The Supreme Court called for a series of regional public discussions about the need for civil legal services for the poor.

The hearing will not address legal assistance in criminal matters.

####