

Access to Justice Commission to meet May 4

May 1, 2009

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission will meet Monday, May 4, at noon at the Mississippi Bar Center at 643 North State Street in Jackson.

Commission members and guests will gather at 11:30 a.m. for lunch. Commission Co-Chairs Chancery Judge Denise Owens and Joy Lambert Phillips will call the meeting to order at noon. The meeting is expected to conclude by 2:45 p.m.

Attorney Yumeka Rushing of Canton, who was recently hired as executive director of the Access to Justice Commission, will meet for the first time with the entire commission.

Funding for civil legal assistance for the poor will be among the discussion topics at the Commission meeting. Judge Owens, Phillips and Rushing will discuss the status of funding for the Commission.

Mississippi Bar Executive Director Larry Houchins will give an update on the Mississippi Bar Foundation. The Bar Foundation awards grants annually to organizations which provide legal services to the poor and needy. The grants are funded by Interest on Lawyer Trust Accounts (IOLTA).

Mississippi NAACP President Derrick Johnson, a member of the Access to Justice Commission, will talk about findings of *A Portrait of Mississippi: Mississippi Human Development Report 2009*. The report ranked Mississippi last among states on the American Human Development Index. The report, commissioned by the Mississippi Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was released in January.

Paheadra Robinson, staff attorney for the Mississippi Center for Justice, will talk about foreclosure initiatives to assist poor people in danger of losing their homes.

Special Assistant Attorney General Heather Wagner, director of the Domestic Violence Division of the Attorney General's office, will talk about forms which may be used in domestic violence proceedings. Wagner recently served as co-chair of the Commission for Study of Domestic Abuse Proceedings. The Study Commission in findings submitted to the Supreme Court and the Mississippi Legislature in December 2008 expressed concern about access to the courts by domestic violence victims who are poor and cannot afford to hire a lawyer.

Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Jess Dickinson, Judge Owens, Phillips and Rushing will talk about the April 8 public hearing held in Oxford, and about scheduling a public hearing in east Mississippi to document the unmet needs for civil legal services for the poor. A date has yet to be set for the east Mississippi hearing, which will be the fourth of a series of regional public hearings. Hearings have also been held in Gulfport and Greenwood.

The Access to Justice Commission was created by the Mississippi Supreme Court in June 2006 to develop a unified strategy to improve poor people's access to the civil

courts. The Commission is tasked 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 needs for civil legal services to the poor.

The Commission is made up of 21 voting members and eight ex-officio members. The Commission includes members of the judiciary, a representative of the Governor, legislators, business and community leaders, and members of the clergy. Representatives of entities which provide legal services to the poor are ex-officio members.

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

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