

## **Commission on Children's Justice to meet July 29**

July 28, 2010

The Mississippi Commission on Children's Justice will meet July 29 at 10 a.m. at the Gartin Justice Building in Jackson.

The Mississippi Supreme Court reestablished the advisory group to examine the juvenile justice system and recommend improvements. The Commission is expected to address the structure and operation of the Youth Court system and interactions of the juvenile justice, child welfare and education systems. The Commission will work to improve communications and coordination between all entities which deal with the best interests of children.

Supreme Court Justice Randy G. Pierce of Leakesville and Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas H. Broome of Brandon are co-chairs.

Justice Pierce said, "We want to continue to improve our court system to better meet the needs of children."

The Mississippi Supreme Court reestablished the Commission on Children's Justice by an order signed June 8, 2010, by Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. The order charges the Commission with developing a statewide comprehensive approach to improving the child welfare system; coordinating the three branches of government in assessing the impact of government actions on children who are abused or neglected; and recommending changes to improve children's safety, strengthen and support families and promote public trust and confidence in the child welfare system.

The 23-member Commission includes judges, school officials, legislators, and representatives of agencies including the Attorney General, Department of Human Services, Department of Mental Health and Medicaid, among others.

Justice Pierce said, "We purposefully put together a very diverse commission of the various stakeholders."

The Commission is expected to conduct three public hearings around the state, starting in the fall. Dates have not been set. Justice Pierce said that the hearings will allow the Commission to hear ideas of people from a broad range of perspectives.

Judge Broome will chair a subcommittee which will focus on the Youth Court system. Court of Appeals Judge Virginia Carlton of Columbia will chair a subcommittee which will address education issues.

Judge Broome said that he expects to focus on the structure of the Youth Court system and its lack of uniformity.

In the 20 counties which have a County Court, those judges also serve as Youth Court judges. In counties which do not have a County Court, the Chancery Judge appoints a lawyer to act in a judicial capacity as Youth Court Referee, or in a few counties, the Chancery Judge hears Youth Court cases. The city of Pearl has its own municipal Youth Court.

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Recommendations for a uniformly structured Youth Court system have been studied before. Concerns about funding and lack of uniformity of services have helped bring about another look at the issue, Judge Broome said.

Judge Broome said, "A child in any area of the state of Mississippi should be able to receive the same services as a child in any other location, regardless of whether they are in a depressed county or a growing county."

Judge Broome said, "There is an effort to try to blend the resources available to make the court operate as efficiently and uniformly as possible....If we can deliver services in a more efficient and more cost effective manner, we need to, not only for the taxpayers. The better job we do at providing services at low cost, the more folks we can serve."

Justice Pierce said that providing services to children who come under the jurisdiction of the Youth Court includes making sure that they receive appropriate education services.

"We want to make sure that as we seek to make improvements with our court system, we look at the whole child. That includes the school system," said Justice Pierce, a former legislator who served as chairman of the House Education Committee.

"What I anticipate is an honest assessment of where we are today with our Youth Court system and how it relates to the education system," Justice Pierce said.

For instance, he said, "A child who moves from school to school within the school year is impacted in a negative way. When children are placed in foster care, the education of those children needs to be a part of the discussion."

Judge Carlton, who will head the subcommittee to address education, is a former legislator who served on the House Education, Juvenile Justice and Judiciary B committees.

Judge Carlton said that providing adequate education is a crucial element of rehabilitation. "You can't talk about juvenile justice or appropriate options available to a Youth Court judge without also ensuring that those options will include the educational component which the child needs to be able to realize their potential in life."

The Mississippi Supreme Court created the Commission on Children's Justice in April 2006. The original Commission laid the groundwork for the Supreme Court's adoption of Uniform Rules of Youth Court Practice. The Supreme Court in reconstituting the Commission commended the previous members for their service.

The state court system receives \$450,000 for Youth Courts annually under the federal Court Improvement Plan Grant. The court order reconstituting the Commission states, "A requirement for the receipt of the Court Improvement Plan Grant funds is that an advisory group be utilized to assist in the identification of areas needing improvement in the children's justice arena, as well as making recommendations for improvement of those areas and the monitoring of the implementation of the recommended reforms."

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The order states, "In undertaking its tasks, the Commission shall review such reports, studies, and materials as it deems appropriate, study proposed legislation, analyze the use of court improvement funds, and submit recommendations to the En Banc Conference of the Mississippi Supreme Court for any necessary changes to improve the court system for children."

The new members will serve three-year terms.

Other members of the commission include: Holmes County Youth Court Referee Robert Clark III of Lexington; Jacqueline Dedeaux of Saucier, Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Youth Services; Greene County Alternative School Principal Carolyn Hartfield of Beaumont; Pascagoula Public School District Superintendent Wayne Rodolfich; Mississippi Judicial College Staff Attorney William Charlton of Oxford; Ray Sims II of Jackson, director of the Office of Justice Programs of the Division of Public Safety Planning; Special Assistant Attorney General Patti Marshall of Ridgeland; Chris Cherney of Jackson, chief executive officer, Mississippi Children's Home Services; Sandra Parks of Brandon, director of the Children's Division of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health; Lori Woodruff of Stringer, Deputy Administrator for the Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Family and Children's Services; Laurie Johnson of Diamondhead, executive director of CASA Mississippi; Kathy Pittman of Raymond, director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Youth Services; Kristi Plotner of Madison, Mississippi Division of Medicaid; Toni Kersh of Pearl, bureau director, Department of Education Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement; Pam Castle of Hattiesburg, Forrest County Youth Court prosecutor; Lea Anne Lemmons of Oxford, school program coordinator, Family Crisis Services of Northwest Mississippi; Joe Haynes of Jackson, Jobs for Mississippi Graduates; House Juvenile Justice Chair Rep. Earle Banks of Jackson; House Education Committee Chair Rep. Cecil Brown of Jackson; and Sen. David Blount of Jackson.

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