

Justice Dickinson to speak at White House legal aid forum

April 16, 2012

Mississippi Supreme Court Presiding Justice Jess H. Dickinson will participate in the White House Forum on the State of Civil Legal Assistance at 1 p.m. (noon Central Standard Time) Tuesday, April 17, at the White House.

Other panelists include White House Deputy Chief of Staff Mark Childress, White House Counsel Kathryn Ruemmler, American Bar Association President William T. Robinson III, former U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburg, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, and Department of Veterans Affairs General Counsel Will A. Gunn. Harvard Law School Dean Martha Minow will serve as moderator.

The forum will focus on access to civil justice, benefits of legal aid for the judicial system and the effect on courts when they risk being overwhelmed with unrepresented litigants.

Justice Dickinson said, "I view this as an incredible opportunity to provide information to people who make decisions about funding this critical program. I hope that it will help the President and Congress formulate reasonable budget priorities."

Funding for the Legal Services Corporation has been cut in recent years. Legal Services Corporation funding in Mississippi is currently \$4.7 million. The state's two Legal Services organizations currently have 21 attorneys, and have cut back staff and closed offices. In 1985, there were 78 lawyers working for Legal Services offices in Mississippi, with a \$6.8 million budget.

"We are going backwards," Justice Dickinson said.

One of every two qualified persons who seek civil legal assistance is turned away from Legal Services offices in Mississippi because Legal Services lacks staff and funds to represent all the low-income people who qualify for help. More than 600,000 people live in poverty in the state.

The lack of civil legal representation is felt by individuals and by society, Justice Dickinson said. "If we deprive people of the opportunity to protect themselves, then they end up being supported by the state. They end up losing their job and getting food stamps and they access government programs when they would rather work and earn their own living and take care of their own families.

"When you think about the cost to society for not providing counsel to single mothers entitled to child support and people who are deprived of transportation to get to work or their homes to raise their families – these things end up being a burden on society," Justice Dickinson said.

"The primary message that I hope to get across is that the principle of access to justice and fairness in the courts is not at the same level as other spending priorities," Justice Dickinson said. "The right to fairness in our courts is not only a basic, fundamental, Constitutional right of every citizen, but it is one of the government's absolute obligations."

The forum is closed to the press. Justice Dickinson may be reached by cell phone afterwards. Contact the Public Information office for that number.

After the forum, Justice Dickinson is scheduled to meet with Sen. Roger Wicker and Congressman Steve Palazzo to discuss civil legal assistance funding.

Justice Dickinson, of Madison, is the Supreme Court's liaison to the Legal Services community. He is a founding member of the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, which works to improve poor people's access to civil legal representation. He is a frequent speaker at access to justice events across the country.

Justice Dickinson has served on the Supreme Court since 2004. He is chair of the Supreme Court Rules Committee on the Legal Profession.

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