

July 26 Guardianship Clinic set for Hinds County school enrollment

July 18, 2012

Thursday, July 19, is the deadline to make an appointment for free legal assistance to establish guardianships to allow Hinds County children to enroll in school.

The guardianship legal clinic will be conducted from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. July 26 at the Hinds County Chancery Court, 407 East Pascagoula Street in Jackson.

Persons who meet the income eligibility requirement for free legal counsel in a guardianship matter may make an appointment by calling the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers project at 601-960-9577.

Schools require documentation of legal guardianship before enrolling a child living with someone other than a parent. Grandparents and other relatives must have guardianship documents filed in Chancery Court. The Mississippi Bar Young Lawyers Division is working with the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project to assist low income people with the filing of guardianship petitions in Hinds County Chancery Court.

Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project General Counsel Tiffany Graves said, "The purpose of the guardianship clinics is to give relatives who have been caring for minor children the ability to legally enroll them in school, provide for their medical needs, and otherwise ensure that these children receive the support they need. Many of the people who will attend the clinic have been caring for the children for whom they wish to become guardians for years. The process for obtaining a legal guardianship is one way to give their commendable efforts on behalf of these children legal effect."

The clinic can help avoid delays in school enrollment for children who live with someone other than a parent. The free clinic helps solve problems for people who can't afford to hire lawyers and don't know how to obtain a guardianship.

At the clinic, volunteer lawyers will draft the pleadings required to request a guardianship. Chancery Judge Denise Owens will hear the guardianship petitions.

"The purpose is to obtain guardianships for the grandparents or aunts and uncles who need to get the children in school for the upcoming year, so that they will not have to sit out until they can hire a lawyer and figure out how to navigate the court system," Judge Owens said.

"When they go to register a child in school, the school personnel tell them that they have to have a guardianship," Judge Owens said. Some people taking care of children do not understand the legal process of establishing a guardianship. "They think they can just walk to court and get the guardianship papers," she said.

"The clinic allows them a sort of one stop shopping for the guardianship. It expedites the process so the child can go ahead and start school. If they wait, they end up falling behind. I've seen them be out a month or two trying to figure out how to get the guardianship papers," Judge Owens said.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project worked with the Young Lawyers Division to arrange and staff the clinic. Fifteen attorneys have volunteered to help prospective guardians during the clinic.

This is the fifth year for the guardianship clinic in Hinds County. A similar clinic for Lee County residents will be held in Tupelo for the first time on July 20.

Young Lawyers Division President Rachel Pierce of Tupelo said, "I think this is an invaluable program, and we hope to expand it to other areas of the state in coming years."

Volunteer lawyers donate their time to assist. However, persons seeking to obtain legal guardianship are responsible for paying the \$147 Chancery Court filing fee. The court requires cash or a money order.

Legal documents which prospective guardians should bring with them include:

- birth certificates;
- photo identification;
- documents indicating the consent of natural parents to the guardianships;
- death certificates of natural parents who are deceased.

For more information about the guardianship clinic, call the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project at 601-960-9577.

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