

Guardianship Clinic will assist with school enrollment in Lee County

July 13, 2012

Free legal assistance will be available July 20 to help establish guardianships to allow Lee County children to enroll in school.

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 Lee County Chancery Court.

July 13 is the deadline to schedule an appointment during the guardianship clinic. 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.

The guardianship legal clinic will be conducted from 9 a.m. to noon July 20 at the Lee County Chancery Court, 200 Jefferson Street in Tupelo.

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."

At the clinic, volunteer lawyers will draft the pleadings required to request a guardianship. Chancery Judge Jacqueline Mask has set aside the morning to hear the guardianship petitions.

The service is provided in an effort to avoid delays in school enrollment of children who live with someone other than a parent. Having legal guardianship also may permit some children to be added to a guardian's insurance coverage. The clinic helps solve problems for people who can't afford to hire lawyers and don't know how to obtain a guardianship.

"These are people who need their cases heard for purposes of getting children enrolled in school and for getting them on insurance," Judge Mask said. "It's truly a tremendous service to children who would not otherwise get the education to which they are entitled."

In the past, low-income people who sought guardianships were referred to North Mississippi Rural Legal Services for assistance, Judge Mask said. However, the NMRLS Tupelo office has closed.

"We have a tremendous need," Judge Mask said.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project worked with the Young Lawyers Division to fill that need. Ten attorneys have volunteered to help prospective guardians during the clinic.

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."

MVLP has organized a similar guardianship clinic in Hinds County for the past four years. This year's Hinds County guardianship clinic is scheduled for July 26 in Jackson.

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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