

Commission on Children's Justice public hearing is Oct. 18 in Jackson

October 16, 2012

The Mississippi Commission on Children's Justice will conduct a public hearing Oct. 18 from 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Gartin Justice Building, 450 High Street in Jackson.

The Commission is holding public hearings to gather information regarding the protection and education of children under the jurisdiction of Youth Courts. The hearing is the fourth and final hearing to be held by the Commission as it gathers information to formulate recommendations to the Supreme Court. Hearings were held last year in Jackson and Oxford, and in Hattiesburg in April 2012.

Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Randy G. Pierce of Leakesville, Commission co-chair, will give opening remarks.

The program of invited speakers includes:

- **10:10 a.m.**, Forrest County Youth Court Judge Michael McPhail of Hattiesburg will talk about the Zero to Three Program which he uses in Youth Court. The program utilizes multiple resources to address the needs of infants and toddlers from birth to age three who enter the court as a result of abuse or neglect and who are at risk for entry into foster care. Zero to Three utilizes a team approach led by the judge and includes child development specialists, child advocates, community leaders and child health professionals. The goal is to reduce the likelihood that children will return to the court in the future, and to improve their chances for optimal development and healthy attachment.
- **10:40 a.m.**, Virginia Pryor, director of strategic consulting for the non-profit Casey Family Programs, will outline the development of pilot programs to provide legal representation to indigent parents in Youth Courts. Mississippi does not provide publicly funded court-appointed lawyers for indigent parents in abuse and neglect proceedings which may result in removal of children from their custody and termination of parental rights. Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest private foundation devoted to improving the child welfare system and reducing the number of children in foster care.
- **11:05 a.m.**, Mark Smith, deputy administrator for the Mississippi Department of Human Services, will give an update on the agency's work regarding permanency placement of abused and neglected children. Youth Court judges from around the state also will discuss their perspectives.
- **11:30 a.m.**, Commission members will discuss their findings and continue their work toward formulating recommendations.

Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. appointed the Commission to study the administration of justice in Youth Court and provide suggested improvements. The 25-member Commission includes judges, school officials, legislators and representatives of the Attorney General, Department of Human Services, Department of Mental Health and Medicaid.

The Mississippi Supreme Court created the Commission on Children's Justice in April 2006. The Supreme Court reestablished the Commission in June 2010 to examine the structure and operation of the Youth Court system and interactions of the juvenile justice, child welfare and education systems. The Supreme Court directed the Commission to develop a statewide comprehensive approach to improving the administration of justice in Youth Courts in the area of child protection; coordinate the three branches of government in assessing the impact of government actions on children who are abused or neglected; and recommend changes to improve children's safety, strengthen and support families, and promote public trust and confidence.

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