

## **Chief Justice Waller to speak at 15<sup>th</sup> District Drug Court graduation on May 15**

May 5, 2015

Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. will be the guest speaker at the 15<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Drug Court graduation ceremony scheduled for 10:30 a.m. May 15 at Resurrection Life Church, 795 Memorial Boulevard in Picayune.

Circuit Judge Prentiss Harrell will preside.

Three graduates and a former graduate of the program also will make brief remarks. The former graduate accepted a college scholarship after turning her life around in Drug Court, Judge Harrell said.

Fifty-one people are expected to graduate. It is the largest graduating class in the eight-year history of the 15<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Drug Court.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Drug Court currently enrolls 262 participants from Jefferson Davis, Lamar, Lawrence, Marion and Pearl River counties. A total of 153 people have previously graduated from the program.

Drug courts seek to rehabilitate drug-using offenders through drug treatment and intense supervision with frequent court appearances and random drug testing. Drug courts offer the incentive of a chance to remain out of jail and be employed and the sanction of a prison sentence if participants fail to remain drug-free and in compliance with all program requirements.

Judge Harrell meets weekly with Drug Court participants. He convenes Drug Court in four of the district's five counties each Thursday, starting a 164-mile circuit at 8 a.m. in Poplarville and meeting with the last group at 5 p.m. in Purvis. "The gratification of seeing people succeed is very worthwhile," he said.

Participants spend two and one-half to three years in Drug Court. They must pay all fines and fees before they are eligible to graduate. Fine and fee collections range from \$20,000 to \$25,000 a month in the 15<sup>th</sup> District, but participants paid \$72,000 in fines and fees during one recent month. Judge Harrell attributed that to the approaching graduation date, with participants seeking to complete their requirements.

Drug court fine collections statewide during the current fiscal year already exceed \$1 million, said State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft. The fines go to the county treasuries. Fees help support Drug Court operations.

Mississippi currently has 40 drug courts. Chief Justice Waller led the effort to expand drug courts statewide. All of the state's 22 Circuit Court districts have a drug court. More programs operate in Youth Courts, Municipal Courts and Justice Courts. More than 3,400 people are enrolled in drug courts statewide. The felony drug courts produce \$46 million in annual savings by avoiding incarceration costs of those participants.

Justice Waller, of Jackson, has served on the Supreme Court for more than 17 years. He became Chief Justice in January 2009.

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