

Meeting to focus on legal representation for low-income parents

June 16, 2015

National leaders in efforts to improve parent representation in the child welfare system will meet with Mississippi Youth Court judges and child welfare advocates June 18 and 19 in Jackson.

Mimi Laver, National Parent Attorney Project Director for the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, and Christopher Church, Children's Research Manager at the University of South Carolina School of Law Children's Law Center, will join the quarterly meeting of the Mississippi Parent Representation Committee. Representatives of the private non-profit Casey Family Programs also will join the discussions. The group will meet noon to 5 p.m. June 18 and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. June 19 at the Gartin Justice Building, 450 High Street in Jackson.

The Parent Representation Committee is working to develop a program to provide legal representation for low income parents whose children come into the custody of the Youth Courts and the Department of Human Services due to allegations of abuse or neglect. Mississippi is the only state in the nation that does not statutorily provide attorneys for indigent parents in Youth Court proceedings which may result in loss of custody of children.

Discussions are expected to include a review of elements of parent representation programs in Arkansas, Iowa, Massachusetts and Wyoming as the Mississippi committee works to develop proposed standards. The group will talk about expectations for parent representation, core components for pilot programs, and funding strategies.

Youth Courts in Adams, Forrest, Harrison and Rankin counties are participating in a pilot program which provides free legal representation for low-income parents in Youth Court hearings in which allegations of abuse or neglect could result in court-ordered removal of children from parents' custody. The committee is working to sustain and expand those pilot programs into other jurisdictions. Funding is an obstacle. The existing programs are funded by Casey Family Programs and a federal grant administered by the Administrative Office of Courts.

Youth Court judges who have the pilot programs say that providing legal representation to the parents helps avoid unnecessary removal of children from parents' custody and helps parents correct the problems that brought them into Youth Court so that they and their children may be reunited. Having legal representation also may expedite cases in which the parents can't be reunited with children.

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