

Family law clinics set to help self-represented low-income people in North Mississippi

July 13, 2015

The Lee County Chancery Court has scheduled a free guardianship clinic July 15 in Tupelo to assist low income grandparents and other relatives to obtain documents needed to enroll children in Lee County schools. The clinic will be held 1 to 4 p.m. at the Lee County Justice Center in Tupelo.

Eight other free family law clinics are scheduled to be held in Aberdeen, Booneville, Corinth, Fulton, Iuka, New Albany, Pontotoc and Tupelo throughout the summer and fall.

Appointments are required. People needing assistance in establishing guardianships must 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 free legal assistance is provided by MVLP, the Lee County Bar, the Lee County Young Lawyers Association and the Pro Bono Initiative of the University of Mississippi School of Law.

Free family law clinics are scheduled across north Mississippi from July through November to assist self-represented litigants in preparing to go to court. Low income people may seek guidance in preparing court documents and presentations in divorce, child support, guardianship, emancipation and name change cases.

Other dates and locations are:

- July 29, 4 to 7 p.m., Itawamba County Courthouse, Fulton;
- Aug. 13, 4 to 7 p.m., Alcorn County Courthouse, Corinth;
- Sept. 29, 4 to 7 p.m., Union County Courthouse, New Albany;
- Oct. 8, 4 to 7 p.m., Pontotoc County Courthouse, Pontotoc;
- Oct. 20, 4 to 8 p.m., Lee County Justice Center, Tupelo;
- Oct. 26, 4 to 8 p.m., Prentiss County Courthouse, Booneville;
- Nov. 12, 4 to 7 p.m., Tishomingo County Courthouse; Iuka;
- Nov. 30, 4 to 7 p.m., Monroe County Courthouse, Aberdeen.

Eligibility to attend a clinic is limited to people whose income is at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. For example, that would be an annual income of \$23,540 or less for an individual, or an annual income of \$48,500 or less for a family of four. Persons seeking assistance must register in advance and be screened for eligibility by the Volunteer Lawyers Project. Contact MVLP at 601-960-9577.

The legal clinics are *pro se* clinics, which means the individuals who attend and receive services from the attorneys will be expected to handle their legal matters in court on their own. Volunteer lawyers at the clinics will give advice, help prepare legal documents for the participants, explain how to file the documents and advise participants of what to say in court.

Chancery Judge Jacqueline Mask worked with the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project, the University of Mississippi School of Law Pro Bono Initiative, the Access to Justice Commission and local bar leaders to schedule a free legal clinic in every courthouse in the eight counties of the First Chancery District. Judge Mask expanded the clinics across the district after holding the first legal clinic in Tupelo in September 2014.

Judge Mask said she contacted bar leaders in each county to encourage lawyers to volunteer their time to provide free legal advice at the clinics. She was happy with the response from lawyers. “They want to help their community.”

Attorney Lee Thorne of Iuka said, “As attorneys, we are called to serve others, and this is a great opportunity to serve others that have a need that cannot be fulfilled outside our profession. If we can take a small amount of our time to fulfill the need that they have, we are happy to do it.”

Attorney Kurt Mord of New Albany said, “We are businessmen or women. We need to give back as much as we are able.” Mord said that he frequently encounters people who can’t afford a fee of a few hundred dollars for an uncontested divorce. “The real benefit of this clinic will be us providing documents to those people who can’t afford us. They can do it themselves. They can handle it from there.”

Mississippi Access to Justice Commission Executive Director Tiffany Graves said, “That’s what we want to see happening across the state. The people on the ground have to take ownership of what’s happening.”

Mississippi Access to Justice Commission Co-chair Rodger Wilder of Gulfport said, “There has been an increase in clinic offerings around the state due to the joint efforts of many organizations and the strong encouragement of chancellors like Judge Mask. An important part of access to justice is giving basic legal advice to folks who do not know how to obtain that advice and cannot afford to pay for it. Clinics address that need.”

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