

Rankin County follows Forrest County Safe Babies Court Team model

July 16, 2015

Forrest County is leading the way in a program to help abused and neglected infants and toddlers get the medical, mental health and social services care that they need to grow up healthy and safe.

Forrest County officials were in Rankin County on Thursday, July 16, to announce the creation of the Rankin County Safe Babies Court Team Program. The Rankin County program is modeled on the Safe Babies program started in Forrest County nearly 10 years ago. The program is expected to be expanded into other counties.

Also, national leaders of the Safe Babies program will be in Petal on Friday, July 17, to provide a training session for foster parents, social workers, mental health care providers and educators. The program will be held 8 a.m to 3 p.m. at the Petal School District Center for Families and Children at 201 West Central Avenue in Petal. The program will discuss normal healthy early childhood development as well as the effect of maltreatment on early childhood development.

Forrest County Youth Court Judge Michael McPhail started the Forrest County Safe Babies Program in November 2005. The pilot program was among the first four sites in the nation, and is a model program. For Forrest County, the approach required changing the way the court dealt with allegations of abuse and neglect involving children under the age of 3. The result has been that cases move more quickly to reunification with family or other permanent placement for children. There's also a cost savings. Judge McPhail estimated that the Safe Babies program has saved Forrest County about \$900,000 over the past 10 years.

"It has always been my dream that we move this beyond Forrest County," Judge McPhail said Thursday at the meeting in Pelahatchie to announce Rankin County's new program.

Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome said, "When you find something that works, you replicate it."

Lucy Hudson of Washington, D.C., national Safe Babies Court Teams project director, said, "The goal of the Safe Babies Court Teams Project is to help infants and toddlers to reach safe, nurturing homes as quickly as possible."

The Safe Babies program targets infants and toddlers up to 3 years of age who enter the court as a result of abuse and neglect, and who are headed for the foster care system. They are the most vulnerable age group, accounting for a large portion of children removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse and neglect.

At least 29 children died from abuse and neglect in Mississippi between July 1, 2014, and June 30, 2015, said Kim Shackelford, Deputy Administrator for Family and Children's Services for the Mississippi Department of Human Services. Most were under the age of 5.

Judge Broome said that 60 to 70 percent of abused and neglected children progress to juvenile delinquency.

The Safe Babies program provides intense early intervention and prevention. The approach is intended to improve children's chances for optimal development and healthy attachment, and to reduce the likelihood that they will return to court in the future.

In Forrest County, a team of community stakeholders works under the direction of Judge McPhail and Josie Brown, who retired from 28 years of work with the Department of Human Services and became senior community coordinator for the Forrest County Safe Babies Court Team. The team establishes individualized service plans and follows children and families' progress

through monthly meetings to review each case. The preference is to reunite the child with parents, if possible, or place the child with relatives. The team works with parents to provide them with the services they need to resume a healthy relationship with their children, if possible. Mental health and substance abuse services are provided along with parenting classes and education in child development.

“Some of these young parents are woefully lacking in the skills they need in parenting,” Judge McPhail said.

Judge McPhail said he had to learn the medical and mental health side of early childhood development. “I went to law school. I did not know a lot about infant development.”

Infancy to age 3 is a critical period in a childhood development. The majority of brain development occurs during that time, Hudson said. Children who grow up in an environment of fear develop differently from those who experience nurturing.

“You really can’t go back and rewire that brain,” Judge Broome said.

Early intervention saves lives and affects quality of life, Judge Broome said.

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