

Monthly Pine Belt legal clinic starts August 12

August 10, 2015

Pine Belt area low-income people who can't afford a lawyer may find legal assistance at a monthly legal clinic in Hattiesburg.

The first session is scheduled for 1 to 5 p.m. Aug. 12 at Christian Services at 301 E. Second Street in Hattiesburg. The clinic is expected to be held on the second Wednesday of each month.

Child support collection is expected to be one of the issues. However, other legal problems can be addressed.

Those seeking services should register in advance by contacting Christian Services at 601-582-5683, or by registering online at www.thrivehattiesburg.org.

The Hattiesburg Area Young Lawyers Association, HAYLA, is working in cooperation with Leadership Pine Belt and Christian Services.

HAYLA made child support collections assistance its public service project for the year. "Our timing was a blessing," said HAYLA Immediate Past President Matthew Shoemaker of Hattiesburg. At the same time, Christian Services and Leadership Pine Belt partnered to provide legal counseling through a program called Thrive. The three organizations are working together.

"We felt like it was a very good idea," said Leadership Pine Belt member Amber Chancelor, a nurse. "It was something that the community needed. I'm excited to be able to help."

Thirteen lawyers from Forrest and Lamar counties have volunteered to help. Organizational assistance comes from Leadership Pine Belt, whose membership includes various professions.

Shoemaker said, "We've had a pretty encouraging response from the bar, particularly young lawyers. If we can keep that momentum, it is possible that we can carry this on for a very long time."

HAYLA got a \$1,000 grant from the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division to help cover printing and supplies. HAYLA members put together a set of form pleadings to be used in child support collection cases.

People seeking assistance with child support collections through the clinic need to already have a court order calling for child support. Volunteer attorneys will explain the forms, provide general information and answer questions. The attorneys are not obligated to accompany clinic participants to court and file documents for them. The expectation is that individuals will be able to represent themselves in court, although some volunteer attorneys may be willing to provide pro bono representation.

Mississippi Access to Justice Commission Executive Director Tiffany Graves said that local initiatives are essential in efforts to make the courts accessible to people who can't afford to pay a lawyer. "That's what we want to happen across the state. The people on the ground have to take ownership of what's happening."

Local attorney participation is essential to filling the unmet legal needs of the poor, said Supreme Court Presiding Justice Jess Dickinson, a member of the Access to Justice Commission. "I am so pleased with the direction we are headed."

Faith-based organizations can help connect the needy to legal services. "I don't know where people go more when they are down and out than to their pastor or religious leader," Justice Dickinson said.

Christian Services has a waiting list of clients in need of legal assistance, said Community Relations Director Vanessa Henson.

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