



WINGS forms to work for protection of vulnerable adults

September 9, 2015

An interdisciplinary group will meet on Sept. 18 to begin work toward improving the way Mississippi protects vulnerable adults.

WINGS, the Working Interdisciplinary Network of Guardianship Stakeholders, will hold its organizational meeting starting at 9 a.m. at the Gartin Justice Building in Jackson.

“The WINGS Committee is expected to propose system reforms to support the rights, dignity and autonomy of vulnerable adults while better protecting them from abuse and neglect,” said Ta’Shia Gordon, Deputy Director of the Administrative Office of Courts and the WINGS Committee liaison with the National Guardianship Network. “Collaboration among the courts, service providers, the medical community and families is essential to improving how Mississippi handles guardianships of vulnerable adults.”

Law students at the University of Mississippi School of Law will work with the WINGS Committee. Professor Desiree Hensley and a group of students have volunteered to support the Committee's work by providing research and information needed to produce a report and recommendations for reform. Seven students are enrolled as part of a fall class.

Mississippi courts continue to see cases in which guardians failed to take care of the needs of vulnerable adults, and in some cases financially or otherwise exploited persons who were unable to manage their own affairs.

Hensley said, “These are people who are seriously at risk and not able to help themselves. It’s a growing need because the population of senior citizens is rapidly growing.”

Any proposed changes also need to respect vulnerable adults’ abilities to do things for themselves. “While you are trying to protect them from abuse and neglect, how are you going to make sure that you are not taking away too many rights?” Hensley said.

Guardianship reform has been a primary focus of WINGS efforts in other states. Reforms in other states have focused on areas including:

- Stronger procedural due process protections in the appointment process;
- Changes in duties and powers of guardians and provisions for limited guardianship orders;
- Guardian accountability and court monitoring; and
- Public and agency guardianship.

While Mississippi Chancery Courts frequently appoint persons to serve as guardians of vulnerable adults, Harrison County is the only county that has a full-time public guardian paid by the county.

Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, who pushed for creation of the public guardian position in 2002, said, “It sets up a system to deliver services to vulnerable adults

who otherwise might not have those services.”

The Mississippi Supreme Court and the Administrative Office of Courts have been selected by the National Guardianship Network, NGN, to receive a \$7,000 seed grant to launch the Mississippi WINGS group. Funding for state WINGS was provided by the State Justice Institute, with additional monies from the Atlantic Philanthropies Designated Gift Fund, and two anonymous donors. NGN technical assistance to WINGS is made possible by SJI and the Albert and Elaine Borchard Foundation Center on Law and Aging.

“The WINGS grant is intended to create incentive for the state to begin looking at how to improve the way the state protects adults who are vulnerable to abuse and neglect,” Hensley said. “The grant is intended to jumpstart a longer term process.”

Supreme Court Justice Randy Pierce said, “Our courts should be ever-vigilant in protecting Mississippi's senior adults. The WINGS program will help us as we continue to seek ways to protect vulnerable adults and ensure that their rights are protected.”

An interdisciplinary approach is necessary because of the complexity of the problems facing vulnerable adults and the various agencies and individuals that address them, Justice Pierce said. Membership includes stakeholders at the local, state and federal level whose work deals with adult guardianship from various perspectives including the courts, private attorneys, social services, mental health, veteran affairs, elderly care facilities and other community based agencies.

The Mississippi WINGS Steering Committee includes Justice Pierce; Gordon of the AOC; Hensley of University of Mississippi School of Law; Edna Clark, senior program administrator of adult protective services for the Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Aging and Adult Services; Anniece McLemore, Mississippi long term care ombudsman for DHS Division of Aging; attorney Kay Hardage of Disability Rights Mississippi; Kim Grier of the Georgia Department of Human Services, past president of the National Guardianship Association; David Hutt of the National Disability Rights Network; and Brenda Uekert of the National Center for State Courts.

WINGS Committee members include Chancellors Joseph Kilgore of Philadelphia, Denise Owens of Terry and Jennifer Schloegel of Gulfport; attorney Rick Courtney of the Special Needs Alliance; Special Assistant Attorney General Joe Hemleben, general counsel to the State Veterans Affairs Board; Oma Hibbler, Perry County Community Resource Agency; attorney Catherine Kilgore, North Mississippi Rural Legal Services; Marc Lewis Ph.D., director of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health Bureau of Mental Health; Coahoma County Chancery Clerk Ed Peacock III; Special Assistant Attorney General Marvin Sanders, Vulnerable Adults Division; and Louise Wilson, Choctaw Elder Center, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

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