

## **Supreme Court makes appointments to Commission on Children's Justice**

September 24, 2015

The Mississippi Supreme Court announced appointments to the Commission on Children's Justice on Thursday, Sept. 24. Court of Appeals Judge Virginia Carlton of Jackson and Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome of Brandon are co-chairs.

Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. signed an order on behalf of the nine-member court on Sept. 22 reconstituting the Commission and continuing its mission to ensure the well-being of at risk children.

"This is a very important commission working to ensure that the rights of our children are protected and ensuring that all children have the opportunity to become productive citizens," Chief Justice Waller said.

Judge Broome said, "We are excited to begin working on improving the safety, well-being and permanency for our children and families. We have a number of challenges in improving child welfare, but we also have wonderful opportunities in the area of early childhood education and community involvement. We have committed people who want to do the right things for the right reasons."

Chief Justice Waller noted that the Commission, originally created in 2006, has done important work to bring about improvements in the justice system. The creation of the position of resident jurist earlier this year to facilitate and provide support to Youth Courts across the state was based on a recommendation from the Commission. The resident jurist works to help bring uniform practices to the way children are treated in the courts throughout the state. The Commission also laid the groundwork for the Supreme Court's 2009 adoption of Uniform Rules of Youth Court Practice.

Five counties operate pilot programs to provide attorney representation to indigent parents facing allegations of abuse and neglect in Youth Court. The Commission in 2013 recommended legislation to give indigent parents a right to a court-appointed attorney in court proceedings in which parents may face termination of parental rights. Parent representation pilot programs operate in Adams, Forrest, Harrison, Rankin and Hancock counties. Before the pilot programs began, Madison County was the only county in the state that appointed counsel for indigent parents facing termination of parental rights in abuse and neglect cases.

The Commission's 2013 recommendation of a statewide system of county courts also remains a priority for Chief Justice Waller.

The Supreme Court's order reconstituting the Commission directs that its members continue to work to develop a statewide comprehensive approach to improving the child welfare system; coordinate the three branches of government in assessing the impact of government actions on children who are abused or neglected; and recommend changes to improve children's safety, strengthen and support families and promote public trust and confidence in the child welfare system.

The Supreme Court reconstituted the Commission because the terms of its previous members had expired. Thirty-two members were appointed to three-year terms.

Reappointed members include Justice Randy Pierce of Leakesville; Court of Appeals Judge Virginia Carlton of Jackson; Rankin County Court and Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome of Brandon; Special Assistant Attorney General Patti Marshall of Ridgeland, director of the Crime Prevention and Victims Assistance Division; Judge Kevin Briscoe of Choctaw, Chief Justice of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Sandra Parks of Brandon, bureau chief of the Children's Division of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health; and Toni Kersh of Pearl, bureau director of the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement.

New members include David Calder of Oxford, director of the Children's Advocacy Clinic at the University of Mississippi Law School; Shirley Kennedy of Jackson, director of the Children's Advocacy Program at Mississippi College School of Law; Dr. John Pruett of Jackson, chair of the Department of Child Psychology at University of Mississippi Medical Center; Dr. Angela Robertson of Starkville, associate director and research professor at the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University; Dr. Lisa Nored of Hattiesburg, chair of the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Southern Mississippi; Mark Smith of Jackson, deputy executive director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services and acting deputy director of Family and Children's Services; James Maccarone of Jackson, director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services Division of Youth Services; Laurie Smith, Office of the Governor; Forrest County Court and Youth Court Judge Michael McPhail of Hattiesburg; Jackson County Court and Youth Court Judge Sharon Sigalas of Pascagoula; Lauderdale County Court and Youth Court Judge Vel Young of Meridian; DeSoto County Court and Youth Court Judge Celeste Wilson of Hernando; Washington County Court and Youth Court Judge Vernita Johnson of Greenville; Tenth Chancery District Judge Dawn Beam of Sumrall; First Chancery District Judge Jacqueline Mask of Tupelo; Walthall County Youth Court Referee Conrad Mord of Tylertown; Judge Holly Denson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Tate County Attorney Ginger Mathis Miller of Senatobia; Karla Tye of Jackson, executive director of Mississippi Children's Advocacy Centers; Mike Duggar of Jackson, executive director of Mississippi United Methodist Children's Homes; Dr. John Damon of Madison, director of Mississippi Children's Homes Services; Angelique C. White of Gulfport, guardian ad litem; Dr. Susan Johnstone, retired school psychologist, formerly with the Tupelo school system; Tiffany Graves of Ridgeland, executive director of the Access to Justice Commission; and Rebecca Mansell of Jackson, director of Children's Safe Center.

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