

Dec. 1 community forum in Columbia to address child abuse and neglect

November 24, 2015

Chancery Judge Dawn Beam has called for meetings with public officials and community leaders on Dec. 1 in Columbia to address a sharp increase in the number of abused and neglected children in Marion County.

Elected officials will meet at 3 p.m. Dec. 1 at the Marion County Chancery Courtroom. A Community Forum is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. at the Marion County Courthouse in Columbia.

Three Marion County children have died in the past year and a half as a result of suspected abuse and neglect. Changes were made in Department of Human Services personnel in Marion County after the first child's death, and the number of children taken into DHS custody increased dramatically. At the time the first child was critically injured, about 30 Marion County children were in DHS custody as a result of abuse and neglect investigations. By mid-November, 165 children were in DHS custody.

"Over the past 17 months, this court has worked with the Department of Human Services to increase the number of court dates, increase the size of staff, and many other improvements," Judge Beam wrote in letters sent to community leaders. "Because Youth Court hearings are confidential, the residents of Marion County have no idea the crisis our children have been through and continue to endure."

Judge Beam has put out a call for community assistance. "We are now to the point in Marion County where we desperately need the community support in providing assistance with job placement for parents, tutoring for children, drug and alcohol awareness and prevention for our young people, adequate housing, and the list goes on," she wrote.

During the 6:30 p.m. meeting, Christopher Church, Law and Policy Director at the Children's Law Center at the University of South Carolina, will present a computer analysis of census data, criminal complaints, abuse and neglect reports and other information that identifies problem areas.

Others who will speak at the forum include Court of Appeals Judge Virginia Carlton, a Marion County native and co-chair of the Commission on Children's Justice; DHS Deputy Director Mark Smith; and Forrest County Youth Court Judge Michael McPhail, who created a model Safe Babies program that directs a wide range of resources to infants and toddlers up to three years of age who have been abused or neglected.

Judge Beam said, "I am convinced that when leaders and concerned citizens see this radar of concentrated areas of poverty, crime and suffering, our hearts will be moved to volunteer our talents and time to help. Our children deserve the very best we have to offer."

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