

Judges seek community support to curb abuse and neglect in Marion County

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Court officials on Dec. 1 asked Marion County residents come together as a community to tackle the growing problem of child abuse and neglect by providing volunteer services. They asked for parent mentors, child care services, tutors, foster parents, drug and alcohol education, prevention and treatment as well as a concerted effort to provide housing, vocational training and jobs.



“This meeting tonight is to ask the community for help,” Chancellor Dawn Beam told a crowd of more than 100 people who packed the Circuit courtroom in Columbia. Local elected officials, law enforcement, educators, social workers, health care workers and pastors filled the room.

More than 160 children from Marion County are currently in foster care, having been removed from their homes by court order as a result of allegations of abuse or neglect. That’s the highest rate of court-ordered removal in the state, and four times the state average, per capita, according to Christopher Church, law and policy director at the Children's Law Center at the University of South Carolina.

Scrutiny of the operations of child protective services in Marion County began about 17 months ago, in June 2014, after a 2-year-old died as a result of child abuse. The child had been the subject of two previous reports to the Department of Human Services of suspected abuse. The next month, in July 2014, a 4-month-old sleeping in bed with two adults died when one rolled over on her. A third child died May 25. The 7-year-old’s school had been calling about absenteeism.

Personnel changes were made in DHS in Marion County, and the DHS staff there tripled, Beam said. The removal numbers rose sharply, going from 30 to more than 160.

Judge Beam made it clear that the increase in children removed from their homes is not over-reaction. She said that she orders children removed from parents’ custody only as a last resort. “We do not take it lightly,” she said. The court examined each case and determined that the children needed to be removed to ensure their safety.

What they’ve seen is a pattern of drug abuse and deplorable living conditions, Judge Beam said.

“I feel so incredibly powerless to help our precious children. That’s why we are here,” Judge Beam said. As the holidays approach, “our babies do not need another baby doll or a bicycle. What they need is a commitment from this community that we are not going to live like this anymore. There is no need to go across the world to help the needy. They are right here.”

Court of Appeals Judge Virginia Carlton, a Marion County native and co-chair of the Commission on Children’s Justice, implored public officials and citizens to become involved in efforts to address the problem. “We are all here because we have compassion for the children and their parents.”

Church, a consultant for the nonprofit Casey Family Programs, examined Marion County Census data to map areas with high concentrations of children living in poverty. Stresses on families living in those areas make them vulnerable. The analysis is a means of targeting areas in need of resources.

The findings were not a surprise, Judge Carlton said. “The areas that are under stress have been under stress for a long time,” she said.

Parent mentors, child care services and tutors are among needed preventative services that volunteers can supply. There’s also a need for trained foster parents, not just to provide temporary homes, but to supervise biological parents’ visitation as they work to reunite with their children.

Resident Jurist John N. Hudson of Natchez, who served as Adams County Youth Court Judge for 31 years, said a community effort there provided support to create a Youth Drug Court, Family Drug Court and the Adolescent Offender Program. Its most recent effort was creation of a child advocacy center added to a local children’s home. The child advocacy center provides professional staff to interview victims of sexual abuse.

The non-profit Adams County Coalition was formed in 1996 to share ideas, raise funds and seek grants to create and implement programs. “It’s been a blessing to Adams County,” he said.

The Coalition, made up of people from varied backgrounds, continues to meet monthly in Adams County. It pools ideas and connects people to resources. “We found out there were a lot of folks already in place that could address those needs,” Judge Hudson said.

Senior Pastor Jerron Carney of Woodlawn Church in Columbia said that some of the needed programs are offered by his church. Drug and alcohol counseling, anger management, parenting classes and divorce recovery are available to the public.

Marion County Supervisor Calvin Newsom, pastor of the John the Baptist Church in Columbia, said four women from his congregation have agreed to get training to act as parent mentors. Helping the parents will help the children.

Judge Beam was encouraged by the community response. “It’s just an answer to a prayer. We have an opportunity to make a difference in every child’s life.”