

Child abuse prevention program ReNewMS to kick off Oct. 14 in Jackson

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First Lady Deborah Bryant on Oct. 14 will help kick off a pilot project aimed at reducing and preventing child abuse and neglect by helping parents break the cycle of drug addiction.

Bryant and Supreme Court Justice Dawn Beam will discuss plans for the child protection program at 9:30 a.m. Oct. 14 during a meeting in the fourth floor conference room at the Mississippi Supreme Court at 450 High Street.

The new program, known as ReNewMS, is a pilot project of the Commission on Children's Justice. Bryant and Justice Beam are co-chairs of ReNewMS. Justice Beam is co-chair of the Commission on Children's Justice.

The pilot program will be implemented first in Marion County, then in Pearl River and Hancock counties, Justice Beam said. The expectation is to expand the program to other counties. The pilot sites were selected because of their high incidences of child abuse and neglect associated with drug-using parents.

Hancock County currently has 327 children in the custody of the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services, according to Chief of Staff Seth Shannon. Of those, 214 had indications of parental drug abuse. In Pearl River County, 226 children are in state custody, and 148 of them had parental drug abuse. Marion County has 254 children in state custody, and 129 of them had parental drug abuse. Many cases have multiple factors leading to a child being removed, so parental drug use is often not the only reason.

Commissioner of Child Protection Services Dr. David Chandler said, "Over the past several years, there has been an increase in the number of children that needed to be removed from their homes, and drug abuse by the children's parents has been a significant reason in this increase. Drug abuse is a factor in about 40 percent of cases where children are taken into the state's custody. It is important that everyone concerned with this issue works together, and we are excited by the opportunity to do that through ReNewMS."

Opioid abuse by parents is leading to child abuse and neglect. Drug abuse is grounds for the courts to remove children from parents and place those children in foster care. ReNewMS will seek to provide drug treatment and prevention services as well as other social services in an attempt to help parents become and remain drug-free. The emphasis is on healing families so that they can be reunited.

Justice Beam, who joined the Supreme Court in February, wrestled with drug-addicted parents for five years as a chancellor in the five-county 10th District, that includes Marion and Pearl River counties. As a chancellor, she saw a cycle of drug abuse and child abuse that repeated from generation to generation. People who were abused as children grew up to abuse their own children.

Taking away custody of children from a drug-abusing parent is in the best interests of the safety and well-being of children. But the trauma of losing custody of a child may send that parent deeper into drug use.

"What we have to acknowledge is that these mothers grew up in dysfunctional homes where they experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, hunger. We have to get to the root of this and break the cycle," Justice Beam said.

In addition to drug treatment and parenting classes, those parents may need help finding employment, safe housing and other basic needs.

"If we can get these mothers the help they need and get them on the road to recovery, we can reunify families more quickly," Justice Beam said.

ReNewMS is a cooperative effort of the courts, the Commission on Children's Justice, the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services, the Department of Mental Health and the University of Southern Mississippi. ReNewMS will also seek assistance from non-profits and the faith-based community, Justice Beam said.

"None of us alone can meet these needs. It's going to take all of us working together," she said.

ReNewMS represents a renewed approach to helping parents overcome systemic challenges driving drug addiction by targeting mothers with children in custody or at risk. It's a renewed approach to engage the community to prevent child abuse and neglect. It also will take a renewed approach to recruiting, training and retaining social workers to address the needs of children and families.