

Adoptive parents sought for children in DHS custody

November 23, 2004

The attorney general, judges, representatives of the Mississippi College School of Law, Department of Human Services staff and volunteer lawyers gathered on Tuesday to call attention to the need for more adoptive parents and to cooperative efforts to find permanent homes for children in need of adoption.

Attorney General Jim Hood said 131 children in Department of Human Services custody are in need of adoptive parents.

Hood asked people interested in adoption “to prayerfully consider over the holiday season adopting one of these 131 children who remain who need parents.”

November is National Adoption Month. Supreme Court Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr. has declared Nov. 30 as Mississippi Adoption Day. Chief Justice Smith has asked Chancery Court judges across the state to schedule as many adoption hearings as possible during November, and to reserve part of their courtroom time on Nov. 30 to finalize adoptions.

Chancery Judge Jacqueline Estes Mask of Tupelo recently convened court on a Saturday in a lawyer’s office to expedite an adoption for a member of the military who had been called to active duty. The child had lived with foster parents for three years, and they planned to adopt. The child became available for adoption while the foster father was on duty with the military. The foster father got a 24-hour pass before being deployed, and Judge Mask scheduled the adoption hearing for the family.

Judge Mask said, “For the judges in the First Chancery Court District as well as these judges here and chancery court judges throughout the state, I can assure you that we are willing to come early, work through lunch and stay late, whatever it takes to complete as many adoptions as we can during this month and on Nov. 30.”

Chancery Judge Sarah Springer of Meridian, chair of the Conference of Chancery Judges, said, “I know I speak for all of the chancellors when I say we usually preside over the breakups of families. And the adoptions give us a big break from that unfortunate event of a divorce. Instead, we are presiding over the unification of parents with children. And that is a wonderful experience and it’s a great joy. Probably the best part of our judgeship is to preside over adoptions.”

Cooperative efforts by the Department of Human Services, the attorney general’s office, chancery judges, the Mississippi College School of Law and volunteer lawyers have increased the number of completed adoptions. Hood noted that 270 adoptions were finalized involving children in Department of Human Services custody during the recently concluded federal fiscal year. That compares to 181 during the same period in the previous year.

Rickey Berry, Deputy Administrator in charge of programs for the Department of Human Services, said, “There has been some significant activity. I know numbers are important, but these are all children. And I can personally testify how important that is because I was adopted as an infant at seven weeks old, and 52 years later, everything is going just fine. My mother is 90.”

Berry said, “We appreciate the law school, the attorney general’s office and all of our partners who have helped us make this a worthwhile and successful program.”

Hood said another 186 children are living with foster parents who plan to adopt them. Efforts are being made to make it easier for those adoptions to be finalized.

In March, Special Assistant Attorney General Patti Marshall, who has been involved in child protection issues for many years, sought assistance from Mississippi College School of Law Dean Jim Rosenblatt and law professor Shirley Kennedy, director the law school's Child Advocacy Program. In June, students at the Mississippi College School of Law began assisting with paperwork required to prepare uncontested adoptions for presentation to chancery judges. Volunteer lawyers were recruited to represent adoptive families who qualify for Department of Human Services assistance with the adoptions. Their efforts completed 37 adoptions. By the end of November, an additional 23 adoptions are expected to be finalized, Hood said.

Dean Rosenblatt said the joy of seeing a child placed with a family energizes everyone involved in the project. "It makes us all work hard and very energetically towards that. This is a great opportunity to work with the Department of Human Services, with the judges and with the lawyers. It's a great opportunity for our students."

Mississippi College law student Katina Hardee, student coordinator for the adoption project, said more than 130 volunteer lawyers are giving their time. Law students have all of the paperwork completed for them and accompany them to court for finalization of the adoptions.

Hardee said, "My job is to make it a cake walk for them (the attorneys) when they enter the courtroom....We are really trying hard to make it as easy as possible and hopefully get other pro bono attorneys in the state to help us."

Tina Hill-Walker, co-chair of the Child Advocacy Committee of the Mississippi Bar, said, "I'm extremely excited to be a part of this project....We can think of no better gift for a child than the gift of a loving family and supportive family."

Students at the University of Mississippi School of Law are also expected to soon begin assisting with adoptions.

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