

Supreme Court seeks to assist local courts with security plans

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The Mississippi Supreme Court is looking for ways to help trial judges and local law enforcement improve security in county courthouses, Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr. and Justice Michael K. Randolph told judges gathered in Gulfport for the Mississippi Trial and Appellate Judges Spring Conference on Thursday, April 28.

Justice Randolph said there is concern over the possibility of acts of terrorism as well as violence by people who may be disgruntled over matters heard in the courts. Plans need to be developed to prevent violence, and to respond to such acts if they do occur, he said.

Courthouse security is a matter under the control of local authorities. "We can't tell you how you should do that," Chief Justice Smith told the chancery, circuit, county and administrative law judges.

But what the high court can do is look for information and resources to assist the trial courts.

Justice Randolph said, "The biggest difficulty we face is the budget crunch." While a few counties can afford to do their own security improvements, "there are a lot of counties out there that are really strapped. We have to share information to help them develop plans for their courts."

Justice Randolph along with Justices Chuck Easley and James E. Graves Jr. make up the Supreme Court Committee on Court Security. They have met with State Capitol Police and officials of the Department of Public Safety. They plan to meet soon with officials of the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security.

Justice Randolph said he began examining court security issues soon after he joined the Supreme Court in April 2004. The urgency for action was driven home by incidents this year in Tyler, Texas, and in Chicago and Atlanta. A man armed with an assault rifle and body armor killed his estranged wife and a bystander and injured his son and three officers outside the courthouse in Tyler in February. The husband and mother of a federal judge were murdered in their Chicago home in February. A trial court judge, his court reporter and a deputy were shot to death in an Atlanta courthouse in March.

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