

MISSISSIPPI
Access to Justice
COMMISSION

JUSTICE *for* ALL

2016 ANNUAL REPORT

Mississippi Access to Justice Commission
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MISSISSIPPI Access to Justice COMMISSION

2016 Year In Review



House Concurrent Resolution #23

On March 1, the Mississippi Legislature presented a resolution congratulating the Commission on 10 years of extraordinary service to Mississippians living in poverty without legal assistance.

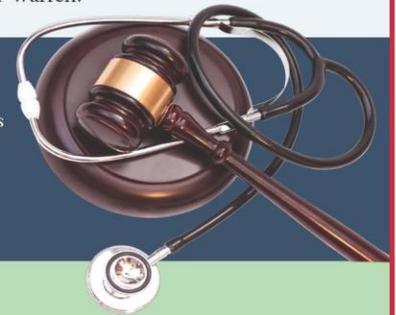
By the Numbers:

- Co-sponsored 7 Expungement Workshops and Expungement Legal Clinics in Meridian, Jackson, and Hattiesburg. In total, 95 volunteer attorneys and law students assisted 523 people.
- Co-sponsored 3 “Lawyers in the Library” Legal Advice Clinics in Pascagoula, Cleveland, and Jackson. 40 volunteer attorneys assisted 107 people at the events.

- Hosted “Community Lunch Meetings” about free legal clinics in the area and access to justice in 6 counties, including Itawamba, Lee, Prentiss, Pontotoc, Tishomingo and Union. Over 250 superintendents, local government officials, law enforcement, court staff, school counselors, social workers, DHS staff, nonprofit and religious leaders attended.
- The Commission made 23 presentations to community groups and legal associations in 12 counties in Mississippi, including Adams, DeSoto, Hinds, Itawamba, Lauderdale, Lee, Oktibbeha, Prentiss, Pontotoc, Tishomingo, Union and Warren.

Medical-Legal Partnership Learning Session

On May 4, the Commission joined the State Department of Health’s Office of Health Disparities Elimination and the Mississippi Center for Justice in hosting Mississippi’s first Medical-Legal Partnership Learning Session at UMMC to discuss ways healthcare and legal communities can work together to assist vulnerable populations more holistically. 65 attorneys, judges, social workers, nurses, and physicians attended.



Launch of MS Free Legal Answers

On August 22, in sponsorship with the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project, the Commission launched ms.freelegalanswers.org, a civil legal help site designed to assist Mississippi’s low-income citizens with their legal questions.



Access to Justice for All: 10th Anniversary Summit

On August 25, the Commission hosted the Access to Justice for All: 10th Anniversary Summit to reflect on past work and share its current programs and initiatives. Over 100 people attended the event, which featured keynote speaker, Lisa Foster, Director of the US Department of Justice’s Office for Access to Justice.

Launch of Expungement Screening Tool

In September, along with 2 web developers, the Commission launched an expungement tool that enables attorneys to electronically screen individuals who attend expungement workshops and export data they collect at the events. Prior to the tool’s launch, attorneys collected all expungement eligibility information by hand, frustrating the often large number of individuals at the workshops. Over 100 individuals have been screened with the tool and we expect the number to increase in coming years.



About the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission (“the Commission”) was created by the Mississippi Supreme Court on June 28, 2006 to develop a unified strategy to improve access to the civil courts for the poor. The Commission is tasked with investigating the need for civil legal services to the poor in Mississippi, and evaluating, developing and recommending policies, programs and initiatives that will assist the judiciary in meeting needs for civil legal services to the poor.

Objectives of the Commission

The Commission’s stated goals are to:

- Identify the current and future needs of the legal services community in providing access to justice for the poor in Mississippi;
- Develop and establish a strategic statewide plan for delivery of legal services to the poor in Mississippi;
- Develop strategies and ideas to increase resources and funding for access to justice in civil legal matters, and to make recommendations to appropriate entities to ensure that the resources and funding are applied to the areas and organizations of greatest need;
- Work to maximize the wise and efficient use of available resources, including development of local, regional and/or statewide systems that encourage the coordination of resources and funding;
- Develop and implement initiatives designed to expand civil access to justice;
- Work to reduce barriers to the justice system by addressing existing and proposed court rules, procedures, and policies that affect access to justice for poor Mississippians;
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the statewide system and service providers, and periodically evaluate the progress made in fulfilling their respective responsibilities; and
- Consider relevant topics, including available funds and budgets, expansion of resources, increased public awareness through communications and message development, pro bono matters, and other related matters, and shall make recommendations as it deems.

Current Commission Co-Chairs and Members

The Commission is made up of twenty-one (21) voting members and twelve (12) *ex-officio* members. Co-Chairs are Chancery Judge Jacqueline Mask (Tupelo) and former Mississippi Bar President Rodger Wilder (Gulfport). Voting members of the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission include: Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, Gulfport; attorney Alison Bryant Baker, Gulfport; Jamie Bardwell, Deputy Director of the Women’s Foundation of Mississippi, Jackson; Representative David Baria, Bay St. Louis; Court of Appeals Judge Donna M. Barnes, Tupelo; Supreme Court Justice Dawn Beam. Sumrall; attorney Edderek Cole, Jackson; attorney La’Verne Edney, Jackson; Chancery Court Judge Deborah Gambrell, Hattiesburg; Faith Garbin, Pascagoula; Reverend Hosea Hines, Pastor of Christ Tabernacle Church, Jackson; Michael L. Jones, UnitedHealth Group, Jackson; Supreme Court Justice Leslie D. King, Greenville; Hinds County Chancery Judge Denise Owens, Jackson; Representative Thomas Reynolds, Charleston; Sixth District Circuit Judge Lillie Blackmon Sanders, Natchez; Dennis Smith, former WLBT News Director, Jackson; attorney Ronnie Walton, Meridian; and Mississippi Economic Council President Blake Wilson, Jackson.

Non-voting *ex-officio* commission members include: Deborah Bell, Interim Dean, University of Mississippi School of Law, Oxford; Sam Buchanan, Executive Director, Mississippi Center for Legal Services, Hattiesburg; Gayla Carpenter-Sanders, Executive Director/General Counsel, Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project, Jackson; Ben Cole, Executive Director, North Mississippi Rural Legal Services, Oxford; Patricia Gandy, Executive Director, Mission First Legal Aid Office, Jackson; Jaribu Hill, Executive Director, Mississippi Workers Center, Greenville; Beth Orlansky, Advocacy Director, Mississippi Center for Justice, Jackson; Jody Owens II, Managing Attorney, Southern Poverty Law Center, Jackson; Joi Owens, Managing Attorney, Disability Rights Mississippi; Jennifer Riley-Collins, Executive Director, American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi, Jackson; Professor Wendy Scott, Mississippi College School of Law, Jackson; and Harry Yoste, Attorney/Director, Northcutt Legal Clinic.

The Executive Director of the Commission is Tiffany M. Graves.

Commission Committees

The Commission is currently comprised of three Committees—Delivery System, Public Awareness and Resource Development—and two Subcommittees— Faith-Based Initiatives and Medical-Legal Partnership. A Strategic Planning Committee also meets to assure the Commission is meeting its stated goals and objectives. The Delivery System Committee oversees the development of an expanded and improved system for providing civil legal services to low income people. The Resource Development Committee is tasked with developing a long-term plan to increase funding to civil legal services programs. The Public Awareness Committee works to educate the Bar, governmental leaders and the public about the scope of the need for legal services. The Faith-Based Initiatives Subcommittee seeks to foster partnerships between the legal and religious communities in Mississippi to help expand access to justice to the state’s poor. Finally, the Medical-Legal Partnership Subcommittee was formed to explore ways the legal and medical communities can work together to reach more Mississippians in need of assistance. Committees often include non-Commission members.

Financial Support for the Commission

The Commission is funded through the generous support of the Mississippi Supreme Court, The Mississippi Bar and The Mississippi Bar Foundation.

2016 Commission Meeting Dates

The Commission meets quarterly. In 2016, Commission meetings were held as follows: March 1, June 7, September 6 and December 6. Guest speakers at the 2016 meetings included Nusrat Choudhury, Blake Feldman and Paloma Wu (American Civil Liberties Union) and LeKesha L. Perry of Key Concepts, LLC. Provider-members and Committee Co-Chairs gave updates of their work at every meeting.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2016

Since the Commission is divided into three committees—Delivery System, Public Awareness and Resource Development—the reports on accomplishments for the past year will be provided based on the working group under which a specific program or initiative was completed.

DELIVERY SYSTEM

Among its objectives, the Commission is tasked with developing and implementing initiatives designed to expand access to civil justice. In addition, the Commission has to work to reduce barriers to the justice system by addressing existing and proposed court rules, procedures and policies that affect access to justice for poor Mississippians. Through various projects, initiatives and outreach programming, the Commission accomplished these goals with the assistance of its committees, the state's nonprofit legal service providers, bar associations and other community partners.

Virtual Forms Project

The virtual form packet for adult name change was finalized in January 2016 and made available to the Mississippi Legal Services Programs and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. The Commission has now developed virtual form packets for irreconcilable differences divorce, removal of disability of minority/emancipation and name change. Individuals can access the forms at the aforementioned programs and on the Commission's website at <http://www.msatjc.org/need-legal-assistance/>. It is the Commission's hope that the legal services programs will make the packets available to eligible individuals on their respective websites as a way to serve those who exceed the programs' financial guidelines and/or have the capacity to represent themselves in the aforementioned proceedings.

Chancery Court Judges Survey

The Commission distributed a survey to all of the state's chancery court judges in April at the Chancery Judges Conference on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Among other things, the survey asked the judges about the number of self-represented litigants who appear before them and the challenges most frequently faced by this category of court litigants.

Launch of MS Free Legal Answers, Mississippi First Online Legal Help Website

In August 2016, the Commission joined the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project in launching Mississippi Free Legal Answers, the state's first-ever, free online legal help website, available at <https://MS.freelegalanswers.org>. The site is designed to assist Mississippi's low-income citizens with their civil legal questions. Question topics can include family law matters (such as divorce, custody, child support, visitation, guardianship, emancipation, and adoption), name change, birth certificate correction, domestic violence, bankruptcy, consumer, education, employment, housing, workers compensation, wills and estate planning. The site does not deal with criminal law questions. Individuals who qualify for assistance will sign up for an account and then post a

question privately to the website. Attorneys will respond to questions and users will be alerted to their responses by email. Twenty-three other states have launched similar sites.

Launch of an Expungement Screening Tool

In September 2016, the Commission, in partnership with two web developers, launched an expungement resource tool that enables attorneys to electronically screen individuals who attend expungement workshops and clinics and immediately export the data they collect at the events. Prior to the launch of this expungement resource, workshop volunteers had to collect all of the eligibility information by hand, which slowed the screening process and frustrated the sometimes hundreds of individuals seeking assistance at expungement workshops. With the expungement tool, attorneys can quickly collect the required information and store an individual's data with a few simple keystrokes. Over 100 individuals have been screened in Mississippi using the tool and the Commission expects the number to grow significantly in the coming year.

Local Access to Justice Initiatives

Expungement Workshops and Legal Clinics

The Commission and the Mississippi Association for Justice (MAJ) partnered on several expungement workshops and expungement legal clinics in 2016. The organizations sponsored seven expungement events in Meridian, Jackson and Hattiesburg. 523 people were assisted at the events by 95 *pro bono* attorneys and law students. The Lauderdale County Bar Association and Attorney/City Councilman Dustin Markham co-sponsored the Meridian events. The Capital Area Bar Association, Mississippi State Senator Sollie Norwood and the City of Jackson were co-sponsors of each of the expungement events in Jackson. Finally, the Hattiesburg Area Young Lawyers Association and Christian Services, Inc. co-sponsored the event in Hattiesburg. At present, only two of the state's civil legal service providers are offering expungement assistance as part of their regular casework. Others are only offering this type assistance through legal clinics. The Commission has engaged in the partnership with MAJ to help fill this gap in civil legal services in Mississippi but will shift its focus to systemic expungement reform in 2017 and beyond.

"Lawyers in the Library" Legal Advice Clinics

The Commission co-sponsored three "Lawyers in the Library" legal advice clinics with the Young Lawyers Division ("YLD") of The Mississippi Bar. The attorneys who volunteered at the events provided legal advice and counsel on the following topics: expungement, family law, social security and estate planning. Events were held in Pascagoula, Cleveland and Jackson. In all, 107 people received legal advice from 40 *pro bono* attorneys. The Commission will continue to partner with the YLD on these events in 2017.

Access to Justice Community Lunch Meetings

The Commission joined local bar association and Commission Co-Chair Chancery Judge Jacqueline Mask in hosting six community luncheon meetings to discuss the free legal clinics in the area and access to justice generally. The meetings were held in six counties, including

Itawamba, Lee, Prentiss, Pontotoc, Tishomingo and Union. Over 250 school superintendents, local government officials, law enforcement staff, court staff, school counselors, social workers, DHS staff, nonprofit and religious leaders attended the luncheons. The Commission expects to attend similar meetings in Alcorn and Monroe Counties in 2017.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Among its more significant accomplishments of the past year, the Commission was able to increase its exposure and bring more awareness to the services offered by the nonprofit legal service provider community as recommended in its stated goals.

Speaking Engagements

The Commission gave presentations to the following groups and/or at the following events: Mississippi State Extension Services (Starkville); Mississippi Judicial Law Clerks (Jackson); Women for Progress, Inc. (Jackson); Adams County Bar Association (Natchez); Evelyn Gandy Lecture Series (Tupelo); Lauderdale County Bar Association (Meridian); The Mississippi Bar's Leadership Forum (Jackson); The Mississippi Bar's Health Law Section (Jackson); the Mississippi Bar Convention (Destin, FL); Community Luncheon Meeting in Fulton; Judicial Advisory Study Committee (Jackson); Community Luncheon Meeting in Booneville; Board of Bar Commissioners (Jackson); Community Luncheon Meeting in Tupelo; Court Administrators' Conference (Jackson); Community Luncheon Meeting in New Albany; and Warren County Bar Association (Vicksburg).

Published Articles

The Commission was featured in the January 2016 issue of *Portico Jackson* magazine in an article titled, "Legal with a Cause: The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission is on a mission to truly create justice for all."

The Mississippi Bar included several access to justice articles in the summer issue of *The Mississippi Lawyer* magazine, including an article written by Commission Executive Director, Tiffany Graves, titled, "The Humans of Civil Legal Aid in Mississippi."

Copies of the above articles are available by request to the Commission.

Newsletters, Website, Social Media

The Commission published an electronic newsletter each month beginning in January and posted regular announcements in The Mississippi Bar's "Bar Briefs" weekly newsletter. The monthly newsletters are available for download at <http://us10.campaign-archive1.com/home/?u=9f2f0059d5271b5732688b7c6&id=a43cc5e4d2>. The Commission also increased traffic to its webpage and its presence on social media through active Twitter and Facebook pages.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Among its many directives, the Commission was empowered to develop strategies and ideas to increase resources and funding for access to justice in civil matters. To that end, the Commission has worked closely with The Mississippi Bar, the state's legal services providers and others to procure additional support for civil legal services in the state.

Response to Proposed LSC Budget Cuts

In May, the Commission submitted written comments to the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) regarding its funding request to Congress for the 2018 fiscal year. The Commission will work closely with the LSC programs—Mississippi Center for Legal Services and North Mississippi Rural Legal Services—to monitor funding issues in the new presidential administration.

Bank of America Donation and Exploration of Cy Pres Funding

The Commission continues to work with The Mississippi Bar Foundation on the disbursement of the Bank of American Settlement Agreement funds. The Foundation has asked the Commission for guidance and recommendations on developing the request for proposal that will be issued to the nonprofit legal community to assist with distributing the remaining settlement funds.

The Commission continues to explore ways to procure *cy pres* funds and has engaged in discussions with several Mississippi Supreme Court Justices on the issue.

Other Funding Possibilities

The Commission actively scouted grant and other funding opportunities to support the nonprofit legal aid programs and informed them as appropriate in accordance with its stated goals.

CONFERENCES, CONVENTIONS AND SUMMITS

2016 Equal Justice Conference in Chicago, Illinois

Several Commission members and legal service providers attended the Equal Justice Conference in Chicago, Illinois in May. Judge Denise Owens participated in the State Access to Justice Chairs' Meetings and met with regional colleagues in Arkansas, Georgia and Tennessee to discuss the possibility of a regional conference or training for judges and court staff on self-represented litigants.

Access to Justice Commission at The Mississippi Bar Convention

The Commission hosted a panel at the Annual Meeting of The Mississippi Bar at the Sandestin Hilton in Destin, Florida in July. The session was titled "Access to Justice for All: An Overview of New and Emerging Programs Seeking to Close the Civil Justice Gap" and featured a panel of Commissioners, provider-members and others discussing recent developments in access to justice,

including the *pro se* clinic expansion in Northeast Mississippi, legal technology resources and the growth in law school clinical programs.

Access to Justice for All: 10th Anniversary Summit

On August 25, 2016, the Commission hosted the *Access to Justice for All: 10th Anniversary Summit* to reflect on its work over the last ten years and share the types of programs and initiatives in which it is currently engaged and expects to take the lead on going forward. Over 100 people attended the event which featured three panels and a keynote address by Lisa Foster, the Director of the Office for Access to Justice of the United States Department of Justice. A formal reception to honor current and past members of the Commission was held immediately after the keynote address.

COMMITTEE & OTHER COMMISSION APPOINTMENTS

Mississippi Parent Representation Task Force

The Commission continues to serve on the Mississippi Parent Representation Task Force. The parent representation pilot program launched new sites in 2016. The Commission assisted in securing funding for additional sites that should launch in 2017 and 2018.

Working Interdisciplinary Networks of Guardianship Stakeholders (WINGS) Committee

The Commission continues to serve on the Working Interdisciplinary Networks of Guardianship Stakeholders (WINGS) Committee, a grant-funded collaborative that will examine and suggest ways to improve the state's adult guardianship system. Commission Executive Director Tiffany Graves recently assisted in the development of a video to help elderly and disabled individuals with estate planning needs as part of the Committee's 2016 activities.

Commission on Children's Justice

Commission Executive Director Tiffany Graves continues to serve on the Commission on Children's Justice (CCJ). The CCJ is charged with developing a statewide comprehensive approach to improving the child welfare system; coordinating the three branches of government in assessing the impact of government actions on children who are abused or neglected; and recommending changes to improve children's safety, to strengthen and support families, and to promote public trust and confidence in the child welfare system.

GOALS FOR 2017

In addition to continuing many of the efforts described in the preceding pages, the Commission will focus substantial time on the following objectives in 2017 to further increase access to civil justice:

Continue to Find Ways to Better Support Self-Represented Litigants

Similar to 2016, the Commission's Delivery System Committee will continue to explore ways to provide critically-needed services and supports to self-represented litigants in 2017. In an effort to provide a resource for anyone facing civil proceedings alone, we are working with a developer to design an app for Mississippi specifically for self-represented litigants with chancery court matters. Among other features, the app will include interactive maps of all of Mississippi's chancery courthouses, downloadable pleadings for divorce, emancipation, name change, visitation, protection orders, and in forma pauperis, video libraries with filing and hearing instructions, information and links to Mississippi's nonprofit legal aid programs, and a link to the recently-launched online legal help website. The app will be a powerful resource and we are already hard at work filling it up with helpful, plain language, user-friendly content. We expect to test the app with actual prospective users—self-represented litigants—to ensure that it will be user-friendly and contain the elements that will be most beneficial to them.

We will continue to borrow from other states that have successfully developed training and educational programs and implemented court policies and procedures that provide guidance to court staffs about what they can and cannot do to assist self-represented litigants. We expect to work with sister-state partners on a regional conference that will include training and other components for judges, attorneys and members of the public.

Foster Greater Awareness of Access to Justice Among the State's Judiciary and Court Staffs

The Commission will work with the Mississippi Judicial College to provide presentations to judges, court administrators and clerks on access to justice and, in particular, the challenges faced by self-represented litigants. The Commission is already slated to address the Circuit Court Clerks in January and the Chancery Court Clerks in February, in conjunction with their respective Judicial College Conferences. The Commission will also address the Justice Court and Municipal Court Judges at conferences later in 2017. It is our hope that these presentation opportunities will help provide greater insight into the scope of the need for free legal services throughout Mississippi and the resources that currently exist to help bring some relief to those who lack the resources to afford attorneys to assist them with their legal issues. We also hope to engage in discussions with the judges and court staffs who attend the conferences about how we can work collaboratively to address issues that prohibit sufficient access to our civil courts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Commission wishes to acknowledge the generous support it receives from the Mississippi Supreme Court, The Mississippi Bar and the Mississippi Bar Foundation. The Commission would also like to recognize the tireless work of the state's nonprofit legal services providers.

We also wish to acknowledge the individuals and organizations with whom we partnered in 2016 on the activities and programs discussed herein. We cannot do our work alone. It takes partners from all fields and all walks of life to help us reach those who need civil legal services the most. We thank these individuals and organizations for their invaluable contributions to our success this year:

Simon Bailey, Esq.
Capital Area Bar Association
City of Jackson
Jennie Eichelberger, Esq.
Lisa Foster, Esq.
Hattiesburg Area Young Lawyers Association
Ashley Hendricks, Esq.
Itawamba County Bar Association
Beverly Kraft
Lauderdale County Bar Association
Ellen Lawton, Esq.
Lee County Bar Association
Meridian City Councilman Dustin Markham, Esq.
Metrocenter Mall
Mississippi Association for Justice
The Mississippi Bar
The Mississippi Bar Foundation
Mississippi Judicial College
Mississippi State Department of Health's Office of Health Disparities Elimination
Mississippi Supreme Court
Mississippi State Senator Sollie Norwood
Tom Ortega
E. Faye Peterson, Esq.
Pontotoc County Bar Association
Keith Porcaro, Esq.
Prentiss County Bar Association
Jason Tashea, Esq.
Jon Tippens, Esq.
Tishomingo County Bar Association
Union County Bar Association
Young Lawyers Division of The Mississippi Bar

We will build on our 2016 accomplishments—and your continued support—to further the cause of access to civil justice in Mississippi in 2017 and beyond.