



Advocates say more money needed for lawyers in youth cases

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JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — An advocacy group says Mississippi needs to put more money into legal representation for young people accused of crimes.

A new report by the Youth Justice Project says some Youth Court defense attorneys are appointed to cases only moments before their clients are supposed to appear in court.

"Children's access to counsel is a right, not a privilege," Jennifer Riley-Collins, staff attorney for the Mississippi Youth Justice Project, said Tuesday during a news conference at the Capitol.

Robin Walker is an attorney with the National Juvenile Defense Center, based in Washington. She also helped write the report on Mississippi's Youth Court system.

Walker said some Youth Court defense attorneys face a "crushing case load" and can't give enough time to each client. She also said Mississippi has a serious shortage of money and other resources to improve the system.

And, she said, some schools routinely send teenagers to Youth Court for minor offenses.

"These problems are not intractable," Walker said.

State Rep. George Flagg, chairman of the House Juvenile Justice Committee, said Tuesday that he'll try to get more money for the Youth Court system next year. Budget writers, however, have already said that money could be tight for all state agencies.

Flagg, D-Vicksburg, did not specify how much money he'll try to get when the 2008 legislative session starts in January. The next state budget year begins July 1.

Anthony Barbour of Jackson, who's now 18, said he was falsely accused of a crime but he would not tell reporters at the news conference what the accusation was. Barbour said he was found innocent with the help of an attorney who kept him and his parents informed about developments in the case.

"She was strong for me. She made sure I was strong," Barbour said. "She made sure that I could hold on."

Marquan Watson, a 14-year-old from Laurel, said he and a friend spent one Easter weekend in a detention facility after they were accused of wrongdoing "for an incident that we didn't do."

He said that after one attorney didn't do a good job on his case, his family found another.

"I know that if we didn't have the lawyer to represent us, that we would be in the training school, despite the lack of evidence against us," Marquan said.

Carlton Reeves, a Jackson attorney and president of the Magnolia Bar Association, said Mississippi needs to fix problems in the Youth Court system: "How we treat the least of these says a lot about our society."