



Posted on Wed, Nov. 28, 2007

## Money sought for youth

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JACKSON -- An advocacy group says Mississippi needs to put more money into legal representation for young people accused of crimes.

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

"Children's access to counsel is a right, not a privilege," Jennifer Riley-Collins, Youth Justice Project staff attorney, said Tuesday at 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 the state'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 teens to Youth Court for minor offenses.

"These problems are not intractable," Walker said.

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

Flaggs, D-Vicksburg, did not specify how much money he'll try to get when the 2008 legislative session starts in January.

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 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," Watson 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."

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