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HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION No. 23

Originated in House _____ Clerk

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 23

A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION COMMENDING AND CONGRATULATING THE MISSISSIPPI ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION FOR THEIR EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS TO THE NUMBER OF MISSISSIPPIANS LIVING IN POVERTY WITHOUT LEGAL ASSISTANCE.

WHEREAS, the great leader and drum major for justice, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., once wrote in his legendary Letter From a Birmingham Jail, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, which realizes that in order for justice to prevail for all of us, the civil justice gap must be closed, and has faithfully served for 10 years striving to make this possible; and

WHEREAS, the 23rd in the nation, this commission was created by the Mississippi Supreme Court on June 28, 2006, out of sheer necessity to develop a unified strategy to improve access to the civil courts for the poor; and

WHEREAS, this development was an inevitability given that 44% of Mississippi's population live in households in lower-to-moderate income brackets where legal assistance is

unaffordable, ranking first in America for people living in poverty, with approximately 696,000 people living at or below the federal poverty level, additionally, the number of Mississippians living in poverty has increased by 72% since 2000; and

WHEREAS, with this daunting task ahead, the commission started by investigating the need for civil legal services to the poor in Mississippi, developing policies and initiatives to assist the judiciary in meeting these needs with a goal to provide overarching support for the legal aid system in Mississippi by way of increased funding, resources, raising awareness, reducing barriers to access to civil justice and improving the quality and efficiency of the delivery system; and

WHEREAS, perhaps the most important factor is that the commission provides support for civil legal service providers because, unlike individuals who have committed criminal acts who are guaranteed a right to counsel, people involved in civil legal matters are not guaranteed that right but should nevertheless be deprived of the privilege to access the civil justice system as a crucial resource to protect their families, homes and health; and

WHEREAS, to be a unifying entity as desired, the commission is divided into the three following committees: Delivery System Committee, Resource Development Committee and Public Awareness Committee, which meet the primary goal of bringing together providers to address the civil justice service gaps; and

WHEREAS, the commission recently added two more subcommittees to join with like-minded professionals, the Medical-Legal Partnership, doctors who follow the Hippocratic Oath, "I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm," and the Faith-Based Initiatives, many of whom follow the passage of Isaiah 1:17, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow"; and

WHEREAS, the challenges heaped upon the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission are great with programs that require turning away two clients for every one who seeks help due to limited resources; however, the commission is gradually improving the delivery system and reaching more people who need legal assistance; and

WHEREAS, the work of this commission will not be done until everyone has equal access to Mississippi's civil court system and the state's providers have the capacity to serve everyone who enters their doors, but this will not be a reality without the legal community hearing loud and clear the heralding call from the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission that, in the words of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured"; and

WHEREAS, though there are still barriers to equality, the commission has made great strides including: statewide public hearings to guide its work; successfully petitioning the Mississippi Supreme Court to amend the Rules of Professional Conduct to allow for the unbundling of legal services; persuading the Mississippi State Legislature to amend a section of the Mississippi Code to change the requirement for an attorney to represent guardians in guardianship cases where a child has few assets; sponsoring local access to justice events; and receiving an American Bar Association Access to Justice Commission Expansion Grant in 2013; and

WHEREAS, the commission's current initiatives include many ways to help self-represented litigants by developing forms for divorce, emancipation and name change matters and easily accessible ways to acquire and understand the forms, and they are exploring innovative technology to help educate litigants about what to expect in court and what happens after they download the forms developed by the commission; and

WHEREAS, the future of our state is bright as the commission plans to: increase its partnerships to librarians across the state; develop training seminars and educational materials for guiding court clerks in dealing with self-representative litigants; host a Pro Bono Summit to education law firm managers on the need for engaging attorneys in pro bono work; develop a toolkit for their Medical-Legal Partnership and Faith-Based

Initiatives activities; explore lobbying for legislation nor court rules to state that legal aid and access to justice is an appropriate recipient of cy pres funds; examine other statutory and procedural barriers for self-represented litigants; and develop a work plan for access to justice in Mississippi for people with limited English proficiency with the help of national partners; and

WHEREAS, it is the policy of this Legislature to recognize the accomplishments of an organization that goes above and beyond what is thought possible to help the impoverished in the State of Mississippi such as the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, lead by the humble and generous executive director Mrs. Tiffany Graves, on this most auspicious occasion of its 10th anniversary of service:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, THE SENATE CONCURRING THEREIN, That we do hereby commend and congratulate the Mississippi Access of Justice Commission on their 10th anniversary, we thank them for their devoted service and extend heartiest wishes for success in all of their future endeavors.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That copies of this resolution be

furnished to the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission, and to the members of the Capitol Press Corps.

ADOPTED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
February 8, 2016

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ADOPTED BY THE SENATE
February 11, 2016

PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE