

Forrest and Perry County Drug Court graduation is Monday, May 14

May 11, 2007

A leader of the national drug court movement will be the guest speaker at the 12th Circuit Adult Drug Court graduation, which is scheduled for 4 p.m. Monday, May 14, at the Lake Terrace Convention Center in Hattiesburg.

West Huddleston III of Alexandria, Va., will address the gathering. Huddleston is chief executive officer of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals and executive director of the National Drug Court Institute. He is a licensed substance abuse counselor who worked with misdemeanor and felony offenders at the county, state and federal levels in the Tennessee and Oklahoma justice systems.

Circuit Judge Robert B. Helfrich will preside over the graduation.

Fourteen people are scheduled to graduate, said Drug Court Coordinator Lucy Bates Davenport.

Judge Helfrich said 142 people are enrolled in the Drug Court program in Forrest and Perry counties.

The 12th Circuit Drug Court, which was founded in October 2003, is the third largest drug court in the state, said State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft. The largest is the 19th Circuit of Jackson, George and Greene counties, with 193 participants, followed by the 14th Circuit of Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties, with 190 participants, according to April enrollment statistics.

Judge Helfrich said the original expected capacity of the program was about 40 people, then it grew to 60, 80 and 120.

Judge Helfrich said, "I asked the participants, 'When do we stop?' They said, 'You don't.' They were adamant that you can't turn anybody away. Why should one have the opportunity and not somebody else that needs it?"

U.S. Magistrate Judge Mike Parker of Hattiesburg said he hopes to see expansion of drug court programs into other areas. Judge Parker, luncheon speaker Thursday, May 10, at the Mississippi Association of Drug Court Professionals Training Conference in Jackson, noted that there are 19 drug court programs statewide. But, he said, "We have half the state where there is no drug court. We need more drug courts in the state. We need one in every circuit court district."

Judge Parker said that drug court professionals in other states envy Mississippi's stable source of funding for drug courts. Drug court programs across the state are funded by special assessments on criminal and misdemeanor fines, and special assessments on the penalties for traffic, litter and game and fish violations.

"This is one place where we can say we are in the lead nationally," Judge Parker said.

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