

## **Corrections Commissioner Epps to address 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court graduation**

May 17, 2007

The 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court will conduct a graduation ceremony for program participants at 3 p.m. Monday, May 21, in the Horace Holmes Student Union Hall at Southwest Mississippi Community College in Summit.

Mississippi Corrections Commissioner Christopher Epps will be the guest speaker. Circuit Judge Michael M. Taylor will preside.

May is National Drug Court Month. Graduations and other special programs are scheduled in many of the 19 drug courts throughout the state.

Twenty people are expected to complete the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court program. Thirty-seven other participants who are advancing in the four phases of the Drug Court program will also be recognized.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court at the end of April was the second largest drug court in the state, according to statewide program statistics compiled by the Administrative Office of Courts. At that time, 190 people were enrolled in the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit program. It is surpassed in size only by the 19<sup>th</sup> Circuit of Jackson, George and Greene counties, which had 193 participants at the end of April. The 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Program, which was founded in 1999, is also the oldest of the state's drug court programs.

Judge Taylor said that the program last year collected about \$199,000 in fines, which go to the general fund of the three counties served by the program. Drug Court program participants also paid approximately \$40,000 in fees which help support the program.

Those who don't pay their fines and fees don't get to graduate. Judge Taylor said he sends some Drug Court participants to the Restitution Center so that they can work and pay their fines and fees if they are approaching completion of other program requirements but are having trouble keeping a job.

Judge Taylor makes attendance at graduation mandatory for all Drug Court participants.

"Graduation is an important event, not only for the participants that are graduating. We hope it provides inspiration for those who are still in the program. They get to see people fail on a regular basis," said Judge Taylor, who sends participants to prison if they don't meet program requirements. "It's important that the ones who have been in the program for six or nine months get to see a good ending for people who persevere."

Judge Taylor noted that the outcome is a lot happier for the participants if Commissioner Epps is their guest for an afternoon, rather than if they become his guests for an extended stay.

"I told them in Drug Court on Monday that, to my knowledge, he (Epps) is the largest landlord in the state of Mississippi. He has more than 20,000 tenants. And he also has one of the largest farming operations in the state," Judge Taylor said.

#####

**Media Contact: Beverly Pettigrew Kraft, Administrative Office of Courts, 601-354-7452**