

# **STATE OF THE COURT ADDRESS**

**JANUARY 24, 2020 FINAL DRAFT**

Good morning to everyone!!! Welcome to the Annual State of the Court Address for Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County. Words can hardly express how great feels to look back over the past year and realize the tremendous strides we have made toward becoming Trauma Informed and Trauma Responsive throughout the entire Courthouse. The challenges we face are rarely simple; but when we initiate the relentless determination necessary for success we've discovered change is not just possible it's practical.

It's relatively easy to implement new best practices into an ideal environment; but it takes a group of truly gifted people to dedicate themselves to working daily with a population of children and families who are at a time in their lives, when they are experiencing a severe need for our help to get solutions to the problems which brought them to us. This is what our TEAM does every day and I thank each of you for all your hard work.

JCMSC is recognized nationally as a model court and we've earned that title by not only exhibiting care and compassion for those we serve on a daily basis; but, we also strive to become

better at what we do by not being afraid to try new ideas.

The management TEAM meets regularly to plan and put in writing our NEXT STEPS to assure our continued successes. The models for accountability, review, reform, and transparency are all in place now and being improved on continually.

Two key components are:

*Strategic Planning Committee (SRT)*

and the

*Countywide Juvenile Justice*

*Consortium.*

These components staffed by internal stakeholders, community partners and civic minded volunteers have access to the Courthouse and the families we serve to be able to see our successes and aid us in reshaping any short-falls that appear.

Our Community Outreach will continue to allow every citizen to get answers to their questions about **what we do** and **how we do it...** Leon Gray and members of his team attend public meetings at various locations throughout the County and, when asked, they address the audience and engage their questions. Police Precinct Meetings, Community Centers, Churches and Schools are all targeted in this outreach.

Our goal will continue to be the BEST at what we do and over the past year, we've noticed that a pat on the back or gestures of support from the community occur more frequently. Our message remains in tack... we're willing to take on jobs that many other people shy away from and we do our best at those jobs every day!!!

I salute **All of YOU!** Each of you plays a vital role here. From our custodial staff and building engineers, clerical staff and clerks; to our probation officers, computer technicians, coordinators, supervisors, managers and administrators and Magistrate Judges, you are all

important to the success of Juvenile Court!

Remember, this is the people's court and what we do here is the business of all citizens of Memphis and Shelby County, because the future health of this great community is inextricably linked to the welfare of the children and families of Memphis and Shelby County.

This is rarely glamorous work we do inside the walls of 616 Adams Avenue; but it's undeniably crucial. Those of you who draft thousands of petitions, legal documents, letters and answer and respond to countless phone calls from those we serve... thank you.

I'm especially PROUD of those of you who take it upon yourselves to go the extra mile, even though your tasks seem endless. Your work is truly essential your determination to serve others is unyielding.

I'm also talking about those of you who compassionately reach out to that child that comes into your offices because you saw beneath their hard exterior, a kind-hearted, intelligent child who simply made a mistake. Thank you for taking the extra time to talk to them, even if it means going home a little late.

Whatever your role is at this Court, to me **YOU ARE** the heartbeat of this Court. It is your work that is helping to

progressively move this century-old Courthouse to the forefront of our nation's Juvenile Justice System. You are helping Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County be defined as a model court in every sense of the word.

**In Foster Care, Joponica Truitt** is an outstanding leader for this department and along with **Marini Clay** and **Jennifer Stovall** work tirelessly to ensure foster care children in Shelby County receive the services they need and their cases are moved along towards permanency. **Laurie Neal** has been the Supervising Attorney in charge of NCP and Foster Care for the past 5- years and I applaud her tremendous leadership.

**The attorneys in the NCP office (Jina Shoaf, Nancy Schiller, and Blake Morrison) help thousands of noncustodial parents with legal issues. This is the only program of this kind in Tennessee.**

**In the Judge's Action Center – Thom Coupe' & Yolanda Joshua do an exceptional job and patiently and kindly help the public resolve problems and issues they have encountered. This too is a thankless job and worthy of recognition.**

**Dr. Bernard Williams** totally recreated the Summons Review Program. The SRP is an initiative created by and implemented at the Court in 2017. Its

goal was to address racial and ethnic disparity at the initial point of contact between youth and law enforcement. The Summons Review Program allows court personnel to review all summons and decide which should be handled informally.

It was decided that all “true” first-time youthful offenders who had allegedly committed a misdemeanor offense would be given a “second chance”, meaning the child will not have their name entered into the official database thereby not having a formal juvenile record. Since its inception, the **Summons Review Program has diverted more than 3,600**

**youth away from formal court processing.**

**Juvenile Court of Memphis** and Shelby County is now a **Certified Designated Organization** which means that the counselors in the Evaluation and Referral Unit can enroll families for health insurance (TennCare) and other State sponsored programs; therefore removing the barriers and red-tape separating families from receiving needed services. We must thank **Martha Rogers** and **Satina Williams** for thinking outside the box and finding a way to make this happen.

**Youth Services Bureau** created a **Pre-Release Class** where the Youth are able to graduate from the program and get quality information from various organizations which will enable them to stay out of the juvenile system. Thanks again **Martha!**

Since the Juvenile Court of Memphis & Shelby County launched its **Youth Court Program** under the direction of **Avis Lamar-Allen** it has become the largest Youth Court in the State of Tennessee.

**With** over 200-youth volunteers, scores of adult volunteers, and nearly the entire legal staff of the Attorney General's Office **Avis Allen, Jasmine Newsome**

and **Pamela James** have developed a partnership between the Court and Shelby County Schools that is like no other in the state. **It is a Model of Excellence.**

**Debra Salters** was the perfect choice to become this Court's 1<sup>st</sup> Expediter.

For almost 2-years now Debra has re-written the rule book on how to help identify inappropriate admissions and lower the number of days children spend in our detention center by working with the children, their family and legal representatives to move cases through the Court more efficiently making for the best possible outcomes in every case.

**Bridgette Rodgers** has taken over the Cease Fire Program and in the tradition of her predecessor the program has not missed a beat!

This partnership with the Tennessee Department of Corrections, U. S. Attorney's Office, D.A's Office and Memphis Police Department primarily focuses on deterring serious gang and youth gun violence; employing a comprehensive approach that combines deterrence with workforce training, employment services and other job creation efforts.

**Pam Taylor**, Deputy Administrator of Volunteer Services Bureau and **Dr. Demetria Banks**, Judicial Chief of Staff

produce one of the finest Newsletters in County Government. It truly tells a monthly story about the fine work we do and it gives us special tidbits about members of this great Juvenile Court family.

Our Newsletter is distributed to all six-thousand members of Shelby County Government and it is still the envy of many other county offices.

**And just a few days ago** the management team brokered a partnership with the Memphis Public Library which will get library cards in the hands of all court involved children and introduce them to the dozens of programs and job

readiness opportunities they have to offer.

**And our newest** partnership with **901 Legal Connect** will work to get **FREE** and discounted Legal Services to our adult clients who qualify; giving them help with their cases at Juvenile Court.

I must say a few words about my **bench... IT'S THE BEST!!!** I have been fortunate enough to build a bench that may well be the **MOST DIVERSE** and the smartest in this **COUNTRY**.

With 7-African-American Magistrate-Judges and 8- Female Magistrate-Judges I couldn't be more proud of the positive changes we have here at the JCMSC. .

**Garland Erguden, David Walker Terre Fratesi, Mitzi Pollard, Carlyn Addison, Harold Horne, Lytonnia Cunningham, Alysia Chism, Nancy Kessler, Deborah Sanders, Sheldon McCall, and James Franklin.**

**While I'm** singling- out some vital team members let me offer my well wishes to the team members who retired last year.

**Michelle Jones**, a Supervisor in the Children's Bureau retired after 25-plus years of dedicated service.

Also joining the ranks of the retired are **Yolanda Ambross**, Juvenile Services Specialist II leaves us after 25-plus years.

**Jennifer McKissick**, a Coordinator in the Children's Bureau served diligently for 25-plus years.

And **Mal Hooker**, a Coordinator in Child Support retired after nearly 30-years on the Job.

**PLEASE JOIN ME IN SALUTING EACH OF THEM...**

I've always felt that Juvenile Court has the most talented staff in local government, and whenever possible the Management Team makes every effort to promote from within.

In 2019, promotions were offered to and accepted by:

**Olivia Campo – VSB**

**Satina Williams** – YSB / E & R  
**Andria Leverson** – Children’s Bureau  
**Bridgette Rodgers** – Children’s Bureau  
**Pamela James** – Admin Services  
**Cheryl Oliver** – Children Bureau  
**Dr. Bernard Wms.** – Chf. Prob Officer  
**Dr. Audrey Elion** – Admin Services  
(Trauma Informed Interventions)

Last year we added 12- new Team Members: and we welcome them and I ask that you all do your best, to show them the ropes and help them feel like family.

**Now, a little more about the Courthouse and its positive operations.**

**TEAM** we all deserve better working conditions and I promised you last year they are on the way.

**Just a couple of months ago** contractors completed the installation of a new Heating and Air Conditioning system which was a nearly \$2-million expenditure. They're still getting the kinks out but we're well on the way to problem solved in that area.

The Courthouse is in line for additional Capital Improvements funding in the 2021 Budget Year and those talks will begin in April, ultimately beginning the process of a total renovation of our Juvenile Court building. A new Youth Education, Recreation and Housing Center to replace our current Detention Center has hit more than one snag; but plans to get that done are ongoing.

I know we are all looking forward to the new state of the art facilities and the management team is making every effort to bring these improvements to fruition.

**Our Court Services** Division with the help of **Jason Tate** have recreated a forum where the parents of the children being housed in the Detention Center are given an opportunity to learn more about the programs offered at the court and to ask any questions they might have concerning their child during their stay in detention.

**Our walls have** continued to speak those children and families who walk through our halls. There continues to be upgrades and additions to the artwork and our

clients have responded to them with positive remarks.

I must salute Dr. Altha Stewart, APA Past President and Director of the Center for Health in Justice Involved who has helped opened and is operating the **Youth Advocacy Coalition.**

This pilot program is designed to increase programming and services for minor offenders while keeping them out of the system.

**Extensive Training of the JC Staff** will continue to be led by Dr. Stewart and her fine team at UTHSC, which is a huge component of our Trauma Informed Court commitment. Dr. Audrey Elion

has taken the point position on trauma training and staff members throughout the building have benefitted from these sessions.

- I can't say enough about **Mid-South Therapy Dogs** and fine job they do especially with some of the youngest children we see in court.
- We will continue putting Probation Offices outside the walls of the Court and into the communities we serve. Currently the Old Allen Station and the Tillman Station Precincts are showing tremendous progress with handling cases in the communities where they occur; further limiting unneeded contacts with the Court. I

salute **Mr. Anthony Clear**, **Ms. Debbie Holman**, and our newest Precinct Liaison, **Shirley Parker** who now works from the Mt. Moriah Station.

**ALL** of these great accomplishments have happened in less than 5 and-a-half years.

**That** says a lot about us as a hard-working, dedicated, and effective team! If we have accomplished so much in such a short time frame, imagine what we can accomplish in 2020 and in years to come!

**I** see nothing but great things in store for our Court. I want us to continue to make a difference in the lives of those we

serve, in our community, in our county, even nation-wide. .

**SO MY CHALLENGE** to you today is simple – **Let's continue to make GREAT THINGS happen!** Let's put aside whatever setbacks, disappointments or criticisms we've had in the past – and those we'll encounter in the future – **and there WILL be some --** and let's keep in mind our unified goal of making sure the children and families of Memphis and Shelby County have confidence in this Court and our Juvenile Justice System.

**As your** colleague and your Judge, I continue to serve on the Board of Directors of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and I

am now President-elect and will assume the office of President in July. It is the oldest judicial organization in the country.

**I am** committed to go the extra mile because I'm very proud of you and honored to be a part of this team. I look forward to the many accomplishments that **WE** will attain in this year.

**You** all know Shelby County dollars are tight and budgets often fall short of meeting all the needs of the Offices and Services they fund.

**This** year, again, I promise to continue to request and fight for the dollars **WE**

**NEED** to make vital improvements to this Court.

Mayor Harris and Commissioners must do their part in providing the finances necessary for creating a Model Court here in Shelby County.

**I end** this year's address with a quote from President Theodore Roosevelt: "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men and women to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

**I've been blessed** to work with each of **You**. As we go into this new decade, I will do my best to continue to lead this

team without meddling; but by allowing the great minds in this room to be the Best Public Servants in Shelby.

In closing, remember that “Nothing changes if nothing changes.” **Thank you... And may God bless us all.**