



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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Steven D. Canterbury, Administrative Director

Sex Offender Intensive Supervision Officers sworn in For immediate release Tuesday, October 20, 2009

Charleston, W.Va. – Supreme Court Justice Thomas McHugh today swore in four new sex offender intensive supervision officers during a ceremony in the Supreme Court Chamber. The specialized officers are working under provisions of the Child Protection Act of 2006 (House Bill 101, passed June 14, 2006).

The officers' only duty is to supervise sex offenders. They work out of their cars, not offices. They work holidays, nights, weekends, and hours in between to provide intensive supervision. The officers also work with circuit court judges and treatment providers to make sure offenders are complying with court orders. The extended supervision includes polygraph examinations and electronic monitoring.

Probation Officers Arthur Houchins, Tonya Lash, Matthew West, and Heath Harmon were hired October 1 to work in Region Six, which includes Fayette, Raleigh, Pocahontas, Greenbrier, Monroe, Summers, Mercer, McDowell, and Wyoming Counties. Their official swearing-in was delayed by scheduling issues.

"You are going to be charged with a heavy responsibility, to ensure the citizens of West Virginia are protected. It's a solemn duty," Justice McHugh told the new officers.

Justice McHugh said that when he served as a circuit court judge in Kanawha County from 1974 to 1980, probation officers "did everything."

"I want you to understand, from the Court's perspective, what important duties you do," Justice McHugh said. We are trying to solve a very severe societal problem. You are on the front lines. You are the ones that see it face to face."

He congratulated the new officers on behalf of the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia, wished them long careers, and assured them that every day they go to work, "you have support of the Court and the Court staff."

One of the new officers, Tonya Lash, said she was attracted to the job because she has worked in the social service field since 1999 and has seen the devastation that sex offenses can cause on families.

"I want to alleviate some of that," said the mother of three teen-age boys from Princeton. Her sons, her own mother and other members of her family attended the swearing-in ceremony.

Sex offenders are "master manipulators," Ms. Lash said. "They can hide in plain sight." Sex offenders usually are well-liked by everyone in the community, and only their victims understand what they are capable of, she said.

(MORE)

Ms. Lash has a bachelor's degree from Bluefield State College and a master's degree in social work from West Virginia University. She has worked as a correctional counselor and has provided direct care for at-risk youth. She said she is used to working non-traditional hours, so that part of her new job "will be no different."

Probation Officer Courtney Lewis has transferred from Region Five to Region Six to act as the new team's coordinator. Ms. Lewis was among the first group of sexual offender probation officers hired in November 2008 to work in Region Five, which consists of Boone, Cabell, Lincoln, Logan, Mingo, Putnam, and Wayne Counties. Those officers operated a pilot program to carry out provisions of the new law, which requires extended supervision for sexual offenders, especially those convicted of crimes against children.

The supervision program is being expanded one region at a time throughout the state. A total of thirty probation officers eventually will be hired to carry out provisions of the law.

The program was developed under the leadership of Justice Robin Jean Davis when she was Chief Justice in 2006 and 2007. Her support was crucial in refining the vision of the supervision protocol. Her work was a continuation of her interest in protecting children in our communities during her "Year of the Child" in 2006 and "Year of the Child, Too" in 2007.

Justice McHugh conducted the swearing-in ceremony in the place of Chief Justice Brent D. Benjamin, who had a commitment today at the fall Family Court Judicial Conference at Cacapon State Park in Berkeley Springs.

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