

Non-Custodial Parents in Mississippi denied right to judicial access by requiring a private attorney to petition the court for visitation with their children.

March 10, 2011

Dear ACLU and NAACP,

I hope this e-mail finds you in good health and spirits. My name is Keino Stephenson and I am the founder of WeAreParents.org, a private child support and consulting agency based out of Baltimore, Maryland. Our agency is committed to strengthening families by providing child support and co-parenting assistance for our clients.

We are assisting a client with a child support case and co-parenting concerns in Union County, Mississippi. We were able to resolve the child support modification, however while attempting to retrieve domestic relation forms online to petition for visitation, we were unable to find any pro se petitions on any website. We contacted the Union County Chancery Court Clerk and were informed that non-custodial parents who would like to petition for visitation, custody, etc. must retain the services of a private attorney.

The discovery of this process for a non-custodial parent to legally see their child is simply incomprehensible. With the increasing epidemic of single parent households and the non-existence of fathers in the lives of children, especially African American children, requiring a non-custodial parent to incur the cost of a private attorney is a travesty of justice. As evidenced by the online custody information portal, <http://www.childcustodycoach.com/free-online-custody-forms.php>, there is nowhere else in the country that denies a pro-se applicant the right to petition the court on their own accord. Our attorney informed us that even the United States Supreme Court allows pro se applicants to petition the highest court of the land. This lack of judicial access can have a chilling effect on parents that may attempt to get custody or visitation and they may be less likely to follow through with the time sharing request which leads to another fatherless child in Mississippi.

I respectfully would like to partner with the ACLU and NAACP to bring attention to this matter and ultimately lobby the Mississippi Judicial System to offer pro se applicants access to the judicial system. Our commitment to strengthening families is being challenged in the State of Mississippi and we will do what it takes to ensure non-custodial parents have the same legal access to their children as their fellow citizens in every other state in America.

Sincerely,

Keino Stephenson  
Founder and President  
WeAreParents.org