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Legislator defends juvenile justice bill following 'ambush'

The Clarion-Ledger

State House Juvenile Justice Committee Chairman George Flaggs, D-Vicksburg, said Friday he invites debate on his legislation that changes how juveniles are treated in the criminal adult system.

"I am emphatically committed to ensuring that this bill addresses the concerns of law enforcement and victims," Flaggs said. "My only goal is to ensure that the criminal justice system delivers true justice for offenders and victims alike."

Flaggs' comments came a day after relatives of crime victims gathered at the state House to express their concern about House Bill 727, the Juvenile Justice Reform Act. The bill passed on Tuesday with no discussion. However, it is still pending in the House because of a technicality.

Flaggs said he "felt like I was ambushed" by the apparent organized showing Thursday because no one had expressed concern to him.

The bill requires the presence of an attorney or parent/guardian before a juvenile gives a confession to law enforcement and a sentencing hearing in Circuit Court. It also allows parole eligibility for juveniles who have served their sentences.

Under state law, juveniles charged with rape, murder and armed robbery are tried as adults. A conviction carries a life sentence, and the trial judge cannot reduce the sentence.

Flaggs said his bill "is not based on knee-jerk sympathy for young offenders, instead, it's based on science of adolescent brain development and the studies that have shown that incarcerating juveniles with adults actually increases recidivism of young offenders."

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