

# Legislators busy, focus on “brain drain” and criminal justice

By Speaker of the House Philip Gunn

The last several weeks of the 2019 legislative session proved to be the busiest thus far. Committee meetings wrapped up in preparation for several days spent entirely on the House floor debating bills.



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In an effort to keep our college graduates in Mississippi, the House overwhelmingly passed the Mississippi Educational Talent Recruitment Act, House Bill 816. This measure would work to prevent “brain drain” caused by recent college graduates leaving

the state in pursuit of more lucrative employment opportunities. If enacted into law, it would provide income tax incentives for recent graduates of colleges and other post-graduate degree programs if they stay in Mississippi for at least five years and invest in the state. This also includes students from other states who move to Mississippi upon graduation and meet conditions of the program.

Through the years, we have made important strides in improving Mississippi’s criminal justice system. However, our prison population and the associated costs continue to rise. Additionally, the recidivism rate has grown to more than forty percent, and opioid addiction is rampant. With the passage of House Bill 1352, the Crim-

inal Justice Reform Act, legislators hope to provide solutions that will help address these issues. Through these changes, our hope is that those who are in the system will be given new opportunities to return to and become productive members of society. This measure:

- Expands the term “drug court” to “intervention courts,” which will now include drug courts, mental health courts and veteran courts.
- Allows participant fees to be waived for indigent offenders.
- Allows offenders to be screened for the possibility of being sent to mental health courts.
- Removes failure to pay fines or failure to appear in court as an automatic

reason to suspend one’s driver’s license.

- Directs the court to order a person with two or more DUIs to undergo an assessment to determine whether he or she has a diagnosis for alcohol dependence and would likely benefit from medication-assisted treatment.
- Permit a person who has been convicted of a nonviolent felony to petition the court for an order to expunge one conviction from all public records five years after the successful completion of all terms and conditions of the sentence.

Over the next few weeks, we will turn our attention to the budget process.

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