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Tyson touts new ways to battle crime

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In 1998, a television reporter approached Mobile County District Attorney John Tyson Jr. with an idea on saving unwanted newborns from abandonment or murder.

Jodi Brooks asked Tyson if he would agree not to prosecute mothers who left their unwanted babies at a hospital. The infants would be safe, not left in a trash bin or drowned in a toilet like the 8-pound boy whose mother and grandmother Tyson had just prosecuted.

"I had never considered that possibility," Tyson said.

Tyson didn't answer immediately. But after some thought, he announced a new policy.

A mother could leave an unharmed infant up to three days old at a hospital emergency room, and Tyson would not prosecute her for the crime of abandonment. The mother would not even have to give her name.

"I realized the philosophy of prosecute, prosecute, prosecute made it more dangerous for the children," said Tyson, the Democratic nominee for state attorney general. Tyson, 54, faces incumbent Republican Troy King in the Nov. 7 election.

Tyson's Mobile County policy for saving unwanted babies was later adopted by the Alabama Legislature. Eighteen children have been surrendered in the state under the policy, according to Tyson.

Forty-six states have adopted their own versions of the program, known as the Secret Safe Place for Newborns.

"All we're trying to do is get children out of the Dumpster and keep those children alive," Tyson said. "And we haven't spent one new dollar on solving this problem."

He said he decided to run after Gov. Bob Riley appointed King to replace Bill Pryor in March 2004. Pryor left to accept an appointment as a federal judge.

Accustomed to winning:

Tyson, a big man with an outgoing personality, has run for office seven times, winning six. He hopes to be the first Democrat elected attorney general since Jimmy Evans in 1990.

The decision to enter politics was easy, he said. When he finished law school at the University of Alabama in 1978 and returned home to Mobile, his father, a lawyer and former member of the Alabama Legislature, had a message for him.

"He looked at me and said, 'All right, it's your turn,'" Tyson said. The elder Tyson meant for his son to enter public service.

"I would say that my father is the one who gave me a sense of public service and public duty," Tyson said. "Even when he didn't hold elective office, he was always trying to do something."

Tyson quickly responded to his father's directive.

He was elected to the state Board of Education in 1980 and was re-elected three times. He decided not to seek re-election in 1994 so he could devote more time to his law practice.

That didn't work.

"I tried to go home and be a lawyer," Tyson said. "But by July of 1994, I'm miserable."

He persuaded then-Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. to appoint him to fill a vacancy as Mobile County's district attorney.

"I thought my job was going to be to try all the high-profile cases," Tyson said. "First, there's so many high-profile cases, nobody can do that. Second, I got on the inside of the system and discovered, to my horror, it was not working."

He said it took up to three years to try a capital murder case. Tyson said he spent his first two years in office trying to eliminate inefficiency and duplication. He urged employees to pitch their best ideas and developed a case-management plan. Capital cases are now generally tried within a year of arrest, he said.

Tyson said his office has handled more than 25,000 felony prosecutions and that he's been on the scene of more than 500 homicides. He said there's no substitute for that kind of experience when it comes to helping prosecutors and law enforcement agencies.

"You've got to do the traditional job of crime fighting well first," Tyson said.

But innovations have to be part of the solution for persistent problems such as Alabama's crowded prisons and jails, Tyson said.

One example is the Helping Families Initiative, which Tyson's office started three years ago.

The goal is to help children who are at risk of becoming criminals based on early warning signs such as alcohol or drug abuse, poor school attendance or other behavior problems.

The county school system notifies Tyson's office every time a student is suspended from the Mobile County school system.

In many cases, the student receives only a warning letter from Tyson. But if the violation is serious enough, the family is contacted for a meeting to develop an intervention plan.

The student and parents may be referred to drug and alcohol programs, mental-health services, parenting or mentoring programs, or other social services.

"Our whole purpose is to keep them out of the criminal-justice system," Tyson said.

Jayne Carson, network coordinator for the program, said the team has intervened with 708 students and their families since it began in October 2003.

Of the 145 students who entered the program in the 2004-05 school year, only 8 percent were suspended again the next year, Carson said. Among suspended students who did not go through the program, 20 percent were suspended the following year.

Available resources:

Tyson said one of the best things about the initiative is that it uses resources that already were available through some 150 public and private agencies that receive referrals.

A \$215,000 grant from the state pays the salaries of the five employees. Tyson's office covers the overhead.

Tyson said that's a relatively small investment from taxpayers, especially considering the money saved by keeping children and teenagers from growing into career criminals.

"It is one program that tries to get on the front end of the crime problem," Tyson said. "Think what would happen if we could achieve a 10 percent reduction in children who wind up in the criminal-justice system."

Tyson said if he's elected he'll work to start initiatives in other counties. Officials of the four school systems in Colbert County visited Tyson's office this month in preparation for starting a similar program.

Tyson said he knows the intervention and prevention approach differs from the usual get-tough talk from politicians.

"It's a bit frustrating to me to have politicians in Montgomery beat on their chests and say we're going to lock them up and throw away the key," Tyson said. "There are not enough keys to go around, and people are fooling themselves if they think we are going to build more prisons."

State Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia, is chairman of the Judiciary Committee in the House of Representatives, which generally handles crime legislation. Black thinks Tyson's ideas have merit.

"The easiest thing is obviously to lock them up and throw away the key," Black said. "Obviously, that hasn't worked very well. A better approach is to try to prevent crime. I think you've got to have a little bit of both."

Tyson said he is optimistic about his chances of winning next month because he and King raised almost identical amounts of money, about \$430,000, during the most recent campaign reporting cycle. Overall, King has reported raising about \$1.43 million to Tyson's \$1.08 million.

Tyson said the key to winning is an effective statewide campaign of media ads. He hopes he can sway voters with his ideas for crime prevention, as well as his experience as a prosecutor, during 30-second television ads.

"The complexity of things are such that it's not fair to try to address them in 30-second sound bites," Tyson said. "But that's the reality of it. I didn't make up the rules."

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