

## TSSW grad leads New Orleans Juvenile Court

March 20, 2025 9:00 AM Stephanie Holden  
sholden1@tulane.edu



Hon. Ranord J. Darensburg

While the Honorable Ranord Darensburg (MSW '91) was pursuing his [Master of Social Work \(MSW\)](#) in 1987, he was recruited for a [dual MSW and Juris Doctorate \(JD\)](#) - a move that started him on a 3-decade-long journey culminating in joining the New

Orleans Juvenile Court as a judge in 2021.

Still active as a social worker, Hon. Darensburg is a member of the National Association of Black Social Workers and the New Orleans Association of Black Social Workers. He says he does anything can to bring social workers into his court because he recognizes their value as advocates and rehabilitators.

“My social work degree always informed my law practice because I was always dealing with people,” Hon. Darensburg said. “I’m able to create accountability that’s sustainable. My social work education gave me the skills to make that accountability stick.”

In some ways, Hon. Darensburg said, the goal of the Juvenile Court and the goal of social work are the same – to make people’s lives better. In fact, social workers invented Juvenile Court in 1899 in Chicago. He advises any social workers who may have clients interacting with the justice system to work with the court to create a plan of support.

Unlike other courts, judges in the Juvenile Court have legal authority to “become a member of the village,” or provide resources and make rulings about all parts of the child’s life. Hon. Darensburg encouraged social workers to provide the broadest possible picture of the child’s life so that the court knows what wraparound services to recommend.

“Juvenile Court is not a criminal court – it’s a court of rehabilitation, not punishment,” Hon. Darensburg said. “Juvenile Court is here to prevent you from going down the wrong path. We know all these kids are going back into the world, so we have a responsibility to provide the tools necessary to allow them to become productive citizens and move past their current involvement with the court.”

Hon. Darensburg called attention to two areas that social workers could focus on to prevent youth interaction with the justice system: truancy and mental health issues.

“The first step to a lifetime of problems is not going to school. You become less likely to complete school and more likely to become involved in juvenile delinquency. Social workers could make a real impact on truancy,” Hon. Darensburg said.

He encourages social workers practicing in places like the foster care and school systems to pay special attention to students with frequent absences. The Supreme

Court of Louisiana has a program called Families in Need of Services (FINS), which works to reduce the number of youth who come in contact with the justice system while they are supposed to be in school, but social workers have the unique opportunity to correct the behavior before it gets to that point.

In addition to truancy, mental illnesses have a high correlation with appearance at the Juvenile Court. To resolve that problem, Hon. Darensburg started the first Juvenile Mental Health Court – a program designed to provide diagnostic care for and connect kids in the system with treatment for mental health issues – in Louisiana. He encourages social workers to leverage their expertise in the mental health field to ensure that their clients are receiving all the resources they need.

“People talk a lot about brain development, social determinants of health, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Juvenile Court,” said Hon. Darensburg. “That is important context to bring to the judge and the court – it helps us understand why people make the decisions they do, and it helps us provide the resources they need.”

Like social workers, the Juvenile Court evaluates children based on the whole picture of their lives rather than the singular event that led them to court.

“89% of the youth who come into the court have a diagnosable condition,” Hon. Darensburg said. “Often, the mental health challenge has something to do with juvenile delinquency. Social workers have the opportunity to really change these kids’ lives.”

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Ranord Darensburg, JD, MSW