

## School Hosts Panel on the Criminal Justice System and Community-Oriented Policing



(L-R) Victor Mason, Russel James, Lee Vance, Blake Feldman, Belinda Smith

The School of Social Work hosted a Criminal Justice System and Community-Oriented Policing Panel. The panelists were Hinds County Sheriff Victor Mason; Russel James, Chief of Richland Police Department; Lee Vance, Chief of Jackson Police Department; and Blake Feldman, Criminal Justice Advocacy Coordinator for the American Civil Liberties Union-Mississippi. Dr. Belinda Smith, associate professor of social work at Jackson State University, served as the moderator for the panel.

The panelists provided an overview of the criminal justice system at the local and national levels. Dr. Smith posed questions to the panelists on a number of issues, including their reactions to the recent events of police killing unarmed African-American men, reforms needed to overhaul the criminal justice system, and ways the citizenry can assist law enforcement officials perform their duties to ensure their safety, while at the same time serving and protecting citizens.

Chief Vance discussed how national incidents involving police killing unarmed citizens do not reflect Mississippi's statistics and vary among states. Chief James shared a story of how one of his officers was able to deescalate a potentially fatal situation that involved a citizen. Attorney Blake Feldman discussed the gravity of police killings and commented, "An unarmed citizen is killed once a month in Mississippi at the hands of the police." Sheriff Mason discussed an outreach program Hinds County implemented that mentors young children.

The panelists agreed that training for law enforcement is crucial to ensure the criminal justice system operates effectively and expressed the need for police officers to be visible in the communities they work in. Dr. Smith remarked, "Disproportionally, African Americans and people of color are racially profiled at a higher rate and overrepresented in the criminal justice system. As such, we must ensure that social work students are prepared to work with marginalized communities. Also, there is a dire need for increased training to strengthen the relationship between the police and the community. Social workers can play an important role."

