



**MINNESOTA  
JUDICIAL  
BRANCH**

**First Judicial District**

**Mission:** To provide justice through a system that assures equal access for the fair and timely resolution of cases and controversies.

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The First Judicial District has 36 judges and more than 250 staff that handle nearly 200,000 cases annually in the counties of Carver, Dakota, Goodhue, Le Sueur, McLeod, Scott and Sibley.

# The First Edition

A Newsletter about the First Judicial District of the State of Minnesota

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## Minnesota Supreme Court Convenes at New Prague High School

By Brian E. Jones, Assistant District Administrator



The Minnesota Supreme Court held oral arguments at New Prague High School in New Prague, MN, on Tuesday, May 11, 2010. The City of New Prague is located within the First Judicial District.

More than 600 New Prague area students filled the school auditorium to watch oral arguments in an actual case, *State of Minnesota, Respondent vs. Michael Stanley Zabawa, Appellant* (Case No. A09-1041). An additional 550 students viewed the arguments via live television in their classrooms. Attorneys from the Minnesota State Bar Association volunteered to visit classrooms prior to the oral argument to review the case with students and help them prepare for the Supreme Court visit.

“These visits are one of the many ways the Judicial Branch helps Minnesotans better understand the courts and the justice system”, said Minnesota Chief

Justice Eric Magnuson. “Visiting high schools is especially important because it puts the court in front of young people who are still learning what it means to be part of a democracy based on the rule of law.”

“Reaching out to the people we serve has long been one of the Court’s highest priorities. Meeting students and answering their questions helps foster an understanding of the  
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Supreme Court (Continued from page 1)

Judicial Branch. At the same time, the Court has the opportunity to learn from their perspectives and life experiences. For all parties involved, it's a valuable exchange."

First District Chief Judge Edward Lynch opened the program with an orientation about the state court

system, explained how the case came to the Supreme Court, and reviewed the rules of decorum.

"This was a wonderful opportunity for students to learn about the important work the Judicial Branch does in discharging its constitutional responsibility to administer justice to the people of Minnesota," said Lynch. "The students were very respectful during the hearing and asked thoughtful



questions of the justices afterward. It was a very successful event that I hope will return to the First Judicial District in the future."

Following oral arguments, the justices answered students' questions on a wide variety of topics. Justices, First Judicial District Court judges, and other distinguished guests ate lunch with New Prague students. Justice Christopher Dietzen addressed members of the New Prague Area Chamber of

Commerce and the New Prague Rotary Club at a joint luncheon at the New Prague Golf Club. In the afternoon, justices visited classrooms at New Prague High School and New Prague Middle School.

The visits are part of a biannual program that seeks to teach stu-

dents about the work of the state's highest court, while building the public's trust and confidence in the Judicial Branch. Since the Supreme Court convened oral arguments in Rochester, MN in 1995, the school visits have taken center stage in the Court's efforts to improve public understanding of the judiciary's work. The New Prague visit marks the 31<sup>st</sup> in-school arguments for the Court.

## Highlighting Counties of the First Judicial District

**Carver County**



**Carver County Judges:**

[Janet L. Cain](#)

[Kevin W. Eide](#)

[Philip T. Kanning](#)

[Richard C. Perkins](#)



## Bilingual Employees in the Courts

By Vicky Carlson, Carver County Court Administrator



**Alex Moreno assists a court customer**

These employees help customers with processes, directions and court forms. They may assist over the counter and on the phone. Sometimes they use their skills by paraphrasing someone else's statements or they

a great opportunity to save money and time.

Not only does a bilingual employee save time and money for the courts, there is also a significant benefit to the customer.

"People really appreciate having someone here to assist them in their native language," said Carver County employee Alex Moreno, who is bilingual in Spanish. "They will often bring their children to interpret for them, which is not always in the best interest of the child."

Bilingual employees appreciate the opportunity to speak their second language at work and use their skills. One of the reasons Dave Herzog, Dakota County Court Administration applied for his position was because the courts were looking for a bilingual employee. "The position and working with non-English speakers helps keep me fluent and gives me practice in the language," said Herzog.

The First Judicial District is fortunate to have bilingual employees in their employ. They not only help bridge a communication gap, but their skills help to improve customer service and save money for the courts.

Bilingual employees play an important role in the courts. They help to bridge a communication gap that can sometimes exist between non-English speaking court customers and employees. They help to diversify the courts and provide better representation for the public.

The State of Minnesota provides services to a wide range of persons, including individuals who do not speak English. According to the Minnesota Court Interpreter Program that tracks interpreter usage, the most widely used language for interpreters for the last several years was Spanish. To assist Spanish speaking individuals at the counters, the First Judicial District is fortunate to have several bilingual employees.

may engage them independently in their own language depending on the situation. Some use their skills two to three times daily, some less frequently, depending on the need and their availability. In many instances, an interpreter call line can be avoided by asking the bilingual employee to assist a non-English speaker, thereby saving money for the courts. For other non-bilingual employees, communicating with a non-English speaker can consume a lot of time and can be frustrating for the customer and the employee. Many times, an employee will contact a translation service to help communicate. These services cost money. At a time when the courts are being required to reduce their budgets, this is



## Free Help for Family Law Litigants

By Liz Reppe, Dakota County Law Librarian

The Dakota County Family Court Self Help Center (SHC) started operation in July 2002. It is a collaboration between the Dakota County Law Library, Dakota County Court Administration and Legal Assistance of Dakota County. The SHC is a free service for residents of Dakota County or litigants with a Dakota County family court case. Users of the service can meet with a volunteer attorney for 30 minutes to get help with questions about form completion, procedure, legal options or other legal concerns. Customers can seek assistance with family law issues such as: marriage dissolution, child custody, child support, visitation, paternity, spousal maintenance and domestic abuse. Unlike other legal assistance programs, the SHC does not require customers to be low income.

Currently, SHC sessions are held in 3 locations: the Law Library in Hastings, the Law Library inside the Apple Valley Galaxie Library and the Wentworth Library in West St. Paul. Two evening sessions were added to the schedule in 2008. Currently there are six sessions offered per month.

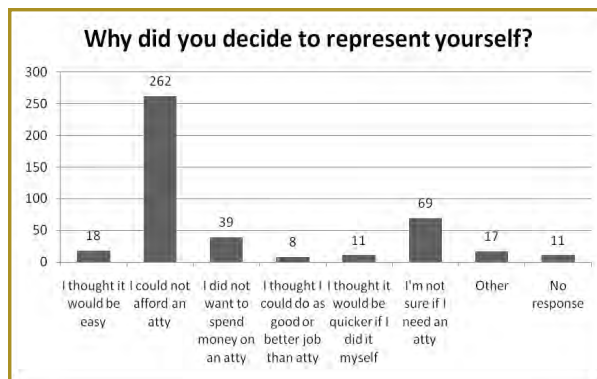
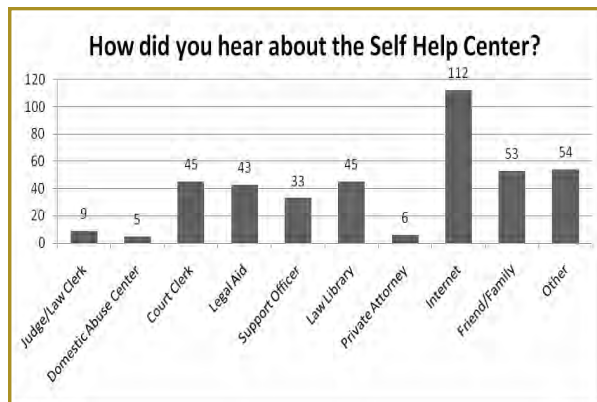
The SHC could not exist without the work of each of its partners. Each group performs the work of the SHC in addition to regular job duties. Court Administration schedules the customer appointments for the West St. Paul

sessions. Legal Assistance of Dakota County recruits and schedules the attorneys. In addition, they facilitate one of the West St. Paul sessions. The Law Library schedules the customer appointments for Apple Valley and Hastings and facilitates the remaining 5 sessions offered each month.

In 2009, 30 attorneys volunteered their services to assist over 350 litigants. The majority of customers were from Burnsville and Apple Valley. The most common issues users sought help with were child support and divorce with children. The great majority of customers indicated they were using the SHC because they could not afford an attorney. Most were Caucasian and their first language was English.

The program has been well received throughout Dakota County. Customers are often referred by the court, legal assistance programs, domestic abuse centers and child support officers. The surveys we receive back from SHC customers are overwhelmingly positive. Moreover, the feedback from the volunteer attorneys about their experience has also been positive.

While it doesn't seem that hard statistics are kept by the courts regarding the number of pro se litigants involved in family law cases, most people working in the court system can report that the number is high. There is a great demand for this service. Every week there are more calls than can be scheduled into appointment times. While the program can't necessarily assist every pro se family law litigant in Dakota County, being able to inform and assist a great many is a benefit to everyone involved in the Dakota County judicial system.





## Equal Justice Committee Sponsors Community Dialogue Session on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts

By Brian E. Jones, Assistant District Administrator

On April 27, 2010 the First Judicial District Equal Justice Committee in partnership with various local community organizations held a two-hour Community Dialogue Session on racial and ethnic fairness in the courts at the Chaska Community Center in Chaska, Minnesota.

Approximately 50 people attended the session, which was held from 6:30-8:30 pm and included about an even mix of citizens and criminal justice system representatives. The session was co-facilitated by First District Judge Joseph T. Carter and Pastor Gordon Stewart, Shepherd of the Hill Presbyterian Church, Chaska, Minnesota. Maureen Farrell, Restorative Practices Coordinator, Carver County Sheriff's Office also assisted with large group discussions and small group facilitator training.

The First Judicial District's Equal Justice Committee has approximately 30 members including individuals who represent judges, attorneys, law enforcement, corrections, court administrators, guardians ad litem, and others involved in the judicial system.

The First Judicial District Equal Justice Committee sponsored this dialogue session as part of its efforts to educate citizens of color on the purpose and operation of the courts. The session was also held to listen to the perspective of local communities of color on the courts and learn what they believe the court can do better with respect to understanding communities of

color. It was the third session held in the last couple years. The previous ones were held at Black Hawk Middle School in Eagan, Minnesota on September 23, 2008, and in the Dakota County Jail in Hastings, Minnesota on October 23, 2008.

The Equal Justice Committee selected Chaska based on its central location in the First Judicial District, the opportunity to partner with Pastor Gordon Stewart from Shepherd of the Hill Presbyterian Church and other local community leaders, the diversity that exists within the city and surrounding area, and other miscellaneous reasons.

"It was a spirit of listening that made the night a success," said Pastor Stewart. "I salute the Equal Justice Committee in its efforts to maintain and improve one of the best judicial systems in the nation."

A detailed written report was prepared following the session, which includes an agenda, session details, major themes, etc. The report, along with others from previous sessions, can be accessed at [www.courts.state.mn.us/?page=3249](http://www.courts.state.mn.us/?page=3249).



*"I believe the Community Dialogue Session was a success." said Judge Joseph T. Carter. "Approximately half the attendees were from the community and they came with a positive attitude and ready to participate in the session. They were attentive and engaging. The session was also a positive experience for those of us who work in the judicial system, as we had an opportunity to listen and learn about some of the concerns and thoughts people have about the system. I am encouraged that the next session will draw a greater number of people from the community."*

## Name Change Was a Special Event in the First Judicial District

By Vicky Carlson, Carver County Court Administrator

Melissa had made the decision to have her children's names changed to that of her current husband. This story follows Melissa's journey through the court system and what this name change meant to her family.

Melissa did her own research on changing the name of a minor and was impressed with how easy it was to find the documents online through the Judicial Branch Self-Help Center

([www.mncourts.gov/selfhelp](http://www.mncourts.gov/selfhelp)), as well as how quick it was to get into court for the hearing. Publication issues made her uneasy, so she hired an attorney to assist her with that part of the process.

Melissa, her husband, and boys appeared in court in April 2010 for their name change hearing. She had prior court hearings in Minneapolis and came to the Western Service Center in Dakota County expecting to meet one-on-one with a judge. Instead, the hearing was held in a courtroom with other individuals who were there for a similar purpose.

While this may have intimidated the family initially, especially with other court participants present, Judge Thomas Poch quickly put

them at ease with his gentle way of making them feel comfortable. "The judge was so hands-on and accommodating with the kids," Melissa said. She was impressed with the way Judge Poch shook the children's hands and allowed them to come behind the bench and take pictures and witness first-hand the signing of each order. It was a very emotional time for this family as the children accepted their step-father's last name.

While this family had a good experience in court, it is critical that we remember the "human factor" as we look at shrinking budgets in the Minnesota Judicial Branch. Everyone wants and deserves their day in court. For Melissa's family, this name change, while it might have seemed simple from a legal perspective, enabled them to enter the next chapter in their lives and was very meaningful.

Even with a crowded calendar, the judge and court staff took the time to make this event special for Melissa and her family. Budget deficits will continue to challenge how many cases are scheduled on a calendar, as well as the length of time from filing to obtain a hearing. It is important to remember that every one of those cases will have an impact on someone's life.



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