



COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

The Fourth Judicial District serving Hennepin County conducted the fifth community listening session on August 10, 2016 at Minneapolis Urban League.

“Be Heard: A Community Listening Session with Hennepin County Judges” allowed community members to talk to judges in a small group conversations. The listening session was attended by 27 judicial officers and staff from Hennepin County District Court.



FOURTH DISTRICT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

“Be Heard: A Community Listening Session with Hennepin County Judges” was held at Minneapolis Urban League, 2100 Plymouth Avenue North, Minneapolis, MN on August 10, 2016, 6:30-8:00 p.m. Invitations and flyers, both paper and electronic, were distributed to several key community organizations soliciting their involvement and support, and this session was shared on various social media platforms. This was the fifth community listening in as many years planned by the Court’s Equal Justice Committee. Previous listening sessions were held in Minneapolis’ Powderhorn community, Minneapolis Urban League and North High School.

The goal of the session was to create a public forum for community members to describe their experiences and discuss ideas for advancing equal access to our courts.

Community Dialogue Plan

The Community Dialogue Plan provides a template for the state-wide Committee for Equality and Justice and the individual Judicial District Equal Justice Committees (EJC) to work together to achieve equitable treatment for all individuals in the court system. The Community Dialogue Plan’s stated purpose is to:

Create a public forum for community members to describe their experiences and discuss ideas for advancing equality and fairness regarding race, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, and any other status protected by law.

SUMMARY OF THE FOURTH DISTRICT SESSION

The goals of the session were:

- To provide an opportunity for community members to share thoughts, concerns, and experiences with the Hennepin County Courts
- To learn what is and isn't working from the perspective of the users of the courts: accessibility, quality of service and perception of fair treatment
- To use what is learned to make changes to ensure that court users' needs are met and that their rights are respected when interacting with the Hennepin County court system

An estimated 20 people attended the listening session. The notes from the small group tables captured some common themes and issues. The discussions were lively and covered a range of topics relating to criminal court, family court, juvenile court, self-represented litigants; and civil judgments.

It was valuable for the judges and court administrative staff to hear directly about the experience of court users. The Court will review the notes from each table to select new self-improvement goals.

Fourth District Session Details

Moderator: Assistant Chief Judge Todd Barnette

Judges and Referees: 22 (Judges Anderson, Barnette, Benson, Bernhardson, Carruthers, Dawson, Engisch, Fraser, Hoyos, Janisch, Kappelhoff, Karasov, Koch, Lamas, Peterson, Piper, Regis, Sande, Siegesmund, Sullivan, Referees Harris and Hutchison)

Administrative Staff/Interns: 5 (Dana Bartocci, Kate Fogarty, Shoreé Pierce, Brianna Scott and CheRae Prestegard)

Community Representation: Community, neighborhood and various faith groups were invited to the listening session.

Major Themes of the Session

Five (5) themes emerged from the small group discussions:

1. Perception of Judges/Judicial Officers

Participants voiced concerns with the load of cases on a calendar and perceptions that judges 'just want to get it over with.' Participants suggested judges learn more about the programs they refer court users to, stay with the same case over time, and work to be more transparent in the courtroom, particularly explaining options to unrepresented litigants in greater detail.

2. Family Court Concerns

Participants shared that Family Court was too difficult to understand and navigate, and suggested the court make Family Court orientation and parenting/co-parenting courses available. They noted a need for more resources on how to obtain legal advice in the Family Court building. They also sought more communication between Child Protection and the courts. Participants also shared that parents are often not given any resources to help them find employment and that the emphasis on criminal history in family court cases keeps fathers away from their children.

3. Broader Court Concerns

Discussion ensued at various tables on court concerns:

- Ensuring the court is not a revolving door, allowing criminals to reoffend in the community
- Victim(s) feel like no one is listening, and they are only in court to 'make a statement'
- Courts should treat each case individually, not as one large case
- There is too much run around between courts, especially Family and Juvenile courts
- Courts are not aware of how hard it is to get a job

4. Community Engagement

Some tables expressed the need for the court to be more involved and relatable, have regularly schedule community engagement, continuing listening sessions, specifically on poverty and institutional barriers.

5. Broader Justice Issues

Participants voiced concerns on broader justice concerns such as Probation officers being overwhelmed with clients and the lack of training offered at the Workhouse.

Proposed Suggestions for Improving the Court System

Many helpful suggestions for improving the court system were received. The EJC considered the feedback and focused on the following:

1. Improve communication between Family and other courts.
2. Provide judicial officers with an in-depth understanding of the impact of probation on defendants.
3. Inform court users of existing organizations, programs and services that may be helpful.
4. Explain to court users in a way they can understand what to do when they leave court.
5. Increase visibility in the community through more opportunities for engagement.

The EJC will developed the following implementation plans. The EJC will also continue to work on the ideas that were presented in prior listening sessions.

1. Improve Communication

- Invite Presiding Judges across courts to re-examine communication breakdowns and increase effectiveness

2. Probation Impact on Defendants

- Conduct a simulation exercise about following conditions for probation to see how difficult it is to be successful on probation
- Invite national speaker to talk about improvements/reform

3. Promoting Helpful Organizations, Programs and Services

- Reach out to resource organizations, such as United Way, for a more coordinated, cohesive way to connect court users to services available
- Increase communication to court users on various platforms (e.g. Social Media, community

education, etc.) to share resources and court education on Family court processes.

4. Understand What To Do After Court Appearance

- The Minnesota Judicial Branch will conduct the Statewide Access to Justice Survey in 2018
- Spread court education and resources, such as the Self Help Centers, using KMOJ radio, libraries, social media, etc.

5. Increased Community Engagement

- Staff a Court Specialist in Community Relations position to focus on increasing court and community relationships, creating opportunities for judicial outreach and organizing community engagement initiatives
- Increase communication and visibility to the community through social media, community radio and publications

Suggestions for Future Community Dialogue Sessions

The Court will promote community events through the twitter pilot and explore different ways to advertise for future sessions. KMOJ radio interviewed Referee JaPaul Harris in connection with this listening session, and offered to host interviews in the future.

For future sessions, it was suggested that the court expand its marketing of the event to include standing signs throughout the community's busiest streets, intersections and transit stops.

Changes Resulting from Community Listening Sessions

Attendees appreciated being able to see the Accomplishments list from the 2015 Listening Session at each table. Prior listening sessions have helped the court implement improvements such as:

- Training for judicial officers on several of the topics discussed in multiple sessions: Probation, Implicit Bias, Procedural Fairness, and how to listen effectively in court
- Developing help kiosks to give court users options to search for case information in various languages to reduce confusion at the Government Center
- Continuing to provide one-stop assistance to self-represented litigants at the Self Help Centers located in the Government Center and the Family Justice Center. Both centers employ multi-lingual staff.
- Furthering research on district court forms is scheduled to begin in the Fall 2016 to improve users' experience and ability to understand. This research follows the recent revisions to Court summons and other documents to plain English, eliminating legal jargon in order to make them easier to understand.
- Enhancing security and access through updates and building renovations over the Summer 2016, to help people feel safe and better able to find information in court buildings
- Improving diversity across positions in the court by sharing job postings with various diverse organizations and associations, including internship positions for youth

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Attached:

Flyer

Listening Session Accomplishments List

Group Discussion Questions