



Connect with the Court

Community Listening Session

Hosted by

7th District Equal Justice Committee

in partnership with

City of Moorhead Human Rights Commission

and

Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota

October 6, 2022

Heritage Hjemkomst Center

Moorhead, MN

7th DISTRICT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The 7th District Equal Justice Committee chose Moorhead, Minnesota as the site for the 2022 Community Listening Session. Moorhead is the second largest city in the 7th Judicial District. As a diverse community with an active City of Moorhead Human Rights Commission, the EJC felt that this city, as well as Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota, would be ideal entities with which to partner. The goal of the event was to help the Court better understand individual experiences, share remote hearing experiences, share ideas about improving the quality of services, and discuss ideas for Access and Justice.

The target audience was anyone who has interacted with the Court or who was interested in learning more about the judicial system. The listening session was advertised through many facets: flyers were posted throughout the Clay County Courthouse, local colleges and Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota publicized the event, the City of Moorhead posted the invitation on their community page and the Minnesota Judicial Branch Court Information Office issued a press release for the area.

Community Dialogues:

Community Dialogues provide a way for the Committee for Equality and Justice and each Judicial District Equal Justice Committee (EJC) to work together to achieve equitable treatment for all individuals in the court system. A Community Dialogue'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.



7th District Session Details:

On October 6, 2022, the 7th District Equal Justice Committee, in partnership with the City of Moorhead Human Rights Commission and Legal Service of Northwest Minnesota, hosted a

Community Listening Session at the Heritage Hjemkomst Center in Moorhead, Minnesota from 6:30 to 8:30 PM. Fourteen Judicial Officers attended the event from across the 7th Judicial District. Honorable Michelle Lawson served as the moderator for the evening. Judges were joined by members of the Human Rights Commission, Legal Services, City, and County Officials including the City of Moorhead Mayor, the Clay County Attorney, a Clay County Commissioner, students, and other members of the public.



SUMMARY OF THE DISTRICT SESSION

Judge Lawson provided opening remarks and introductions. The evening was divided into two parts. The opening session was a large group discussion allowing all to voice comments, concerns, and suggestions. Judges then left the panel and joined individual tables to facilitate small group discussions, and then reported back to the entire group. All in attendance were engaged and participated in the large and small group discussions. Topics covered included:

Remote Hearings:

Zoom technology provides easy access and allows individuals and stakeholders to participate in hearings remotely. Remote technology reduces transportation barriers, increases safety of the victims, if they are not living in the same household, and reduces the time commitment to attend hearings. Also, it was noted that additional time needs to be provided for remote hearings. If any individual has access issues, the following access options were provided:

- Local public libraries have started to provide WIFI access points for court participants.
- Local courthouses have tablets and space available for court participants to attend remote hearings.
- Legal kiosks are available across the Minnesota. <https://www.legalkiosk.org>
- Law libraries may also have access points and resources available.

On the downside, defense attorneys have found it hard to communicate with clients and prepare them for what is going to happen in court. All expressed frustration with technological issues. Finally, judges have found it difficult to read emotions and noticed a lack of respect for the Court.

Access and Justice:

Discussed that generally court proceedings are open to the public to observe; however, it was noted that court buildings are often intimidating. Second, discussed how non-English speakers interact with the Court. Most forms have been translated into the top five languages spoken in Minnesota. In addition, interpreters are readily available to assist with court proceedings and language access lines are also available to assist court staff. Finally, a specific topic of media interactions with treatment courts was discussed. Specialty Courts are a process of recovery for individuals and are viewed as a true restorative justice process. Individuals going through this personal journey may be intimidated by media, so care and concern should be considered so specialty court participants have a say in photos and stories shared.

Ideas for Improving Quality Services:

- Expand Self Help Clinics
- Access to forms: [Minnesota Judicial Branch - GetForms \(mncourts.gov\)](https://www.mncourts.gov) provides many form templates and guide-n-file interviews to assist self-represented litigants with completion and submission of court forms.
- Language Access
- Allow litigants to watch court before their own hearings

- Discussed challenges with enforcement of orders (DANCO) with border states.
- Discussed funding issues.
- Discussed voting for judges on the district level as the local population may not be aware of judge from other counties.



SUMMATION

The 7th District EJC Team was encouraged and thankful for the feedback and appreciated the time the community spent talking with the Court.

Participants enjoyed the opportunity for small group discussions as many found the large group more intimidating and most felt more comfortable speaking in a small group. Additionally, most hoped that the events would be more widely publicized thereby generating more local interest and participation.

During the event the following suggestions were made to improve the Court System:

Remote Hearings:

- Provide parties with information as to “What to Expect when Coming to Court”. (References material available at [www. mncourts.gov](http://www.mncourts.gov))
- The length of the court hearing should be considered as a factor in remote hearing scheduling.
- Provide additional time for remote hearings. (Research provided indicates that remote hearings take 30% longer.)

Access to Justice:

- Make Informa pauperis applications easier to locate on the webpages.
- Allow individuals to observe court before they participate in court.

Ideas for Improving Quality Service:

- Promote Self Help Services.
- Acknowledge jury duty may be the only interaction some individuals will have with the Court System.

These suggestions will be reviewed by the Committee for Equality and Justice and the 7th District EJC. The suggestions will be considered in assessing any priorities or future actions.

Miscellaneous Information

A few suggestions for future Community Listening Sessions to consider is to provide a lunch or dinner. Second, venue selection should be community centered around the targeted population. Third, encourage non-professionals to attend.

Students were surprised and encouraged to see so many women on the Bench.