



## **Fourth Judicial District**

### ***Domestic Violence Court: Results of Victim Survey***

*Prepared by:  
Hennepin County District Court Research Division*

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## Executive Summary

The Research Division of the Fourth Judicial District recently surveyed victims of cases heard on the domestic violence court calendar in downtown Minneapolis. Overall findings suggest that victims' impressions of the court were favorable. Over 70% of survey respondents were satisfied with the outcomes of their cases, and 68% felt that the judges cared about their situations. Victims' levels of satisfaction with how they were treated by the judges were at least as favorable as their levels of satisfaction with their own advocates.

In addition, victims' positive perceptions of the court were seemingly unrelated to the outcomes of the cases in which they were involved. This finding corroborates national research on courts in general which suggests that individuals' levels of satisfaction with the court have less to do with the outcomes of their cases, and more to do with whether or not they feel they have been treated fairly.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

The Fourth Judicial District initiated a new domestic violence court calendar on November 13, 2000. This court calendar handles arraignment and pre-trial hearings for all in-custody and out-of-custody cases of domestic violence in the city of Minneapolis. A preliminary evaluation of case processing efficiency and dispositional analysis was completed and distributed after the first full year of operation, in fall 2001. The preliminary study found that cases heard on the domestic violence calendar were, on average, being processed more quickly than these types of cases had been in prior years. Furthermore, the conviction rate for these cases had risen nearly 20% when compared with a baseline study of domestic violence cases in 1998.

This report documents the results of a telephone survey of victims involved in domestic violence court cases during the calendar's first year. This is the initial phase of a full process evaluation, to be completed later in 2002. A recidivism analysis of defendants will also be completed in early 2003.

The purpose of the victim survey was to supplement the objective, quantitative information we are able to collect regarding case outcomes and recidivism. The Fourth Judicial District bench is concerned with knowing how the court appears to be functioning from the victims' perspective, as victim safety was a primary impetus behind the development of the domestic violence court calendar. The bench believes that by speaking directly with the victims, we can glean important information which can guide initiatives to improve the domestic violence court.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Social Justice: Outcome and Procedure," by Tom R. Tyler, *International Journal of Psychology*, vol. 35, 2000, pp. 117-125.

## Sampling Methodology

We began, in December 2001, by pulling cases from the Minneapolis City Attorney Victim Liaison domestic violence victim database.<sup>2</sup> We pulled cases that the city attorney had closed out in the last three months of 2001, for two reasons. First, by pulling recent cases we could be relatively certain that the court experience would still be relatively fresh in the minds of the victims we spoke with. And second, some of these cases should ultimately match up with those we will eventually analyze for the recidivism study.

In identifying survey respondents and preparing to conduct telephone interviews, we followed as closely as possible the procedures outlined by one of the foremost experts in this area, Don Dillman.<sup>3</sup> We used a statistical computer program to pull a random sample of 150 out of the group of 318 victims on the City Attorney Victim Liaison database. We sent these individuals letters from Chief Judge Kevin Burke, alerting them that someone from the court would be calling them to solicit their opinions regarding the operation of the domestic violence court. (See Appendix A for a copy of the letter from Chief Judge Burke). Of the 150 letters sent, 9 letters came back because of a bad address. About one to two weeks after victims received the letters, we began phone calls.<sup>4</sup> We found that in 12 of the cases, we had no phone number for the victim, and another 43 of the phone numbers we had had been disconnected by the time we called. In short, out of the 150 potential victims, we had valid phone numbers for only 86.

We made first attempt phone calls during the day, and followed up with evening phone calls for those we were unable to reach during daytime hours. We made up to three attempts to contact each victim. We called victims over two month's time, and completed surveys for 34 victims, 40% of those for whom we had a valid phone number. Similar studies of domestic violence victims suggest that this is a reasonable percentage for completed surveys.<sup>5</sup>

## Survey Topics

A full copy of the survey questions appears in Appendix B. We asked victims questions about their satisfaction with the case outcome, their experience with advocates, probation staff, and the judge, and their overall satisfaction with the experience of being in the courtroom. We asked both closed-ended (multiple choice) and open-ended questions; we recorded any additional comments victims made, whether solicited or not.

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<sup>2</sup> After exploring several options, it became clear that the City Attorney's office had the most complete and up-to-date victim information.

<sup>3</sup> See *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* by Don A. Dillman, 1978. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

<sup>4</sup> Optimally, Dillman suggests a preliminary phone call to schedule the interview. We chose to omit this step, based on time and resources available.

<sup>5</sup> Estimates for other telephone surveys of domestic violence victims range from 2% to 50%.

## Results

### Overall Satisfaction with Case Outcome

As presented in Table 1, 26 (71%) out of the 34 victims we spoke with were satisfied or very satisfied with the outcome of their cases.<sup>6</sup> While those whose cases were convicted tended to be more satisfied than those whose cases were dismissed, the differences were not overwhelming (see Table 2). Of those cases where the defendant pled or was found guilty, 73 % percent of survey respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied, as compared with 64% of respondents where the case was dismissed.

**Table 1. Satisfaction with outcome of domestic violence court case**

| <i>Satisfaction level</i> | <i>Number of respondents</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Very satisfied            | 9                            | 26.5%             |
| Satisfied                 | 15                           | 44.1%             |
| Dissatisfied              | 4                            | 11.8%             |
| Very dissatisfied         | 6                            | 17.6%             |
| TOTAL                     | 34                           | 100%              |

**Table 2. Satisfaction with outcome of domestic violence court case, by case disposition<sup>7</sup>**

| <i>Satisfaction Level</i> | <i>Case Disposition</i>  |                                |                  |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
|                           | <i>Pled/Found Guilty</i> | <i>Continued for Dismissal</i> | <i>Dismissal</i> |
| Very satisfied            | 4<br>(26.7%)             | 3<br>(42.9%)                   | 2<br>(18.2%)     |
| Satisfied                 | 7<br>(46.7%)             | 2<br>(28.6%)                   | 5<br>(45.5%)     |
| Dissatisfied              | 1<br>(6.7%)              | 1<br>(14.3%)                   | 2<br>(18.2%)     |
| Very dissatisfied         | 3<br>(20%)               | 1<br>(14.3%)                   | 2<br>(18.2%)     |
| TOTAL                     | 15<br>(100%)             | 7<br>(100%)                    | 33<br>(100%)     |

### Satisfaction with Interactions with Judges

We asked survey respondents whether or not they felt the judge cared about their situations, and their level of satisfaction with how they were treated in the courtroom. These questions, for the most part, elicited positive responses about how the judges treat victims in domestic violence cases. Out of the 34 respondents, 23 (68%) said that they felt the judge cared about their situation, and out of the 23 victims who were physically present in the courtroom, 20 (87%) were satisfied or very satisfied with how the judge treated them. (See Tables 3 and 4). When these responses were measured against case

<sup>6</sup> Because of the low number of completed surveys, percentages should be interpreted with caution.

<sup>7</sup> One of the surveys could not be tied to case disposition data because of a bad case number.

disposition (Tables 5 and 6), it was clear that victims' interpretations of how they were being treated by judges had little relationship to whether or not the case was convicted.

**Table 3. Did you feel the judge cared about your situation?**

|            | <i>Number of respondents</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Yes        | 23                           | 67.6%             |
| No         | 4                            | 11.8%             |
| Don't know | 7                            | 20.6%             |
| Total      | 34                           | 100%              |

**Table 4. Satisfaction with how judge treated victim in the courtroom**

| <i>Satisfaction level</i>                               | <i>Number of respondents</i> | <i>Percentage</i> | <i>Percentage of Victims in Courtroom (N=23)</i> |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Very satisfied  | 8                            | 23.5%             | <b>34.8%</b>                                     |
| Satisfied   | 12                           | 35.3%             | <b>52.2%</b>                                     |
| Dissatisfied  | 2                            | 5.9%              | <b>8.7%</b>                                      |
| Very dissatisfied                                       | 1                            | 2.9%              | <b>4.3%</b>                                      |
| Does not apply<br>(Victim was not present in courtroom) | 11                           | 32.4%             |  |
| TOTAL   | 34                           | 100%              | <b>100%</b>                                      |

**Table 5. Did you feel the judge cared about your situation, by case disposition**

|            | <i>Case Disposition</i>  |                                |                  |
|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
|            | <i>Pled/Found Guilty</i> | <i>Continued for Dismissal</i> | <i>Dismissal</i> |
| Yes        | 10<br>(66.7%)            | 5<br>(71.4%)                   | 7<br>(63.6%)     |
| No         | 2<br>(13.3%)             | 1<br>(14.3%)                   | 1<br>(9.1%)      |
| Don't know | 3<br>(20.0%)             | 1<br>(14.3%)                   | 3<br>(27.3%)     |
| TOTAL      | 15<br>(100%)             | 7<br>(100%)                    | 11<br>(100%)     |

**Table 6. Satisfaction with how judge treated victim in the courtroom, by case disposition (of those who were in the courtroom)**

| Satisfaction Level | Case Disposition  |                         |              |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
|                    | Pled/Found Guilty | Continued for Dismissal | Dismissal    |
| Very satisfied     | 4<br>(33.3%)      | 2<br>(40.0%)            | 2<br>(33.3%) |
| Satisfied          | 7<br>(58.3%)      | 2<br>(40.0%)            | 3<br>(50.0%) |
| Dissatisfied       | 1<br>(8.3%)       | 0<br>(0%)               | 1<br>(16.7%) |
| Very dissatisfied  | 0<br>(0%)         | 1<br>(20.0%)            | 0<br>(0%)    |
| TOTAL              | 12<br>(100%)      | 5<br>(100%)             | 6<br>(100%)  |

Many of the victims we spoke with volunteered extremely positive comments about the judges who handled their cases. In general, respondents seemed to feel that judges took their situations to heart, and were impressed with the interactions they had with the judges. Some expressed that they were impressed with the severity with which the judges spoke to the defendants. Below are some of the positive comments we received specifically with regard to the judges on the domestic violence court calendar:

*“The judge definitely cared about my case.”*

*“The judge seemed very neutral...fair.”*

*“Judge was very caring.”*

*“I was treated fairly and with respect.”*

*“The judge was very attentive.”*

*“The judge asked a lot of questions about how the victim felt.”*

There were also a few less positive comments regarding victims’ experiences with the judges:

*“I felt like (the judge) cared more about not putting her in prison. She’s a repeat offender.” (from a male victim)*

*“He was on probation for a bruise...went back to jail a couple of months. They just reinstated his probation and let him out quicker...Putting him in jail and letting him out just makes him angrier.”*

*“(Judge cared about situation) at the end. Took awhile for him to care about it...till the pictures (of injuries) got really serious.”*

*Satisfaction with Interactions with Victim Advocates and Probation Staff*

Only 13 out of the 34 respondents reported having an advocate. Of those, however, most were satisfied with how their advocate explained the court process to them. (See Table 7). Similarly, 15 respondents reported having contact with probation, and of those, most were satisfied or very satisfied with their interactions with probation staff. (See Table 8).

**Table 7. Satisfaction with how advocate explained court process  
(of those who had an advocate)**

| <i>Satisfaction level</i> | <i>Number of respondents</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Very satisfied            | 5                            | 38.5%             |
| Satisfied                 | 6                            | 46.1%             |
| Dissatisfied              | 1                            | 7.7%              |
| Very dissatisfied         | 1                            | 7.7%              |
| TOTAL                     | 13                           | 100%              |

**Table 8. Satisfaction with how probation explained court process  
(of those who had contact with probation)**

| <i>Satisfaction level</i> | <i>Number of respondents</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Very satisfied            | 5                            | 33.3%             |
| Satisfied                 | 6                            | 40.0%             |
| Dissatisfied              | 1                            | 6.7%              |
| Very dissatisfied         | 2                            | 13.3% %           |
| Don't know                | 1                            | 6.7%              |
| TOTAL                     | 15                           | 100%              |

In general, victims had positive open-ended responses about advocates. For example, one victim noted that the “advocate was calming and supportive.” Two male victims expressed disappointment with the fact that they were not offered the services of an advocate. The only other negative comment was from a victim who expressed frustration at trying to reach a city advocate by phone.

There were very few specific comments regarding probation. One victim noted that the probation officer “didn’t want to hear what I had to say.” Another victim was extremely upset that probation staff gave her address to the defendant (in the context of stating a no contact order) after the victim had asked for that information to be kept private.

### Safety in the Courtroom

We asked survey respondents whether or not they felt safe when they were in the courtroom. Out of the 23 victims that were physically present during court proceedings, all but one reported that they felt safe while in the courtroom. We asked victims what specifically made them feel safe, and they overwhelmingly suggested that the presence of the sheriff's deputies was a major factor in their feelings of safety. In addition, the physical layout of the courtroom, whereby in-custody defendants are separated from the audience, played a part in victims' feelings of safety as well. Some individual comments are worth noting here:

*"Presence of sheriff's deputies was comforting."*

*"The separation of the defendant from the rest of the courtroom."*

*"The security officer told (him) no contact at the Government Center."*

*"Because of advocate service and security."*

*"I knew he couldn't get past the sheriff's deputies."*

These comments are especially meaningful to those involved in the implementation of the domestic violence court, as court security and victim safety have been priority issues since the beginning.

### Overall Comments about the Process and Suggestions for Improvement

We asked survey respondents to tell us, in their own words, how we could make the domestic violence court better and more responsive to the needs of others in their situations. We received both positive comments and suggestions for improvement. For example, some of the positive comments were as follows:

*"My situation was handled very well...wouldn't change anything."*

*"It (the process) went smooth."*

*"It (the process) was really good. I felt they took my safety into consideration."*

*"It was fast...didn't drag on."*

*"I felt the court made it clear how to contact them if there were problems in the future."*

*"No complaints whatsoever."*

*"I thought (court) was good in explaining...giving options. I was pleased with the whole situation...ended up working out very well for us."*

The majority of less positive comments could be interpreted as suggestions for improvement. For example:

*“Be more sensitive to people’s needs.”*

*“Listen more to the victim.”*

*“Listen to the victim more carefully...There are some crazy bastards out there and you never know what they’ll do.”*

*“It is a very complicated process. One needs to be very savvy to follow it.”*

*“I wish the process was faster with less time between court appearances. The whole experience felt too drawn out.”*

*“Process could have been different... ‘open courtroom’ is hectic...uncomfortable...everyone knows your business.”*

*“He received too many chances....violated OFP three times before receiving jail time.”*

*“Take the first incident very seriously.”*

Suggestions that impact other agencies were to improve the victim notification process when the defendant is released from jail, and for the police to be more responsive when victims contact them. One victim commented that probation staff seemed more concerned about the felonies pending against the victims than the case of domestic assault. Finally, the male victims, for the most part, were unhappy with the way they were treated during the process, in the words of one, as if “it wasn’t a big deal” because the defendant was a woman.

*Appendix A: Letter from Chief Judge Burke*

January 10, 2002

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Our court records show that you were recently involved in a case in Hennepin County's Domestic Violence Court in the Government Center in downtown Minneapolis. On behalf of all the judges of the Fourth Judicial District, I hope that your case was resolved in a timely fashion and that you have been able to find safety and security in your everyday life since the case ended.

I am writing to ask for your help. Because our Domestic Violence Court is still fairly new, we would like to gather information from you that will help us to make it as effective as possible. Within the next several weeks, a senior court staff member will be calling you to ask you a few short questions regarding your experience in Domestic Violence Court. They will begin the conversation by asking you if it is a safe time to have a conversation about the court, and if you say no, they will provide you with a phone number where you can call them back when you are able. Your answers to the questions will be entered directly into the computer, where there will be no name or identifying information attached to any answers. So although we will have your name and phone number when we contact you, the answers to the questions themselves will be anonymous and available only to our research staff.

When the court staff member calls you, please consider taking a few moments to answer their questions and provide us with honest feedback. The reason we started Domestic Violence Court was to take a significant step toward making sure that you and others in your situation feel that you can count on the court to be fair and just, and to make your safety a priority. We value your input, as your answers can help us to continue our progress toward making the Domestic Violence Court as good as it can be.

Thank you in advance for your time and assistance.

Sincerely,

Kevin S. Burke  
Chief Judge  
Fourth Judicial District

## *Appendix B: Telephone Survey*

### Introduction

*(Make sure you have the correct person on the phone).*

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I work for Hennepin County District Court in Minneapolis. Is this a safe time for you to talk?

*(If no, then say:) When would be a better time to call you back? Should I reach you at this number or somewhere else? (After getting information, end conversation with day/time/number when you will call back.)*

*(If yes, then say:) Thank you. Our records show that you were recently involved in a case in domestic violence court here in the Government Center in downtown Minneapolis. Do you remember the case to which I am referring? Do you remember receiving a letter from Chief Judge Kevin Burke telling you that someone from the court would be calling you? The reason we are calling is to get your honest opinions about the domestic violence court with the hopes that we can continue to make the court better.*

*(If they are unsure, try to provide some information to spark their memory – like the fact that it came with a letter from the City Attorney’s Victim Liaison Office, or some of the things the letter said).*

Great. I would like to ask you a few short questions about your time in domestic violence court, because we truly value your opinions in the hopes that we can make the court as responsive as possible to others in your situation. It will take 5-10 minutes of your time. I will record your answers directly into the computer, without your name attached so that no one who looks at this will have any way of knowing who gave what answers. The answers you give will be completely anonymous to anyone who looks at the results of this survey. With that in mind, would you be willing to answer these few short questions for me? Thank you.

1. How satisfied were you with the outcome of the domestic violence court case you were involved in recently?
  - a. Very satisfied
  - b. Satisfied
  - c. Dissatisfied
  - d. Very dissatisfied
  - e. Don’t know
  - f. Refused

Additional comments:

2. Did you have an advocate?
  - a. Yes (*go to number 3*)
  - b. No (*go to number 4*)
  - c. Don't know (*go to number 4*)
  - d. Refused (*go to number 4*)
  
3. (*If answer to number 2 is Yes, ask:*) How satisfied were you with the way your advocate explained to you how the court process would work?
  - a. Very satisfied
  - b. Satisfied
  - c. Dissatisfied
  - d. Very dissatisfied
  - e. Don't know
  - f. Refused

Additional comments:

4. Did you feel that the judge cared about your situation?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Don't know
  - d. Refused

Additional comments:

5. How satisfied were you with the way the judge treated you while you were in the courtroom?

- a. Very satisfied
- b. Satisfied
- c. Dissatisfied
- d. Very dissatisfied
- e. Don't know
- f. Refused

Additional comments:

6. Did you have contact with someone from probation?

- a. Yes (*go to question 7*)
- b. No (*go to question 8*)
- c. Don't know (*go to number 9*)
- d. Refused (*go to number 9*)

7. (*If answer to number 6 is Yes, ask:*) How satisfied were you with the way the probation officer explained the process to you?

- a. Very satisfied
- b. Satisfied
- c. Dissatisfied
- d. Very dissatisfied
- e. Don't know
- f. Refused

Additional comments:

8. Did you feel safe while you were in the courtroom?

- a. Yes (*go to number 9*)
- b. No (*go to number 10*)
- c. Don't know (*go to number 11*)
- d. Refused (*go to number 11*)

9. (*If answer to number 8 is Yes, ask:*) What specifically made you feel safe?

