



## 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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[First Judicial District Public Website](#)

The First District has 36 judges and 250 staff who handled more than 90,000 cases in 2021 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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## oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Policy Takes Effect

The Minnesota Judicial Branch [order of April 19, 2022](#), and [oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative policy](#) providing the framework for how remote and in-person hearings will take place, became effective June 6, 2022. Going forward, all hearings scheduled and hearing notices issued will follow the policy. Case participants will find the most accurate information about how their court hearings will take place on their hearing notices.

For hearings in Non-Criminal case types, including Family, Domestic Abuse, Harassment, Eviction, and Major and Minor Civil, many hearing types are generally presumed remote. There is a presumption that evidentiary hearings – hearings where evidence is being presented or testimony is taken on issues in dispute – will generally be held in person. Judicial officers have the authority to grant case-by-case exemptions to these guidelines, but only under exceptional circumstances. [Read more](#) about Non-Criminal hearing appearances.

For hearings in Criminal cases, each judicial district has developed its own localized plan for providing both remote and in-person hearings in criminal cases.

These localized plans will help each district address the large backlog of felony and gross misdemeanor cases stemming from the pandemic. [Read more](#) about Criminal hearing appearances.

Treatment court proceedings are generally presumed in person for participants.

## Inside

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| 1-2 | oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Policy Takes Effect  |
| 2   | Chief Justice Delivers State of the Judiciary Address   |
| 3-4 | For Judge Richelle Wahi Equity Work is Path Towards Truth Justice   |
| 5   | Minnesota Judicial Branch Launches Digital Exhibit System   |
| 6-8 | New Facilities, Centralization of Staff Results in More Efficient Services for Scott County               |
| 9   | Minnesota Court Records Online (MCRO) Receives President's Award from the Minnesota State Bar Association |

oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Policy Takes Effect

(Continued from page 1)



### About the oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Framework

The Minnesota Judicial Council in September 2021 approved the framework for the continuation of remote hearings in some case types. The work of developing the remote hearing framework and the subsequent rollout was guided by the oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Steering Committee appointed by Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Lorie S. Gildea, and informed by feedback gathered from judges, court staff, attorneys, and court users across the state. The work to improve remote and in-person proceedings represents the commitment of the Minnesota Judicial Branch to innovation and transformational change for a more user-focused judicial system.

## Chief Justice Delivers State of the Judiciary Address

Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Lorie S. Gildea delivered the 2022 State of the Judiciary address to the Minnesota State Bar Association annual convention on Wednesday, June 22.

In the opening to her remarks, Chief Justice Gildea told members of the bar that this year's State of the Judiciary address comes at a moment of historic transformation for Minnesota's courts:

*"I am pleased to report that Minnesota's judiciary is strong and resilient. And while our courts face some lasting challenges from the pandemic, we are also ready to take advantage of the invaluable lessons we have learned over the past two years and are using those lessons to expand access to justice and improve how we serve the people of Minnesota. Our justice system is moving forward, together, and charting a new course that will guide the long-term, post-pandemic future of the judiciary in Minnesota."*

In her State of the Judiciary address, the Chief Justice provided an overview of the oneCourtMN Hearing Initiative. She also shared updates on projects that are increasing access, transparency, and customer service in the justice system, which include Minnesota Court Records Online (MCRO), the Minnesota Digital Exhibit Management System (MNDES), and the Legal Paraprofessionals Pilot Project.

The Chief Justice shared an update on the work of the Committee on Equality and Justice to eliminate disparities in probation revocation and ensure juries are representative of the communities they serve. She also addressed one of the Minnesota Judicial Branch's most significant challenges: workforce recruitment and retention.

Read the [full text of the Chief Justice's State of the Judiciary Address](#).



## For Judge Richelle Wahi, Equity Work is Path Towards True Justice



**Judge Richelle Wahi**

When Judge Richelle Wahi presides at the Dakota County Courthouse in Hastings, Minnesota, she explains to parties why she doesn't always make eye contact. "It's important that people feel seen and heard."

Wahi experienced hearing loss later in life, so she reads from a court reporter's real-time transcription on a screen in front of her. Courtroom audio also connects with her hearing aid.

But the pandemic was a time when everyone – not just a select few – needed technology accommodations to attend court.

Wahi and others realized the benefits of having proceedings online, especially without any public transportation connections to the courthouse. "Zoom greatly enhanced access to justice for people in the First Judicial District who didn't have transportation and save everyone time and money to get there," she said.

Wahi was tasked with getting family court back up and running with a focus on inclusion and access. The importance of such work dates to Wahi's childhood in rural southern Minnesota and extends throughout her educational and professional journey.

"Being one of only a few immigrant families and growing up in a small town, you're made keenly aware of your differences," noted Wahi, whose father was from India and mother from a French-speaking part of Canada. English was rarely spoken at home.

Wahi wasn't sure what to do after college but was interested in law and accepted to William Mitchell. She didn't know it was the right choice until she met and was mentored by professor and former Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Esther Tomljanovich.

Tomljanovich started a student group for women, lovingly called 'the Coven,' that met regularly for tea and encouragement. "Judge T taught me never to be afraid to ask the tough questions and to continue to go outside the comfort zone," said Wahi. "And the Coven showed me there'd always be people to support me."

After law school, Wahi litigated multimillion dollar cases. But it was a conciliation court case worth just \$567 – where



*For Judge Richelle Wahi, Equity Work is Path Towards True Justice*

*(Continued from page 2)*

she volunteered as referee – that pulled her heartstrings. “As small as this case may seem, it was very important to this person. It became apparent to me to serve everyday people.” When a vacancy opened on the bench, Wahi applied and was appointed district court judge in 2016.

Wahi’s equity work also includes serving on the Minnesota Judicial Branch’s Statewide Committee for Equality and Justice and chairs the Subcommittee on Access and Fairness. The work identifies bias within the justice system and recommends changes in processes, procedures, and policies.

“This work is near and dear to my heart because we know there are inequities within our justice system that must be recognized, challenged, and changed to ensure true justice. It’s my path, it’s my duty.”

EVENT: Judge Wahi presented findings and recommendations of a recent report on jury race data from the Committee for Equality and Justice at an event within the Hennepin County Bar Association in May 2022. You can read the report [here](#).

\*This article originally appeared in the Spring 2022 issue of *Mitchell Hamline Law*, the annual alumni magazine of Mitchell Hamline School of Law and reprinted with permission.



**Judge Richelle Wahi  
with Justice Esther Tomljanovich at the  
Women in Law Celebration on May 12, 2022**



## Minnesota Judicial Branch Launches Digital Exhibit System

### *User-friendly web-based portal securely stores and manages multimedia digital exhibits*

The Minnesota Judicial Branch is implementing a new web-based application that puts users in control of managing their digital exhibits. The Minnesota Digital Exhibit Management System (MNDES) provides a secure tool for users to upload digital exhibits, and then access and review their uploaded digital exhibits without visiting a courthouse or relying on court staff.

“The Minnesota Judicial Branch is committed to leveraging technology and innovation to provide a secure, consistent, and quality experience for people to interact with the courts and to improve court efficiencies,” said Chief Justice Lorie S. Gildea.

“MNDES is one example of the advancements our courts are making to operate in an increasingly digital environment.”

MNDES accommodates most modern evidence formats, including audio and video files, images, and documents. The exhibits are stored in a secure

platform and are not directly accessible by or visible to the public.

The new application provides many benefits to external court users, judges, and court staff, including:

- Attorneys and self-represented litigants can upload and manage their exhibits from anywhere.
- Parties can display exhibits during remote and in-person court hearings.
- Court clerks can manage exhibits virtually.
- Judges can access exhibits and make notes as needed within the platform.
- Courts can utilize chain-of-custody tracking and other features to securely manage exhibits.
- In the near future, jurors will be able to view digital exhibits during deliberations.

A pilot test of MNDES in four counties resulted in a positive response from users. Users cited the application’s

accessibility, ease of use, and ability to upload multiple files simultaneously. During the pilot test, the courts efficiently displayed exhibits from MNDES during both remote and in-person hearings and trials.

MNDES was successfully piloted and is currently available in Ramsey, Sherburne, and Washington counties. Statewide expansion of the new application will be phased in throughout 2022. An implementation timeline, recorded training, and instructional documents on the new application are available on the [MNDES page](#) of the Judicial Branch website.





## New Facilities, Centralization of Staff Results in More Efficient Services for Scott County



How and where services are delivered by Scott County to its residents has changed significantly over the past few years. Several new facilities have been built, and existing facilities have undergone extensive renovations and updates; the relocation of over 500-plus staff took place within a three-year span. With the support of Scott County staff, the public, and external construction partners (Kraus Anderson/Wold Architects), these projects all came in on time and below budget.

"The successful execution of a \$65 million project weighs heavily upon

those individuals who are committed and dedicated to making a difference," said Dustin Kruger, Scott County Capital Facilities Project Manager. "We had those individuals involved in these projects, which contributed to our success and ultimately made Scott County a leader in providing top-notch services to its citizens."

Scott County sold the Workforce Development Center (located on Canterbury Road) in November 2021. At that time, the County staff and services being provided at that location moved to the main campus in downtown

Shakopee (services such as the Career Force Development Center, Economic Assistance, and Adult Mental Health/Anchor Center). The new locations for these services are better equipped to meet the needs of those Scott County residents looking to tap into these resources.

The new Government Center West (GCW) building – which took the place of the parking lot at the old main entrance to the facility – is now the flagship of the Health and Human Services department, Veterans Services, County Attorney, and Community Cor-



*New Facilities, Centralization of Staff Results in More Efficient Services for Scott County*

*(Continued from page 6)*



**Left to Right, Judges Paula Vraa, Mark Vandelist, Christian Wilton, Charles Webber, Kevin Mark and Caroline Lennon at the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony on March 15, 2022**



rections. “These departments are very well equipped and positioned on the campus to efficiently and effectively manage all the needs of the community,” noted Pam Selvig, Scott County Health and Human Services Director.

The existing Government Center – now called Government Center East

(GCE) – has been renovated top to bottom, receiving an entire overhaul of the HVAC system, updated technology, and new customer service counter (s) on the first floor – greatly increasing the number of customers that can be seen in a given day. The Anchor Center is also located on the first floor of the GCE building, providing a dedicated space to accommodate commu-

nity support programs for adults with mental illness. Transportation staff was also moved to the GCE building from the Public Works campus in Spring Lake Township to enable more collaboration within those key departments that focus on transportation agendas. Environmental Services, Taxation, Employee Relations, Building Inspections, Natural Resources,



*New Facilities, Centralization of Staff Results in More Efficient Services for Scott County*

*(Continued from page 8)*

Parks, Surveyor, and Zoning departments all reside in the GCE building as well. The reoccurring theme focuses on *centralized* services, bringing nearly all County services to one main campus.

With staff moving out of the Public Works building, it presented an opportunity to rework the now available space in that building and offer a more versatile, multi-functional space to meet the needs of several different County initiatives. For example, there will be an expanded space for the Scott County Sheriff's deputies to drop in while out patrolling the County, keeping the communities safe. The space will also allow for an expanded Elections space for the public to stop in and vote during all active election periods; this space is centrally located in Scott County, making it convenient for residents in the more rural areas.

The existing Justice Center/Court House had specific areas that were renovated during this three-year timeframe. A total of two new courtrooms and a large jury assembly area

have been added to better serve the needs of the ever-increasing demands of the court system (a third courtroom was also added to the third floor of the Law Enforcement Center). A new law library was constructed, increasing the available space and resources for the public.

"The opening of Scott County's new and improved Government Center marks a bright and bold milestone in the Court's operations, its mission, and its continued commitment to delivering justice to the citizens of Scott County," said Scott County District Court Judge Christian S. Wilton. "Now aesthetically and functionally improved, this beautiful courthouse offers a central location for Scott County's law library, Veteran Services, Mental Health, and Public Health offices along with much needed additional courtrooms. Courthouses have always been one of the most important buildings in counties like ours, and this courthouse is no exception. It stands for equality and truth and justice. Its doors are open to all regardless of race, gender, religion, or money.

This building shines as an example of government by the people, for the people, and of the people."

All this work was completed while maintaining the key services that Scott County residents depend on each day.

"Scott County would like to thank all residents for their continued patience and support throughout these major changes to our facilities and the way we do business," said County Administrator Lezlie Vermillion. "We will continue to refine our service delivery and appointments as we move forward. *Delivering What Matters* remains at the forefront of everything we do."





## Minnesota Court Records Online (MCRO) Receives President's Award from the Minnesota State Bar Association

On June 30, 2022, the Minnesota Judicial Branch announced that the [Minnesota Court Records Online \(MCRO\)](#) Development and Business Team received the 2022 President's Award from the Minnesota State Bar Association (MSBA). The Award recognizes outstanding support and assistance to the MSBA and its mission.

"The mission of the MSBA is to promote the highest standards of excellence and inclusion within the legal profession, provide valued resources to its members, and strive to improve the law and the equal administration of justice for all," said Jennifer Thompson, President of the MSBA. "This year's recipient of the President's award, the Minnesota Court Records Online Development and Business Team, has supported and assisted the MSBA in living all three tenets of its mission. I am hard-pressed to think of a tool that has had more of an impact on the ways lawyers in Minnesota practice law in the past two and a half years."

MCRO allows the public to search for and retrieve appropriate public court documents without going to a court facility. Users can search for cases using a person's name, business name, attorney name, or bar number, as well as by case number and citation number for any location at any time. The application also features a Register of Actions that includes case events, document index numbers, hearings, parties, and financial information. Additional search functionality, including the ability to search for hearings scheduled on court calendars and to search for monetary judgments, is anticipated to launch later this summer.

"The Minnesota Judicial Branch is honored to receive this distinguished award from the Minnesota State Bar Association," said Minnesota Chief Justice Lorie S. Gildea. "Minnesota Court Records Online is a groundbreaking application that provides greater access, transparency, and convenience for the people we serve."

More than 6 million district court documents have been accessed through MCRO since it launched in March of 2021.

"Minnesota Court Records Online is one of the most notable innovations created by the Judicial Branch," said State Court Administrator Jeff Shorba. "The application and the benefits it provides to attorneys, justice partners, court users, and the media is a testament to the expertise, skills, and dedication of our internal MCRO development and business team that made a vision for greater access and transparency a reality."



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