



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.

Hon. Caroline Lennon
Chief Judge
(952) 496-8200

Brian E. Jones
Judicial District
Administrator
(651) 377-7400

[First Judicial District Public Website](https://www.fjd.mn.gov)

The First District has 36 judges and more than 250 staff with a district average of 95,000 case filings annually in Carver, Dakota, Goodhue, Le Sueur, McLeod, Scott, and Sibley counties

The First Edition

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

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Minnesota Judicial Branch Clears Pandemic-Era Backlog, Receives Highest-Ever Satisfaction Rating

The Minnesota Judicial Branch has officially reduced its major criminal caseload to pre-pandemic levels. This comes on the heels of a new survey results that show the public is extremely satisfied with Minnesota courts.

“Eliminating the pandemic backlog was a vital step toward ensuring courts can continue to deliver timely access to justice to the people of Minnesota,” said Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Natalie Hudson. “Our success in reaching our backlog reduction goal is a testament to the hard work of our district court judges and staff, the ambitious leadership undertaken by the Minnesota Judicial Council, and the strategic support provided by State Court Administration.”

Minnesota’s major criminal pending caseload, which includes felony and gross misdemeanor cases, increased by 40% when the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to in-person hearings. In an effort to reduce the backlog and ensure access to justice, the Minnesota Judicial Council adopted a multi-pronged strategy for reduction. This not only ushered in the use of remote hearings, it also included the hiring of senior judges, referees, and extra

Inside

- 1-2 Minnesota Judicial Branch Clears Pandemic-Era Backlog, Receives Highest-Ever Satisfaction Rating
- 3 Governor Walz Appoints Luis Rangel Morales to Fill First Judicial District Vacancy
- 4 Minnesota Judicial Branch Publishes Annual Report to the Community
- 5 Dakota County Adoptive Families Receiving Support Through Jockey Being Family Backpack Program
- 6-7 Minnesota Judicial Branch Warns Public About Jury Scam



The First Edition

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(Continued from page 1)

support staff, and the hosting of special criminal backlog events, to reduce the number of open criminal cases.

The Branch's efforts to reduce the backlog coincided with exceptional feedback from the public on their satisfaction with the courts.

The Minnesota Judicial Branch Access and Fairness Survey queried court users from August to November 2023 about their experience with the court system. Nearly 15,000 people responded to the survey – twice as many than previous surveys – and reported the highest level of satisfaction since 2008.

"We're incredibly happy with these results," said State Court Administrator Jeff Shorba. "We've worked very hard to make access to justice easier for Minnesotans and it seems people

like the changes."

Notable findings include:

- **Access ratings increased:** The average survey score for questions regarding access to the court was 4.3 (out of 5), the highest average access ratings recorded since the survey began in 2008. The highest access ratings were from attorneys and justice partners appearing remotely, and participants in child protection and treatment court hearings.
- **Fairness rating high among remote respondents:** Survey respondents gave district courts their highest-ever rating for overall fairness, with an average score of 4.2. Fairness ratings for remote respondents (4.3) were significantly higher than for in-person respondents (4.0).

- **Wait-time dissatisfaction down:**

Just 28% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with court wait times. This is down from 47% in 2019.

The survey did point out some areas for improvement, including making the court's website easier to navigate – something the Minnesota Judicial Branch already is addressing.

The Minnesota Judicial Branch conducts the Access and Fairness Survey every three years. The results inform how the Minnesota Judicial Branch sets its strategic and operational plans.

The complete Access and Fairness [Survey report](#) is available on the Minnesota Judicial Branch website, mncourts.gov.



ACCESS TO JUSTICE



Governor Walz Appoints Luis Rangel Morales to Fill First Judicial District Vacancy



On May 28, 2024, Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan announced the appointment of Luis Rangel Morales as District Court Judge in Minnesota's First Judicial District. Rangel Morales will replace the Honorable Shawn M. Moynihan and will be chambered in Hastings in Dakota County.

"It is my pleasure to appoint Luis Rangel Morales to the First Judicial District," said Governor Walz. "Appearing before the court is an intimidating experience for everyone, but Mr. Rangel Morales has proven throughout his career how empathy

and compassion can ease those anxieties while also ensuring the equitable administration of justice. This skillset will be invaluable as a judge for the people of Dakota County." "Luis Rangel Morales will be a remarkable judge," said Lieutenant Governor Flanagan. "His exceptional legal acumen, lived experience, and public defense background will bring a unique and needed perspective to this important role. I look forward to seeing all the great work he will do for this court and community."

Minnesota's First Judicial District consists of Carver, Dakota, Goodhue, Le Sueur, McLeod, Scott, and Sibley counties.

Luis Rangel Morales is a staff attorney and director of community engagement for the Neighborhood Justice Center, where he represents low-income community members facing criminal charges in Dakota, Ramsey, and Washington counties. He has also served as defense counsel for the Ramsey County Veterans Treat-

ment Court and Ramsey County DUI Court. Rangel Morales's community involvement includes serving as chair of the St. Paul Planning Commission and vice-chair of St. Paul's Board of Zoning Appeals. He has also volunteered with organizations helping at-risk youth. Rangel Morales received his B.A. from the University of St. Thomas and his J.D. from the University of Minnesota Law School.

For more information about the judicial selection process, please visit the [Governor's Judicial Appointments webpage](#).



Minnesota Judicial Branch Publishes Annual Report to the Community

The Minnesota Judicial Branch has published its [2023 Annual Report to the Community](#).

The Annual Report details the significant efforts of the Minnesota Judicial Branch throughout the past year to improve and enhance the delivery of justice in Minnesota. It also provides annual updates from judicial districts and appellate courts, including case filing statistics.

"This is an exciting time of innovation and evolution in our courts, as we continue to leverage the experiences we gained during the COVID-19 pandemic to modernize and improve how we serve the people of Minnesota," Chief Justice Natalie Hudson writes in the report.

"I could not be more proud of what we have accomplished emerging from the pandemic, and the process we've made in 2023," writes State Court Administrator Jeff Shorba. We are the most innovative and forward-thinking court system in the country, and I look forward to continuing to step into the future and embracing a

new wave of innovations and technologies to deliver the best possible system of justice to the people of Minnesota."

One of the items highlighted in the Annual Report is the First Judicial District receiving the 2023 State Court Administrator Team Award.

The judges and staff of the First District received the Team Award for their efforts to become the first district to eliminate the entirety of their Major Criminal case pandemic backlog, as well as their ongoing work to help the Judicial Branch meet its statewide backlog reduction goals.

The District employed a comprehensive strategy to tackle its backlog, including setting aggressive Major Criminal calendars, leveraging their central assignment system to move judges around to avoid canceling or rescheduling hearings, and collaborating extensively with local justice partners. District Administration would send weekly emails to judges and court administrators containing a status report on their backlog progress, and court administration would

email judges on a regular basis highlighting cases that were beyond their timing objectives.

"This is a such a great example of how collaboration and teamwork can help us achieve even the toughest of goals," State Court Administrator Jeff Shorba said when presenting the award.

At the time the Minnesota Judicial Council set the backlog reduction goal in November 2021, the First District had a backlog of more than 1,300 cases. Just one year later, that backlog was completely eliminated, and the First Judicial District became the first district in the state to reach its backlog goal.

The 2023 Annual Report, along with previous versions, is available on the [Publications and Reports](#) page of the Judicial Branch website.



Dakota County Adoptive Families Receiving Support Through Jockey Being Family Backpack Program

Since the summer of 2023, through collaboration from the Dakota County juvenile court judges, court administration, and Social Services, state ward children and their adoptive families have been receiving ongoing support from the Jockey Being Family foundation.

The Jockey Being Family foundation is a non-profit 501c(3) that was established in 2005 by Debra S. Waller. This foundation strives to support and strengthen adopted families, not only at the time of adoption, but also long term. They consider adoption to be a lifelong journey. In 2007, the foundation began providing teddy bears to the children.

The foundation grew and became more established across the country. In 2015, the Jockey Backpack Pro-

gram was launched. The Jockey Backpack Program provides post adoption services to state ward children and their families. The children and siblings receive a monogrammed backpack that includes the beloved foundation teddy bear, a blanket, and books based on each child's age, interests, and family status. The parents receive a tote filled with resources and contacts to support the family in their lifelong journey.

Since the foundation's inception, the Jockey Being Family foundation has provided support to over 405,000 families. Additionally, through the Jockey Backpack Program, there have been over 98,000 backpacks donated to state ward children and siblings and 54,000 totes provided to parents.

The collaboration between the agencies in Dakota County has resulted in the backpacks being ordered and delivered to the courthouse prior to the adoption hearing. At the time of the finalization, the juvenile court judges and Social Services present the backpacks and totes to the children, siblings, and parents. This program and feedback from the families has been positive.

To quote the Debra S. Waller, founder of Jockey Being Family, "with your help we can keep the promise of a "forever family" alive for thousands of children and families." For more information on the Jockey Being Family and Jockey Backpack Program, please visit www.jockeybeingfamily.com.



Minnesota Judicial Branch Warns Public About Jury Scam



A national scam in which individuals pose as law enforcement officers and falsely claim there is a warrant for the recipient's arrest is now happening in Minnesota.

The scam, which claims people are in imminent danger of arrest for missing jury duty, is designed to create panic and pressure victims into providing personal information or making immediate payments to avoid arrest.

The Minnesota Judicial Branch became aware that scammers were targeting Minnesotans after the Duluth courthouse received a panicked call from a victim. The person told the court she received a call from someone claiming to be a police officer with an arrest warrant for her signed

by local judge. When the victim started asking the caller questions, the caller became belligerent and mean. The victim hung up and called the court, which informed her the call was a scam.

"Although jury duty is an important civic duty, neither police nor the Minnesota Judicial Branch will ever call you and demand money if you do not respond to your jury summons," said Minnesota State Court Administrator Jeff Shorba.



Scam Warning Signs

- **Unsolicited Contact:** Scammers call or email without any prior notification, claiming they are a police officer and that you have an arrest warrant for missing jury duty. In some cases, scammers "spoof" the telephone number so it looks like they are call-

ing from the court or from a law enforcement agency.

- **High-Pressure Tactics:** Scammers use fear and urgency to compel you to act quickly, threatening arrest or legal action if their demands are not met.
- **Request for Personal Information:** Scammers may ask for personal information such as Social Security numbers, bank account details, or credit card numbers.
- **Demand for Immediate Payment:** Scammers may insist on immediate payment to avoid being arrested.

What to Do If You Are Contacted



- **Do Not Provide Personal Information:** Never give out personal or financial information over the phone



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(Continued from page 6)

or through email to unsolicited contacts.

- **Verify the Claim:** Contact your [local jury office](#) or law enforcement agency directly to verify if there are any legitimate issues regarding jury duty or warrants.
- **Report the Incident:** If you believe you have been targeted by this scam, report it to your local law enforcement agency and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) at www.ftc.gov/complaint.

Official Procedures for Jury Duty Notifications

Jury duty summons are sent via mail, not by phone or email. And while failure to report for jury duty can result in penalties, the court will never call you to demand money.

Likewise, you may search for arrest warrant information in the [Minnesota Court Records Online](#) database.

The Minnesota Judicial Branch is committed to protecting the community from fraud and scams and urge the public to remain vigilant and informed about the tactics used by scammers to avoid falling victim to these deceitful practices.



The First Edition Editorial Team:

Editor: Brian E. Jones

Formatting Editor: Roseanne Juris

Comments and story ideas may be submitted to:

brian.jones@courts.state.mn.us

