



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 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 Adopts Historic Framework for District Court Hearings

The Minnesota Judicial Council voted to adopt a new district court hearing framework that will reshape the way district courts conduct in-person and remote hearings to deliver justice in Minnesota.

The new framework aims to bring statewide consistency to how district courts hold hearings in both criminal and non-criminal matters, while at the same time respecting judicial discretion and providing local flexibility.

“This new hearing framework builds on all of the lessons we learned from the pandemic,” Minnesota Chief Justice Natalie E. Hudson said. “We gathered feedback from more than 5,500 judicial officers, staff, justice partners, litigants, and members of the public because we are committed to listening to the people we serve and delivering the highest-quality system of justice to the people of Minnesota.”

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The new framework includes three primary components:

Default hearing settings: either remote or in-person

- All hearings in court cases will be assigned a default setting that is either in-person or remote based on case type – for example: criminal, non-criminal. District courts will hold hearings according to those default settings unless the judicial officer orders a case-by-case exception or a deviation plan is in place.

A process for case-by-case exceptions to default hearing settings

- Judicial officers will continue to be able to deviate from the default hearing settings based upon the needs of a specific case without issuing an order or providing findings. A request for a case-by-case exception may be made by a party or initiated by the court.

A process for agency, judicial district, county, or court division to deviate from the default hearing setting

- Agencies, judicial districts, counties, and court divisions will have the ability to request a deviation from the statewide default hearing settings under certain circumstances – for example, a district court may want to hold certain hearings remotely instead of in-person to increase access to justice partner services or legal representation. These requests will be reviewed and approved by the Judicial Council.

The new framework and [policy](#) will go into effect on Feb. 3, 2025, to give district courts time to adjust and schedule hearings based on the new default hearing settings.

Minnesota's district courts began widely hearing cases in online courtrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, the Minnesota Judicial Branch con-

ducted numerous surveys and focus groups with justice partners and court users and found widespread support for the continued use of remote hearings. In a statewide survey of court hearing participants, remote hearing attendees reported fewer barriers to attending their hearings than those who attended in person, such as taking time off work, travel, and impacts on their physical or mental health.

As a result of that positive feedback, the Minnesota Judicial Council [implemented the oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Policy](#) in June 2022. The oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative Policy provided a temporary framework for how district courts would use both in-person and remote hearings to hear and resolve cases. Today's adoption of a permanent district court hearing framework reflects both the Judicial Branch's commitment to using both in-person and remote hearings to deliver justice in Minnesota, as well as all of the lessons learned and feedback gathered over the past two years under the oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative.



Theodora Gaïtas Sworn In as Minnesota Supreme Court Associate Justice

The Honorable Theodora Gaïtas took the oath of office as the Minnesota Supreme Court's newest associate justice in a formal ceremony at the Minnesota History Center on Monday, Sept. 16.

"I am honored to stand before you today to pledge my commitment to serving the people of Minnesota as an associate justice of the Supreme Court," Justice Gaïtas said. "I am also deeply grateful – thank you Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan for giving me this opportunity."

Gov. Tim Walz praised Justice Gaïtas' intellect and compassion, saying she is an excellent choice to fill the seat vacated by Justice Margaret Chutich, who retired in July.

"I can tell you with absolute confidence that Justice Gaïtas is the right person for this moment," Gov. Walz said. "I know that the state's high court and the people of Min-

nesota will be well served."

Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Natalie Hudson echoed that sentiment. "Justice Gaïtas is a remarkable choice for our court – she has been on the front lines of our justice system in many roles, always bringing her keen intellect and commitment to fairness and equity," she said. "We are incredibly fortunate to have her bring that experience and unwavering dedication to justice to our highest court."

Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, Court of Appeals Judge Keala Ede, and attorney Julie Matonich also spoke on behalf of Justice Gaïtas. Clea Gaïtas Sur, Justice Gaïtas' daughter, performed a "Unity Waltz" she composed in honor of her mother's investiture.

Prior to joining the Supreme Court, Justice Gaïtas served on the Court of Appeals for four years and as a

judge in the Fourth Judicial District for two years. Before her appointment to the bench, she was in private practice with Matonich Law and served as an appellate public defender with the Office of the Minnesota Appellate Public Defender. Justice Gaïtas is a 1994 *cum laude* graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School.

Justice Gaïtas joined the Supreme Court on Aug. 1. The court held a private swearing-in ceremony on that day.



Supreme Court Orders Mandatory Use of Minnesota Digital Exhibit System

The Minnesota Supreme Court has [ordered](#) the use of the [Minnesota Digital Exhibit System](#) for the submission of all electronic exhibits, including documents, photographs, audio files, and video files, effective Jan. 1, 2025.

Summary of Key Requirements

Beginning Jan. 1, 2025:

- All electronic exhibits must be submitted using MNDES.
- ◊ Exceptions will only be made if a party requests, and the presiding judge permits, an alternative submission method for good cause shown.
- ◊ Digital Exhibits containing sexual content or nudity, as defined in [Public Access Rule](#) 4, subd. 1(s), or live links to the same, must not be submitted using MNDES and must be submitted by conventional means.
- Only digital exhibit files that are on the [MNDES Acceptable File Type List](#) may be submitted and parties are required to make

reasonable efforts to convert any digital exhibit to a format that is on the MNDES Acceptable File Type List.

- ◊ If permission is granted to submit an exhibit outside of MNDES, the party submitting the exhibit must ensure that a proprietary player and/or instructions necessary to access the digital file are provided for public access and appellate review.
- The new order implements the Supreme Court's [amendment](#) to Rule 26.03, subd. 20(1) of the Rules of Criminal Procedure that requires the court to permit received audio and video exhibits into the jury deliberation room unless the court determines that doing so is not feasible, or that prejudice to a party is likely following an objection by the party.
- ◊ In civil cases, sending audio and video exhibits to the deliberation room remains permissive.

- Court staff will track all exhibits submitted via MNDES and provide them electronically in cases on appeal.
- Court Administration may continue to provide parties, litigants, or other participants officially affiliated with a case in district court or on appeal with access to evidentiary exhibits by email or other means of electronic transmission.
- ◊ Court Administration may only provide public access to evidentiary exhibits by email or other means of electronic transmission if expressly approved by the presiding judge.

Please review the [Supreme Court's August 30, 2024, order](#) for additional detail on these provisions.

Resources and More Information

To help facilitate a successful transition to MNDES, we are committed to supporting you and providing the



Supreme Court Orders Mandatory Use of Minnesota Digital Exhibit System

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resources you need to comply with these new requirements:

- Comprehensive training materials and resources for using MNDES effectively, including guidance on submitting exhibits,

are available on the [Evidence and Exhibits page](#) of the Minnesota Judicial Branch website, under the Minnesota Digital Exhibit System (MNDES) tab.

- If you have technical questions

about MNDES, contact our [customer support team](#)



First District County Fairs Feature ‘Weddings on a Stick’

County fairs in the First Judicial District added a new attraction this year: weddings!

Judges from Dakota, Goodhue, and McLeod counties performed free weddings at all three county fairs during August. In total, they married almost three dozen couples.

“The feedback we received from the McLeod County Fair Board and public was amazing,” said Karen Messner, McLeod County Court Administrator.

The idea for hosting weddings at

county fairs came about as a result of the Minnesota Judicial Branch hosting a booth at the State Fair for several years. Judges have been eager to marry couples at the State Fair, so the Branch thought county fairs would be a good place to give the concept a try. The First District ran with the idea, scheduling 34 weddings over the course of all three fairs.

“It was a great outreach opportunity for the Judicial Branch and a fun and unique experience for the couples,” Messner said. “One fair board member indicated that it was so fun to have

the couples walking around the fair in their wedding attire.”

Judges in Goodhue County performed weddings in the fairgrounds’ beautiful garden, surrounding couples with an abundance of flowers and plants during their ceremonies.

The county fair wedding experience was so positive – for couples, judges, and the county fairs – that all three county fairs have asked judges to marry couples again next year.



Governor Walz Appoints Christopher Bates and Matthew Schmidt to Fill First Judicial District Vacancies

On October 21, 2024, Governor Tim Walz announced the appointments of Christopher Bates and Matthew Schmidt as District Court Judges in Minnesota's First Judicial District. These seats will be chambered in Hastings in Dakota County.

Christopher Bates will replace the Honorable Janet L. Barke Cain.

"It is my pleasure to appoint Christopher Bates to the Dakota County bench," said Governor Walz. "Whether working to improve outcomes for victims experiencing domestic violence or helping future generations reach their full potential, his focus has always been on improving lives. He will bring a valuable perspective to this court and the entire First Judicial District."

Matthew Schmidt will replace the Honorable Timothy J. McManus.

"Matthew Schmidt will be a remarkable judge," said

Governor Walz. "As an established criminal defense attorney and a long-time resident of this community, he is ready to do the work of the people and continue moving the needle towards justice."

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

About Christopher Bates



Christopher Bates is the deputy director and chief general counsel of the Minnesota Cannabis Expungement Board. He previously served as an assistant county attorney for the Ramsey County Attor-

ney's Office, an assistant city attorney for the Minneapolis City Attorney's Office, and an assistant county attorney for the McLeod County Attorney's Office. Bates's community involvement includes serving on the board of directors for Mental Health Resources, volunteering with the Boys and Girls Club of the Twin Cities, and serving as a mock trial judge with the Minnesota State Bar Association. He earned his B.A. and J.D. from Hamline University.

About Matthew Schmidt



Matthew Schmidt is a partner at Ho & Schmidt, LLP and a part-time public defender in the First Judicial District Public Defender's Office. He was previously a law clerk for



Governor Walz Appoints Christopher Bates and Matthew Schmidt to Fill First Judicial District Vacancies

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the Honorable Joy D. Bartscher on the Second Judicial District. Schmidt's community involvement includes being a member of the South St. Paul Lions Club, where he volunteers for elementary vision

screenings and helps raise funds for local athletic teams and the K-9 police fund. He also volunteers with his sons' sports teams. Schmidt earned his B.A. from Gustavus Adol-

phus College and J.D. from Hamline University School of Law. For more information about the judicial selection process, please visit the [Governor's Judicial Appointments webpage](#).

2024 Performance Measures Report Published

The Court Research Office has published the Judicial Branch's [2024 Performance Measures Report](#). The report is posted on the [Publications and Reports](#) page of the Judicial Branch website.

This is the 16th annual Performance Measures Report, and it contains data and results related to the Judicial Branch's core goals:

- Access to Justice;
- Timeliness;
- Integrity and Accountability;
- Excellence;

- Fairness and Equity; and
- Quality Court Workplace Environment.

Positive highlights from the report include:

- The elimination of the pandemic backlog of Major Criminal cases.
- Improved court customer ratings in the 2023 Access and Fairness Survey.
- An overall clearance rate of 100% across all district court case

groups, marking the fourth straight year the Judicial Branch has met its overall clearance rate goal.

The contents of the report are organized into four sections:

- Executive Summary;
- Using Performance Measures for Administration;
- Review of Key Results and Measures; and
- Data Details (Appendix).

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