



MINNESOTA JUDICIAL BRANCH

Second Judicial District

Equal Justice Committee Update and Community Dialogue Report

October 11, 2017

Introduction

In 2010, the Minnesota Judicial Branch created the Committee for Equality and Justice. The Committee for Equality and Justice is charged with working collaboratively across the Judicial Branch to advance efforts to eliminate bias from court operations, promote equal access to the court, and inspire a high level of trust and public confidence in the Minnesota Judicial Branch.

As part of the FY2016-2017 Minnesota Judicial Branch Strategic Plan, the Committee for Equality and Justice adopted a goal that each individual judicial district would begin judicial community outreach to allow court users the opportunity to describe their experiences and provide recommendations to address issues regarding equality and fairness.

Community Dialogue

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.

On October 11, 2017, the Second Judicial District held a Community Dialogue at the Amherst Wilder Foundation in Saint Paul. Seventeen judges attended the session. Representatives from the Ramsey County Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the Saint Paul City Attorney's Office, Ramsey County Community Corrections, the Second Judicial District Interpreter's Office, and the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office were also present.

Over 120 people attended the Community Dialogue. The Equal Justice Committee credits the location of the event as a key piece of the successful turnout. The Wilder Foundation was deliberately chosen as a venue because it is at the intersection of the Summit-University, Frogtown and Rondo neighborhoods. The building has free parking in a nearby ramp and is on major bus lines in the Central Corridor. In addition, the Wilder Foundation's space was flexible enough that the EJC could accommodate all of the attendees when more than double the number of anticipated participants arrived.

The Equal Justice Committee also developed an outreach and communication plan that included both social media and traditional media. The event was also advertised in the Pioneer Press and Highland Villager. The flyer used for the event is attached to this report.

Upon arrival, Judge Guthmann welcomed the participants and invited them to sit at any table with a judge, a moderator and a note taker. Because of the high participation rate of Second District judges, attendees were able to have one-on-one contact with a judge at every table. The agenda used for the discussion is attached to this report.

The responses to the questions were very wide ranging. A comprehensive list of the recorded feedback is attached to this report.

In general, the issues raised at the session can be summarized into the following broad categories:

1. Judges heard attendees' concerns about racial disparities in the criminal justice system and high incarceration rates for people of color.
2. Judges heard concerns about there being too many active warrants in Ramsey County and the need for warrant reduction and forgiveness.
3. Judges heard from people who thought that cases in the justice system felt too rushed, and then judges also heard from others that their cases took too long. Several attendees advocated strongly for some court hearings to be held in the evenings and weekends, when litigants are not at work.
4. Judges heard about the need for more high-quality juvenile programming/alternatives, in particular for girls.
5. Judges heard a significant amount of concerns about how the courthouse buildings -both the main courthouse/government center and the Juvenile Family Justice Center- are confusing and unwelcoming, particularly for non-English speakers.

Participants also offered positive feedback about the location and the setup of the community dialogue session, though some were frustrated that the discussions were too loud and it was difficult to hear.

Ongoing Initiatives

To address some of the ongoing issues raised at the community dialogue session, the Equal Justice Committee, with the support of the full Ramsey County Bench, is committed to taking the following next steps:

- 1) The Equal Justice Committee will continue to support efforts to end the disparity between people of color and white people in the criminal justice system. Such efforts include a commitment to diversion for certain low-level offenses, examining the use of "sign and release" warrants, supporting the implementation of a validated pretrial release tool, actively participating in the work of the Robina Institute on Probation Violations, and reexamining the assessment of fines and fees for certain moving violations.
- 2) The Equal Justice Committee will co-sponsor a warrant reduction day, scheduled for April of 2018.

- 3) The Equal Justice Committee will continue to support the work of the attorneys, particularly prosecutors and public defenders. The Equal Justice Committee will also look at ways to incorporate principles of procedural justice that might provide better transparency and clarity for those involved in the justice system. Moreover, the Equal Justice Committee will research and monitor other court scheduling models, including evening or weekend schedules.
- 4) The Equal Justice Committee will support the work of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative to encourage high-quality, evidence-based culturally competent programming for juveniles.
- 5) The Equal Justice Committee will host an “Open Courthouse Day” in May 2018, to solicit feedback from the public about how our space can be more inviting and welcoming to the communities we serve.
- 6) The Equal Justice Committee will engage in continued community outreach, including targeted listening sessions for specific communities, including our Hmong and Karen populations.



Please Join

A COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

with Ramsey County District

Court Judges

Wednesday, October 11, 2017
6:00—7:30 p.m.
Wilder Foundation, 451 Lexington Parkway
St. Paul

Meet with Ramsey County District Court Judges to:

- .Share your opinion of how the court system works
- .Discuss ideas for advancing equity, equality, access, and fairness in the courts

Sponsored by the Minnesota Judicial Branch Committee for Equality and Justice and the Second Judicial District Equal Justice Committee.

Second Judicial District Community Dialogue
Wednesday, October 11, 6:00-7:30
Wilder Foundation
Saint Paul, MN

Goals

- To provide an opportunity for community members to share thoughts, concerns, and experiences with the Ramsey County Courts.
 - To hear from people who have interacted with the court system directly, or have friends/family who have interacted with the court system;
 - To hear what is and isn't working in terms of:
 - user-friendliness;
 - quality of service; and
 - the perception of fair treatment.
 - To use what is learned to help the courts ensure residents' needs are met and that rights are respected when interacting with the Ramsey County court system.
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Schedule (*times are plus or minus 5 minutes, depending on the crowd*)

6:00 - 6:05 p.m. – Welcome and Getting Settled

6:05 - 6:10 Convening and Overview

- Full-group facilitator (likely Judge Guthmann) will let the room know that it's time to begin, will introduce all of the judges in attendance and will go over:
 - Why we are having this session;
 - What we hope to result from it; and
 - Area of focus (the courts – not the police, not other county programs/services), bring participants' attention to the handout.
 - The core questions that will be asked at each table

6:10 - 7:00 (50 min.) Small Group Discussion (plain bold text is for volunteer facilitators;
italicized bold text is for judges)

- **Welcome, I'm (first and last name) and I am a volunteer facilitator for this small group. My job tonight is to make sure we hear from each person at this table – I'll be asking questions and listening to your thoughts and ideas. It's also my job to keep us focused during the time we have together.**
- ***And I'm (first and last name) and I am a judge in Ramsey County. I'll be listening and taking notes to make sure your thoughts and ideas are shared with all the other Ramsey County judges and court staff so that we can make improvements based on what we learn from you.***
- Facilitator to make some sort of tone-setting statement about having a respectful and meaningful conversation – language TBD.
- Discussion Questions:
Try to remember the first time you dealt with court staff or a judge. What was the situation and how did it make you feel? (follow-up once all participants have read their statements, asking the full small group: what do you think the staff or judge could have done differently in these situations?)

When have you felt most like your needs have been met by the people involved in the courts?
When have your needs not been met?

When have you felt most respected by the people involved in the courts? When have you felt least respected?

What about after you were interacting with the court system? How well did the support or resources you received for next steps meet your needs? If support or resources were not provided, what do you think would have been helpful?

Have you accessed court services online, via the Second Judicial District's Self Help Desk, through the Ramsey County Law Library or any other service offering guidance or legal assistance? Were those services accessible and helpful? Why or why not?

Have you or someone you're close to had contact with the juvenile justice system specifically? If so, are there ways we can improve our work in that area?

Are there any other concerns or thoughts that you came here to share with us today related to the courts? How do you think your concerns might be addressed?

Do you have suggestions for how the court may improve access to justice, make the system more user-friendly or increase the likelihood that residents feel they were treated fairly?

7:00 - 7:15 p.m. Small Group Reporting

- Large-group facilitator will reconvene everyone as a large group.
- Judges at each small group will be asked to share one or two themes that emerged from their small groups – 1-2 min per table

7:15 - 7:30 p.m. Closing

- Full-group facilitator will close out the session, letting participants know the next steps of what will be done with the input from this session, and directing participants to complete the feedback forms.
- Full-group facilitator will thank participants for coming and adjourn.