

The WATCH Chronicle



WATCH is a court monitoring and judicial policy non-profit located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. WATCH works to make the justice system more responsive to crimes of violence against women and children, focusing on greater safety for victims of violence and greater accountability for violent offenders.

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WATCH report examines Ramsey County Criminal Courts

The 50-page report covers judicial performance, courtroom decorum and much more.

By Mark Wollemann

WATCH’s newest report, which focused on Ramsey County Criminal Courts, clearly documents the strong commitment by participants in that court system to assure appropriate responses in cases involving violence against women and children.

WATCH’s newest report entitled “First Look at Ramsey County Criminal Courts” is a 17-month study of cases involving domestic assault, criminal sexual conduct, child abuse and sex trafficking. The report found judges, attorneys and staffers doing their best in a challenging environment that would benefit from the establishment of consistent standards.

The 50-page report was produced by WATCH Program Manager Ellen Sackrison and addresses judicial performance and communication, courtroom decorum, attorney performance, efficiency and timeliness, defendant accountability and court offered childcare services.

WATCH believes that although there are many examples of positive observations from volunteers, there is room for improvement in terms of Ramsey County’s adherence to best practices and its overall responses involving violence against women and children.

The study’s findings were generated from volunteer observations of 647 court hearings from Jan. 1, 2016 through May 31, 2017. WATCH’s overall recommendation flowing from the report, which was released in October, is that Ramsey County establish “a Steering Committee of all stakeholders.” The ultimate goal of that committee would be to incorporate the report’s



Ellen Sackrison, above, WATCH’s Program Manager, authored the organization’s latest report, on the Ramsey County Criminal Courts.

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observations and recommendations into a “best-practices document” for Ramsey County’s handling of domestic violence cases.

In addition to creating a document to establish consistent performance throughout the system, here are some of the key recommendations from the report:

- Create an environment in which court personnel can “hold each other accountable” when there is a breach of professional decorum or a disruption of courtroom protocol.
- Develop a standard for judicial announcements so they can be heard throughout the courtroom.
- Create and make available to judges a standard description of a Domestic Abuse No-Contact Order (DANCO) so that judges issue rulings and communicate with defendants and victims in a consistent way.
- Develop a “protocol for enforcement of Minnesota Statute Section 518B.02, Subdivision 1, which requires defendants convicted of a domestic-related offense to complete domestic abuse treatment/counseling.”

“Since its founding in 1992, WATCH has advocated for transparency across the judicial system,” the Report’s introduction states. “Particularly when it comes to crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and sex trafficking.”

WATCH published [its first report in 1994](#), about Hennepin County’s handling of these types of cases and this report builds on that tradition. The organization’s most recent report, the [2016 report on sex trafficking](#), was its look beyond Hennepin County and into Ramsey County. It explored the handling of sex-trafficking cases in both Hennepin and Ramsey counties from 2012-2016.

After studying Ramsey court cases, “we decided we wanted to do a similar report” to the 1994 Hennepin County report,” Sackrison said. “We wanted to lay the groundwork for any future research. ... We wanted to see where Ramsey County is in terms of how they handle cases involving violence against women and children.”

Sackrison said that Ramsey County is doing many things well in cases of domestic violence and, especially, sex trafficking. “But we know that they don’t have a ‘best-practices document’ in Ramsey County,” she said, “and that’s what this report essentially recommends.”

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Ellen Sackrison,
WATCH Program
Manager

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Improving courtroom decorum is among the report's key findings. WATCH volunteers, much like courtroom visitors or family members of a defendant or victim, are interested observers. They notice when a lawyer makes an off-hand comment, when a judge seems bored or dismissive, or when a court officer ignores a confused victim looking for help.

"The people who work in the system are in the courtroom every day," Sackrison said. "They treat it as their office, but they need to remember that there are people sitting there who can listen and overhear your conversations."

"If you're a victim or a victim advocate or just a regular person in court, it can be pretty shocking. ... We want to remind people that this isn't your home; it's not your office. ... That there are people in the courtroom who are there for the first time."

There are physical barriers to improving the experience for visitors and courtroom employees alike. From getting judges to always use microphones so they can be heard throughout the courtroom, to setting aside areas for attorneys to meet with clients in an area that doesn't cause distraction to observers.

"Creating an atmosphere of respect, I would say," would be the goal, Sackrison said. "It's research-proven that even if somebody doesn't agree with the outcome of a case, if they were treated with respect, they're going to respect the decision more."

Court monitoring report

Volunteers offer courtroom insights

Have you ever wondered what WATCH volunteers observe on a daily basis in court? Each volunteer is encouraged during their shift to share what they thought was the most interesting observation that day, and what they liked and disliked.

One of the benefits of observing the judicial processes in-person is learning how complex it is for our court system to navigate cases of domestic violence and sexual assault. The volunteers' comments show that these issues are not black and white.

While attending court you could see a victim who appeals for charges to be dismissed, and another time a defendant who pleads guilty seemingly to see his family faster. WATCH volunteers regularly leave court realizing with greater clarity how crimes affect not only those directly involved but their families, too.



The current Ramsey County Courthouse building was opened in 1932.

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Every day in the courtroom, WATCH volunteers observe the great work being done, along with sharing their thoughts about potential improvements.

Most Interesting

“The judges’ consistent encouragement and praise for defendants, and the failure to even once mention the effect of the defendant’s behavior on the victims. Not surprising but still discouraging.”

“The defendant was more worried about his son than his case. He was willing to take a plea to see his son sooner.”

“It was interesting to see how court handled cases involving translation. It added complexity to the case and almost seemed to disadvantage the defendant. Attorneys seemed a bit insensitive to non-English speakers. It was also interesting to see how social media was emphasized on No Contact Orders.”

Praise

“Judge Kappelhoff is a great addition to the bench and seems like he would help improve the court system.”

“Judge Bernhardson was very concerned with victim’s safety, the efficiency of the process (trying to settle when possible) but also remained patient/neutral with defendants and seemed to also have their best interest at heart. Very organized courtroom.”

“In this experience, I observed court personnel truly making an effort to address and understand all individual needs. In addition, judge did a good job by clearly stating sentencing orders. Court personnel did a good job updating the audience about which case was next.”

“The prosecutor did a very good job of asking difficult questions to a vulnerable victim in a tactful manner.”

Improvement

“No one really represents the victim, the judge feels the defendant’s pain but not the victim’s.”

“I would like to see more transparency in these court cases. For instance, I didn’t understand why the charges were lowered and dismissed.”

“I dislike the fact that the judge told the defendant, who was being sentenced for using a minor in sexual performance, that they are not a ‘horrible person.’ I understand the anxiety about facing prison time, but I do not believe comforting a sex offender about what he did is a useful courtroom procedure.”



Volunteers and interns needed

WATCH is a court monitoring and research organization based in Hennepin County. It is focused on improving the justice system’s response to crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect and human trafficking so victimized women and children can rebuild their lives. Its secondary aim is to create a more informed public.

Position description: Volunteers visit courtrooms in Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Ramsey County (St. Paul) and Washington County (Stillwater) to observe and take notes on cases pertaining to violence against women and children. Volunteers fill out WATCH forms that are provided, and turn them into the WATCH office after each shift.

WATCH volunteer shifts are Monday through Friday, either 8:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m., or 12:45-4 p.m.

Online training sessions are required. Applicants must fill out a volunteer application, interview with the Program Manager and pass a background check.

How to apply: Please contact the Program Manager Ellen Sackrison at watchvolunteer@watchmn.org.

There is a link to our application in the volunteer section on our website <http://www.watchmn.org/>.

In the news

Newspaper's reports on violent police



In the second part of a four-part Star Tribune series called “Shielded by the Badge,” police in Minnesota acknowledge that cops who are accused of domestic violence rarely face sanctions. The newspaper’s report found that police officials and victim’s advocates interviewed for the four-part series said it’s a significant problem. They said officers who are violent at home should not be on the job. “You don’t want criminals in uniform,” said a retired Nashville police lieutenant. The story is [here](#). You can read all four parts of the series [here](#).

A shocking rise of domestic violence

An editorial in the Star Tribune pointed out with alarm the shocking increase in deaths linked to domestic violence. At the time of the editorial, in early October, there had been 35 deaths linked to domestic violence, nearly double the number reported for all of 2012. The newspaper called it “shocking” and something “that ought to outrage Minnesotans.” The editorial concluded that it will “take an ongoing commitment” to tackle the issue, including “legislation, community and individual action.” You can read the editorial is [here](#).

Clothesline project of Winona

The Women’s Resource Center of Winona highlighted the human stories behind domestic violence as part of its annual Clothesline Project — a clothesline with decorated T-shirts bearing the stories of those who died from domestic violence in Minnesota in the past year. This year’s Clothesline Project was assembled with help from students in the women’s, gender and sexuality program at Winona State University. (The Safe Haven program at the Family and Children’s Center of Winona is the center’s main partner on the project.) More on that story, [here](#).

How can you help the justice system become more responsive to crimes of violence against women and children?

- You can share the **WATCH** mission and vision with your family and friends!
- You can boldly address issues of domestic violence prevention with those closest to you!
- You can volunteer to be a **WATCH** court monitor! Click [here](#) for the link to apply!
- You can graciously offer a financial donation to help support our work on behalf of the entire community!

Contact Nick Cichowicz to learn more:
nick@watchmn.org