

Hear it From the Judge

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Perhaps this is the last place you expected to hear from the Judge. Most of us never have the need to come into a Minnesota Courtroom unless we are called for jury duty or appear in Conciliation Court. Yet, daily your Minnesota Judges are performing very important and difficult tasks involving critical issues that affect the lives of citizens, many of which may be your friends or neighbors. Judges apply the laws, which are passed by the legislature or based upon prior Supreme Court decisions, to specific cases which come before them. Though these decisions are very important to the individual parties who appear in Court, there exists little public exposure or explanation of the laws and procedures within which Judges must operate. That is the point at which this new column will come in.

My goal is to write articles which help to explain why and how Judges make decisions, the procedures which apply to the legal process, the role of the various participants in this process, and your role as citizens who “own” the government – including the judicial branch – within which Judges operate. You may also be interested to learn how one becomes a Judge, what are the qualifications to become an effective Judge, and how do we re-elect Judges. You may also ponder as to why we never hear or see the Judges in the newspaper or on TV and why Judges do not take the opportunity to explain their decisions once these decision appear in the press.

Among the questions you may have, and for which it is the goal in this column to answer, are the following:

How do I bring my claim in conciliation Court?

If I win in Conciliation Court, will I get my money?

How or why does a Judge decide to set bail in a criminal case?

Why do I get picked for jury duty?

Why does the Court process take so long?

Why do we need jurors and what is a jury of my peers?

What happens to children who need protection?

Why is it that Judges do not explain their decisions in the newspaper?

How does a Judge decide to sentence a person to jail or prison?

How is child support determined?

How can we settle the case “out of court?”

Why are judges worried about courtroom security?

Why do we not see TV cameras in the Courtroom?

How does the Judge make her/his decision?

Can I appear in Court without an attorney?

What does the Court of Appeals and Supreme Court do?

The Minnesota Judicial Branch is a separate and co-equal branch along with the Legislative and Executive Branches. There are currently 288 Judges in our 87 counties. There are also 19 Court of Appeals Judges and 7 Supreme Court Justices.

One could walk into nearly any courthouse throughout the state on any day and witness the judicial process in action. Yet, for most of us, there is no reason to enter the courthouse unless we have separate business to transact such as to pay our property taxes or renew our driver's license. Notwithstanding our lack of personal experience with the Judicial Branch, it is a critical function of government as established by our Founders which the citizens deserve and should expect.

Though most of us may not be personally aware of what the Judges do, we can take comfort that the Minnesota Judiciary is considered one of the best in our country. Minnesota Judges are among the hardest working in the country and a 2007 Chamber of Commerce survey of Corporate Counsel rated the Minnesota Courts as No. 2 nationally for fairness of litigation environment and No. 3 nationally for impartiality, competence, and fairness. Further, a 2006 survey of Minnesota citizens who utilized the court system considered Minnesota Judges as qualified, fair, dedicated to the facts and laws, honest, trustworthy and impartial. Our local Judges in the 8th Judicial District have, I believe, continued to conduct themselves with this same high level of integrity and fairness.

The 8th Judicial District consists of 13 counties which run geographically on the west from Yellow Medicine County to Wilkin County. The District's eastern most boundaries include Renville and Meeker. Kandiyohi County is the largest in population within the 8th Judicial District. There are currently 11 Judges and seven Court Administrators serving these 13 counties.

You should expect guest articles written by other Judges throughout the 8th Judicial District. If you have comments regarding an article written, or suggestions for future topics, please contact your local newspaper. I hope you find the articles enjoyable and informative as you "Hear it From the Judge".