

Hear it From the Judge

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What is our Judicial Branch?

It has been a long time since most of us studied civics. However, most of us may remember that we have three branches of government – Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. The branch we remember the least is the Judicial Branch.

As we refresh our memory as to Minnesota’s Judicial Branch, we will also recall our understanding of the U.S. government’s Judicial Branch.

The Minnesota Judicial Branch is divided into three (3) levels of courts. The first level is the District Court. This level is often known as the Trial Court. The second and third levels are the appellate courts which consider cases heard first in the District Court. The Court of Appeals is the intermediate appellate court and the Supreme Court is the highest appellate court.

District Courts exist in each of our 87 counties and there is a courthouse in each county. There are 289 authorized District Court Judges in our state. All cases in the Minnesota court system start at this trial court level and there are approximately 1.9 million cases filed annually in the Trial Court. There are currently 10 Judicial Districts. Other than Hennepin and Ramsey county, each district has multiple counties and multiple judges within those counties. With the exception of criminal first degree murder cases, all appeals from the District Court decisions first go to the Court of Appeals.

The Minnesota Court of Appeals began in 1983. This court provides a deliberate review of all decisions in the trial courts as well as state agencies and local governments. As an error correcting court, the Court of Appeals handles most appeals in Minnesota. That is, most cases that are considered by the Court of Appeals do not get heard by the Supreme Court

There are currently 19 Judges on the Court of Appeals and this Court considers approximately 2,400 appeals annually. The Judges sit in three (3) judge panels to decide cases and they do occasionally travel to locations throughout the state to consider appeals.

The highest court in Minnesota is the Supreme Court. This Court is considered the final authority of the constitutional rights of the people in our state. The Supreme Court decisions will also serve as guidelines to follow in future cases at all three (3) court levels.

The Supreme Court considers review of approximately 900 cases annually and accepts approximately 100 cases for review. The only cases which are automatically considered by the Supreme Court are election contests and first-degree murder cases. The Supreme Court also makes rules for practice and procedure in the legal system. There are 7 Justices on the Supreme Court.

The vision of the Minnesota Judicial Branch well states the importance of this co-equal branch of government: “The general public and those who use the court system will refer to it as accessible, fair, consistent, responsive, free of discrimination, independent, and well managed.”