

Demystifying the Judiciary

New Learning Center will spotlight how the justice system works

The judiciary comes under the magnifying glass in a pioneering place called the Learning Center, on the first floor of the new \$88 million Hall of Justice in Lansing. A mix of artifacts, graphics, videos, hands-on interactives, computer programs, photographs, and text will interface in the 3,800-square-foot gallery space to create the kind of environment that will arouse interest, encourage curiosity, and promote understanding of how the justice system works.

In reaching out to the public and to schoolchildren in this way, Michigan is charting new territory, according to Vicky Kruckeberg, Learning Center coordinator. Although Hawaii does have a gallery and wonderful programming, Kruckeberg points out that the focus there is on the unique culture and how the laws apply to that culture. Similarly, the American Bar Association's exhibit in Chicago is aimed more at the legal community itself, rather than the general public. "We're breaking ground here with something that hasn't been explored before. This really is a model and several states are watching us to see how this is going to work out."

The idea to undertake such a project came from the Supreme Court Justices themselves, especially Justice Elizabeth A. Weaver, according to Justice Michael F. Cavanagh, who heads a planning team for the Learning Center. "It developed while we were in the process of developing plans for the [Hall of Justice]. There is kind of a tour loop that includes the State Capitol and the State Historical Museum and Library and we have tours through the courtroom here in the [G. Mennen Williams Building] and the Learning Center, it was felt, would be a natural and ideal extension of that tour and would be very attractive and appealing primarily to school children," Cavanagh explained.



When visitors walk into the gallery, they will encounter dozens of hands-on displays. Press a button or two and get an education about traffic violations—one of the most common interactions that people have with the law. "The exhibits are inviting, engaging, and in some ways, even a little playful," said Jeff Bernstein of Exhibition Design Incorporated, a Kalamazoo firm responsible for the set up. There are photo opportunities—sit in a jury box and get your picture taken. Spend a day in court and learn what it is like to be a member of the prosecution, the defense, the judge, or the jury.

"Part of this is to get visitors to understand the players and their responsibilities and the thought process that these individuals go through in their roles," explained Kruckeberg. "We expect our primary audience to be schoolchildren, so we're designing this to show them how the judicial branch applies

to them." An example she cites is a school locker with a sign that proclaims "does your principal have the right to search your locker? Open the locker to find out." But the exhibits aren't just for children. Adults will also find them interesting and educational.

Other exhibits will trace the history of the judicial system and how a case proceeds from a trial court through the appellate system all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court. A large plasma screen will show "live" proceedings in the Supreme Court when it's in session. One area of the gallery will focus on issues and specific cases. For example, if a visitor is interested in finding out more about American Indian rights and tribal sovereignty, a video of Judge Michael Petoskey from Traverse City explaining tribal systems in Michigan can be accessed immediately. Specific initiatives like alternative dispute programs, mediation, domestic violence interactive



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programs, drug court, and teen court will also be highlighted to remind people that there are alternative ways of settling disputes and resolving problems.

"The judicial branch of government affects people's lives and they need to understand it better," Kruckeberg stressed. "When they become a jury member, they will have a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities: if they have a case that goes through the court system, they will have a better understanding of what that's all about; if they decide to have a career in the legal profession, this will give them some ideas of the roles involved in the legal profession."

A good deal of research and preparation has gone into this effort. Educators, consulting lawyers, computer and video experts, and designers have all been involved. Kruckeberg herself has a museum background, having worked in the field for almost 25 years. Before taking on this challenge, she was the director of the Detroit Historical Museum. As part of her job, she will also be conducting



distance learning classes and workshops for teachers in remote parts of the state who are unable to bring their students to Lansing. For those who can make the trip, curriculum materials are being developed to help teachers prepare their students for the visit to the facility. Special consideration is being given to fourth and fifth grade students as they prepare for their Michigan Education Assessment Program.

"What we're hoping for is that they come away with a real understanding of our system, its principles, what it stands for, and importantly, have a hands-on experience that enables them to really understand how the system operates," Justice Cavanagh said. "I think that's something that just doesn't jump out at students out of textbooks. I think the variety that the Learning Center will contain ought to hold their attention and leave some lasting impression on them and they come away with the understanding that we are operating under a Constitution, and a legislature enacts the laws, and courts have all these different functions, and there are this many

justices on the Supreme Court, things of that nature, that will hopefully leave a lasting impression," he added.

Kruckeberg estimates that in the very first year of operation, the Learning Center should get about 10,000 visitors or more. Without a facility, the court already serves 6,000 visitors annually. The first tours through the center, which cost just under a million, will be on November 1st. An opening ceremony for the Hall of Justice will take place on October 8th. Docents will be needed to guide groups of visitors through the gallery and volunteers are being sought for a training program that will begin in late August or early September. Teachers and others who possess good public speaking skills and who are willing to guide groups of people through the facility are needed. Knowledge of the judiciary is not necessary. To volunteer, call 517-373-3449 for more information. ◆

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The Michigan Hall of Justice is located at 925 W. Ottawa Street, Lansing, MI.

The Learning Center is located on the first floor of the Hall of Justice at the corner of Allegan Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard.

Admission is free. Everyone is welcome.

Hours: Monday–Friday,
9:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

Parking facilities are located on the east side of the Michigan Hall of Justice.

Groups of eight or more should call ahead for reservations to ensure the availability of a tour guide. For reservations call 517-373-5027 or 517-373-3449.

Check the Michigan Supreme Court website at www.courts.Michigan.gov.