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District Courts are

COMMUNITY COURTS

Courts and the buildings that housed them were once an essential part of the community. Often, the courthouse was the only public building in the region large enough for a town meeting. Many courts shared their space with other important agencies, such as schools, libraries, and of course, the police. As villages grew to become cities, and the courts grew as a consequence, this relationship slowly disappeared. In the end, circuit courts became something outside of the community, no longer deeply connected.

BY BRIAN W. MACKENZIE

Michigan's legislature, recognizing the need for a local judicial presence within the community, created a new type of court: the district court. Unfortunately, district courts had jurisdictional restrictions that limited their ability to cope with larger community problems. This, combined with their ever-increasing caseload, impeded the district court's ability to restore the idea of the court as a local institution.

In the 1990s, some district courts took a new look at this old idea. A number of district courts held old-style town hall meetings. Some used questionnaires published in the newspaper or mailed directly to their constituents. Others created focus groups. All of the approaches asked what the public thought of their local district court.

The result of these early efforts led many district courts to believe that their citizens wanted something more than good docket management and tough criminal sentencing. These district courts learned that the people they served wanted them to focus on the larger needs and problems of the community. In effect, they wanted the district court to become a community court.

From these early efforts certain principles have emerged. This new approach is committed to:

- Reinventing the relationship between the community and the district court. District courts have created citizen advisory committees to offer advice, bring-

ing additional resources to enhance court services and new ways for the court to solve problems. These courts also work with any interested group in solving community problems.

- Communicating more fully with the community. District courts are creating websites, annual reports, speaking to community groups, working with the media, taking their dockets into local high schools and offering tours of the courthouse to inform the community about their local district court.
- Focusing on solutions that solve community problems. This includes such

community groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, Parents of Murdered Children, local school systems, local bar associations, businesses, and local volunteers, that drive innovative new solutions.

- Using district court buildings as a community resource. District courts are allowing their buildings to be used for community meetings, regional bar groups, organizational gatherings, AA groups, etc.
- Restoring the community. District courts are working to repair the damage caused by criminal behavior. This takes

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programs as sobriety courts, teen courts, and domestic violence courts. It also includes holiday testing programs for dangerous drunk drivers and programs aimed at deterring adolescent drinking and smoking.

- Bringing the different parts of the community into the court. District courts are creating new relationships with

the form of ordering defendants to perform community service, offering community mediation programs and working on new ways to ensure victims of crime are made whole.

The Michigan Supreme Court is behind this effort, establishing a pilot district court program for just this purpose. A community court requires collaboration and problem-solving. It creates new relationships with community groups, businesses, residents, and schools. It promotes new approaches to public safety rather than merely responding to crime after it has occurred. These principles and programs are the spark that is rekindling the concept of the district court as community court. ♦

Chief Judge Pro Tem of the 52nd District Court Brian W. MacKenzie has lectured nationally and authored several articles about domestic violence, community collaborations, drunk driving prevention, and trial court performance standards. In 2000, the Michigan Supreme Court appointed him as a coordinating judge for a pilot project involving community outreach and trial court performance standards. Judge MacKenzie has served as a leader and member of several community organizations.

