

The Register editorial: Court Watch program puts citizen eyes on courts

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Iowa's state government has long been focused on "getting tough on crime." Now, in addition to the thousands of people on probation, parole or in work-release programs, there are about 8,500 inmates in Iowa prisons. County jails are full. Incarceration breaks up families and costs taxpayers a fortune. Though some offenders should be removed from society, there are some public officials who appear to be overzealous about locking up as many people as possible.

Some lawmakers, for example, seem intent on expanding the Iowa Code by turning more actions of people into crimes. Too infrequently, however, the Legislature revisits those laws to see whether there are unnecessarily harsh penalties written into the statutes. The public should discourage schools from involving police officers in minor offenses in their buildings, which can funnel youth into the juvenile justice system. Voters should look beyond simply the conviction records of county prosecutors at election time.

And then there are the courts. This is where the fate of the accused is frequently decided. Judges are sometimes bound by mandatory minimum sentences that have been written into the law. Judges have too few options for diverting offenders from jail and prison. Who is keeping tabs on an overburdened, underfunded system with hundreds of judges hearing thousands of criminal cases each year?

Dozens of Iowans are stepping up to volunteer for that task. A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy (AMOS) has successfully gotten a Court Watcher program off the ground in Polk County.

Court watchers are trained volunteers who quietly sit in courtrooms to observe and document what is going on. Like similar programs around the country, the goal in Polk County is to witness the criminal justice system in action. The presence of an outsider in a courtroom signals to judges, prosecutors and others that the community cares about how its government is treating citizens when they find themselves in trouble with the law.

Thirty Iowans attended the first court watcher training at Central Presbyterian Church in Des Moines earlier this month. Another 30 are scheduled to go through

training soon. The Rev. Denny Coon, pastor of Walnut Hills United Methodist Church in Urbandale, said his first experience as an observer was enlightening but somewhat troubling.

He attended a hearing involving a juvenile female arrested for prostitution. The judge was 35 minutes late. The defendant was "visibly upset and crying," Coon said. The girl's mother doesn't live in Iowa and said she didn't have money to return if the hearing were postponed.

"The system was in disarray that day," said Coon. "As a parent, I can't imagine how the defendant and her mother were feeling during this delay. There's a girl waiting to hear about her future and a mother who traveled from Indiana."

Court watchers record observations about what happens in the proceedings. The long-term goal is to generate reports based on the information gathered.

There are few things more heartening than an organized, grass-roots effort to get citizens to pay attention to their government in action. The presence of court watchers will help ensure Iowa's justice system is on its toes.

Why some people volunteer

The first Court Watch training in Polk County focused on juvenile court. Here are some of the reasons Iowans gave for volunteering for the program:

I want to learn about the court system and its weaknesses and improve the justice system in small ways. ... I currently work with middle and high school students and this helps me be better informed. ... I hope to gain a greater understanding as to the court system's ebb and flow of convictions as it pertains to demographics, ethnicity and geography. ... I want to see some juvenile offenders get a second chance. ... I want to keep others from having the experiences my family and I have had. ... I want a better understanding of how our court system works and would like to think my presence may make a difference. ... I would like to contribute to any improvements within the system. ... My children and grandchildren live in this community and I hope I can help prevent them from ever being in the legal system.

Iowans interested in training to be a Court Watcher can email organizingforjustice@gmail.com

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