

Community & People

Tenth Judicial District hosts 'equal justice' community meeting

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By [Sarah Burghardt](#)

The Tenth Judicial District hosted a community dialogue for local residents to voice their opinions and issues they have about the legal justice system. Community members, law enforcement officers, judges and attorneys gathered Jan. 31 at the Fridley Community Center to listen and gain feedback on how the justice system can be improved and ensure equal treatment and access for every citizen.

Each judicial district has an Equal Justice Committee that hosts community dialogue sessions. These sessions are hosted a few times a year and address differing views of racial and ethnic fairness in the Minnesota court system.

District Judge Daniel O'Fallon, who is also the committee chair, said this effort to listen and learn from those who feel that they have been treated unfairly.

"Our goal here tonight was to come in and listen to what we aren't doing well and hear from people that are in our system," O'Fallon said. "We need to hear those perceptions, concerns, and at the end, try to figure out some solutions."

One suggestion that O'Fallon noted was a drop-in day care center at the courthouse.

"This really highlights a concern," he said. "If people have to come to court, sometimes they are giving up a whole day to take time off of work or they have to do something with their kids."

Although he is unsure if a solution like this could be funded, it is suggestions like these that bring forth fresh ideas and ways that the justice system and residents can improve their relationship.

Access and transportation was another issue in many discussion groups. Some residents felt that there is a need for an auxiliary court in the southern part of Anoka County, since transportation can be a barrier for those coming to court.

Columbia Heights resident Degha Shabbeleh is of Somali decent and said that she feels that biases can often come from types of clothing or even slang language that is used.

“We were discussing how the judges really shouldn’t pay attention to what you’re wearing, or how you’re saying something, but really what the crime was and to try to help,” Shabbeleh said. She explained the expectation of court appearance could be different among cultures.

“What if I can’t afford it, what if it’s not part of my culture, what if I don’t know?” Shabbeleh said.

She said that, especially from a first generation youth perspective, these differences should be recognized. It is key to try to offer as much education and materials as possible for residents to learn about the court system and assumptions should not be made.

Columbia Heights Police Sergeant Justin Pletcher came up with a “court preparation program” idea that would be offered to juveniles that must go through the court system, or others that are interested in learning more about the Minnesota court system and etiquette.

As many people are beginning to represent themselves in court, the Tenth Judicial District created a Self Help Center two years ago. The center is designed to provide information, services and resources for those court participants that are unsure of how to handle their legal issues. This branch can help residents to learn about court basics and legal forms, or how to find a lawyer or community services. Although, since Self Help Center staff are court employees, the center cannot provide legal advice or legal research.

This community dialogue was the first session of the year, and O’Fallon said that he hopes another one can be set up for later this year. He said that the committee is looking to expand activities in the district’s communities, like “National Night Out” type of events.

These sessions are a work in progress. O’Fallon said that the committee is considering bringing the dialogue sessions directly to minority communities to hear their thoughts.

“That may be more effective, rather than a big group, sometimes it can be a little intimidating,” O’Fallon said. “We’re learning too, that’s the key here.”

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