

JUSTICE INITIATIVES/PUBLIC TRUST

Background/Issues

As commanded by their bylaws, state and local bars have always worked with their courts to improve the administration of justice. More and more, bars and courts are reaching out to include non-lawyers groups in the process. The American Bar Association's Coalition for Justice believes that community involvement is a better way to improve justice because it (1) brings fresh ideas, (2) builds broader support for resulting reforms, and (3) earns increased public trust and confidence in the system – and in the profession.

The Coalition's *Summary of State and Local Justice Improvement Activities – 2003* continues to show increasing numbers of "Justice Initiatives" involving non-lawyers being implemented nationwide.

To encourage and support state/local initiatives, the Coalition for Justice maintains an informational clearinghouse, assists individual state and local projects, maintains a network of national non-lawyer organizations, participates in citizen conferences and bar meetings, and provides modest seed money grants. Plain-language *Roadmap* booklets cover key issues arising from bar/court/community collaborations. Topics in the *Roadmaps* series include youth courts, planning for access to civil legal services, user-friendly courts, community involvement, bias in the system, jury reform, alternative dispute resolution, and unified family courts.

With the assistance of the Kettering Foundation, the Coalition for Justice and the ABA Standing Committee on Judicial Independence have produced a National Issues Forum (NIF) program entitled ". . . *And Justice For All*": *Ensuring Public Trust and Confidence in the Court System*. The program is designed to encourage bar associations, courts, and members of the community to organize local discussions about the justice system using free ABA/NIF materials. The materials may be found at www.abanet.org/justice.

The ABA and the National Center for State Courts also continue follow-up to the 1999 National Conference on Public Trust and Confidence in the Justice System sponsored by the ABA, the Conference of Chief Justices, the Conference of State Court Administrators, and the League of Women Voters.

Missouri Bar Activities

In 1998, The Missouri Bar played a key role in a Conference on Public Trust and Confidence organized by the Supreme Court of Missouri. The conference brought together a diverse group of Missourians with the goal of providing suggestions, insights, criticisms and ideas on ways by which the judiciary can be more effective in defining the role of courts in American society. The group concluded that, when compared to the other branches of government, the U.S. judicial system remains relatively well-respected. However, the group agreed that the courts must do more to ensure a positive experience for users of the judicial system. Specific ideas formulated included: an increased emphasis on how the judicial process works (including greater use of the Internet); greater emphasis on the roles played by court personnel; enhanced efforts to correct

misinterpretations reported by the news media; greater community involvement by court officials; the need for additional judges; improvement of physical facilities, including compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act; emphasizing the value of non-partisan selection procedures for judges as a means of ensuring “the best and the brightest” members of the judiciary; responsiveness to the needs of selected groups that interact with the courts; development of a more “user-friendly” court system; training to encourage greater awareness by court personnel of the public’s needs and the importance of civility in their dealings with the public; more opportunities for interaction between citizens and the courts, such as information kiosks; training and attention to practices designed to eliminate bias, including gender bias, within the judiciary; a greater appreciation of the role played by, and sacrifices made by, jurors; providing an information packet to all persons called for jury duty; allowing jurors to take notes and ask questions of witnesses during a trial; issuance of a “thank you” letter from the court to all jurors at the conclusion of a trial; greater emphasis on the role of mediation in addressing some issues; and mandatory training for judges on speaking with and working with the news media.

In the wake of that conference, The Missouri Bar – often in conjunction with the Missouri Judicial Conference – initiated a number of activities designed to facilitate citizen interaction with the courts and judges. For example, shortly after the conference, the President of The Missouri Bar and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Missouri initiated the distribution of an ABA Judicial Division publication, “Judicial Outreach on a Shoestring: A Working Manual,” to all state judges.

Another program resulting from the conference, “Judges in the Classroom,” continues to provide opportunities for judges to interact with students during civics classes and explain the history and role of courts and judges in the American justice system.

A Missouri Bar public opinion survey focusing on citizens’ perceptions of lawyers, judges and the legal system led to the creation of an institutional advertising campaign designed to bolster citizen confidence and ensure that misperceptions do not hinder citizen access to the justice system. Through a special program with the Missouri Broadcasters Association, a series of 30-second radio and television announcements began airing on television and radio stations throughout the state in 1999. The initial series of announcements emphasized three points: the system works; lawyers are problem solvers; and legal services are affordable. Subsequent years’ announcements have focused on different areas, but the fact remains that this program continues to have an enormous positive impact on improving the public’s trust in the justice system.

In 2000, The Missouri Bar and the Supreme Court of Missouri launched the initial “Juror Appreciation Week” to honor those Missourians who fulfill their duties as jurors. On April 20 of that year, then-Chief Justice William Ray Price Jr. entered the following order:

Each year, thousands of Missourians perform one of the most significant civic duties granted to citizens – they serve as fair and impartial jurors in communities throughout the state.

To honor those citizens who have performed their civic duty, the Supreme Court of Missouri directs all Missouri courts to observe “Juror Appreciation Week” during the first seven days of May.

“Juror Appreciation Week” shall be a time to remind the public of the great responsibility and honor of serving as jurors.

It shall be a time of re-commitment, when citizens have an opportunity to realize that jury service is a civic duty of the utmost importance to our democratic way of life.

It shall be a time of appreciation, when judges and lawyers take time to gratefully acknowledge jurors in courthouses throughout the state and find ways to thank them for their service.

“Juror Appreciation Week” continues to be observed annually by Missouri’s legal community in conjunction with the May 1 national celebration of Law Day U.S.A. As part of the observance, this year The Missouri Bar made available to newspapers a series of articles focusing on civil rights in the workplace. Copies of the articles were also made available for downloading via The Missouri Bar’s website at www.mobar.org.

The Missouri Bar also recently revised and re-designed its popular “Information for Trial Jurors” brochure, which gives jurors an overview of the court system and the trial process. The new version of the brochure was made available to all trial courts across the state at no charge.

A new publication making its debut in 2005 was “Speak Up for Missouri Courts.” This brochure provides citizens with information about the importance of an independent judiciary that is free from outside pressures yet accountable to informed voters.

