

Judge Kathleen Brickley: The Bigger Picture of Outreach

Merriam-Webster defines community as “a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.”

As Chief Judge of the 36th Circuit Court in Van Buren County, Judge Kathleen Brickley sees the court as “a vital part of our community.”

Three years after being appointed to the bench in 2012, Judge Brickley was appointed to the leadership role and she hasn't looked back since. In addition to the many projects and tasks she has taken on internally to reengineer the way the court operated, she has also looked outside the courthouse to find inspiration for further innovations.

Given the opportunity to participate in the Michigan Supreme Court's Leadership Team Academy in 2017, Judge Brickley and Court Administrator Frank Hardester developed a Team Leadership Project with an eye toward integration of the court and the community it serves. The result? The Court to Community Outreach Program was born.

“When we began this program, we found that many of us in the court were already actively involved in volunteer outreach efforts—we just weren't sharing and coordinating our activities, especially via social media,” Judge Brickley recalled. “Doing so has not only helped us perform outreach more effectively, but it has created—free of charge—positive PR for the court and a morale boost within the court. It is rewarding to be acknowledged for your service and to see your co-workers educating or serving the community.”

Judge Brickley explains that Court to Community is a multi-faceted outreach program that focuses on the goals of sharing court information, services, and accomplishments with the community, and doing so in a coordinated fashion.

Internally, she continues, the court team has created an all-court policy that makes outreach a priority of the court, centralized the dissemination of outreach efforts, and included Court to Community Outreach as a regular agenda item at Judicial Council and Management Team meetings. In addition to attending events and activities in the community, they are also ramping up communications of their activities by employing various platforms such as a court newsletter, social media, and press releases.

“Too often, people think of courts as a consequence rather than a resource. The reality is that, for many communities, the court is the resource hub—we just haven't been particularly adept at conveying this,” she explained. “By making outreach a formalized priority of the court, we hope to do better.”

Through their efforts to bring court programs to the public—education about problem-solving courts, Adoption Day events raising awareness of the need, attending school and local events to talk about juvenile diversion opportunities or the “24/7 Dads” program, collaborating with

groups such as Families Against Narcotics—the community can literally see the court as a resource. Going one step beyond that, Judge Brickley believes that engaging in other activities such as local recreational sports and food drives, for example, people can see the court as a part of the community.

“What we do impacts our neighbors as well as their friends, coworkers, and children,” Judge Brickley shared. “Our judges and our extraordinary staff share the conviction that along with the responsibilities of working within the court is the responsibility to look beyond it.”

She continued, “Today, many are skeptical of the government, viewing it as one entity working against them. Judges have an ability to educate people on the role of the judiciary and its status as a separate branch of government. And we are in a position to invite community members to be a part of the discussion and a part of the solution.”