

CHIEF JUDGE WILLIAM FAGERMAN

Engineering Court Systems: Chief Judge William Fagerman's Diverse Experience Enables Him to Serve Multiple Communities

Chief Judge William M. Fagerman took a rather unorthodox route into the legal profession: "I attended Michigan Tech for my undergraduate studies, and I actually worked as an engineer for Michigan Bell before I went to Wayne State for law school."

Now, decades later, it is clear that Chief Judge Fagerman's varied career experience — in addition to being an engineer, he has served as a private practice attorney, a county prosecutor, and a public defense attorney — has paid off impressively on the bench.

"While working in private practice, I did personal injury work, criminal and divorce cases, and general civil law. In addition to my stint as a prosecutor, I've also done indigent defense and domestic relations work," Chief Judge Fagerman remarked. "Being on the other side of the bench has given me valuable experience in preparation for my role as a jurist — the learning curve's steep enough as it is, so every bit counts."

These diverse experiences have enabled Chief Judge Fagerman to occupy a distinct role within the judiciary: he currently leads a multicourt system with concurrent jurisdiction over Missaukee and Wexford Counties, a system that comes with its own unique advantages and challenges.

"Since we have such a small community, if one of our judges gets overloaded, the docket moves much slower. Our concurrent jurisdiction plan greatly benefits



*Chief Judge Fagerman on the bench.
(Photo credit: Cadillac News)*

our local residents by balancing out the workload for the judges so the dockets can be promptly addressed," Chief Judge Fagerman explained. "At the same time, we have to deal with issues that aren't as prominent at single courts. We're always working to streamline information flow between our courts and coordinate our attorneys' schedules, and as Chief Judge I've become embroiled in personnel and budgetary issues for courts that I don't directly sit on."

Chief Judge Fagerman is particularly proud of a multicounty sobriety court that was recently established for drunk drivers.

"It's been a significant improvement to our community, and its success has inspired us to work towards potentially creating more specialized courts, such as a veterans court," he remarked.

Chief Judge Fagerman has also made courtroom security one of his top priorities during his tenure on the bench. This is made especially salient by the recent two-year anniversary of the Berrien County Courthouse shooting, in which two court officers tragically

lost their lives.

“Security in the courthouse is primarily the sheriff’s responsibility, but courts must be proactive in adopting more effective security measures — you never think security’s a problem until there’s an incident,” he explained. “For example, the Wexford County Court has a single point of entry, as well as metal detectors and a security staff. Other measures we’ve implemented include assessments of our security from the State Court Administrative Office and firearm policies in the courtroom.”

In addition to his accomplishments on the bench, Chief Judge Fagerman has supported his community through many organizations.

“Back when I was a prosecutor, I was a board member for Team-Up Cadillac, which was basically an ad-hoc group of parents, educators, law enforcement, and social service providers that addressed misbehavior and criminal activity in the local school system,” he explained. “In particular, we tried to bring awareness to teenage drinking and drug abuse.”

Chief Judge Fagerman has also served as an executive

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board member of the Traverse Narcotics Team — a multicounty drug enforcement team comprised of law enforcement personnel and prosecutors — as well as a member of the Domestic Violence Task Force, which aimed to “change the culture surrounding domestic violence incidents.”

“Back in the day, domestic violence cases used to be handled by separating the parties and giving verbal warning, but the lack of a follow-up often led to reoffenses. Now, we have a ‘zero tolerance’ policy, which mandates an arrest if there’s probable cause that domestic violence has occurred,” he remarked. “This has resulted in a substantial change in how domestic violence cases are pursued and prosecuted.”

For Chief Judge Fagerman, the communities that he has dedicated himself to aiding also include the less experienced litigants who enter

his courtroom.

“My favorite part of the job is mentoring younger attorneys when they come and ask for advice on how to proceed with things,” he shared. “It’s incredibly rewarding to use my experience to help others on their own legal journeys.”



Chief Judge Fagerman speaking to community members. (Photo credit: Cadillac News)

