

JUDGE SUSAN DOBRICH

One could describe Judge Susan L. Dobrich as a juggler, of sorts.

Not only does she preside over the 43rd Circuit, Probate and Family Treatment Courts in Cass County — and as of January, 1, 2016, the 4th District Court — but she also serves as President of the Michigan Association of Treatment Court Professionals, is active in the Michigan Probate Judges Association, and serves as President-elect of the Judicial Section of the State Bar of Michigan.

So how does she keep all of these balls in the air? Like many multi-court chief judges, she has become a multi-tasker.

“Sometimes, it can be fun and other times, it can be overwhelming,” Judge Dobrich remarked. “A lot of it comes down to organization and having the right staff to assist you. I am lucky to have really good staff members to help me through.”

Since being elected to the bench in 1994, the former prosecutor has not slowed down.

Seeing how substance abuse, in particular, has torn many families in her community apart over the years, Judge Dobrich started the Cass County Family Treatment Court in 2003.

“When I first started working with treatment courts, my goal was to be able to provide additional services in the area for substance abuse,” she explained. “About 80 percent of the cases that appear in family court, the abuse and neglect portion of that court, deals with substance abuse.”

In the 12 years that have passed, Judge Dobrich feels a sense of pride and gratification in witnessing the “parade of transformations” in the treatment court.



Judge Susan Dobrich

She has also learned to embrace performance measures as a tool to take her court further.

“At first, I wasn’t really focused on the performance measures; I looked at the anecdotal information and the satisfaction we all felt by having a treatment affecting changes in people’s lives,” Judge Dobrich recalled.

“But as we moved into the development of a treatment court,” she continued, “looking at the science and data, at the need to provide better service by applying for grants both at the federal and state level, we realized how important performance measures are.”

Reunifying families is how Judge Dobrich measures her performance



Judge Dobrich outlined that as a result of performance measurements, they've been able to obtain substantial funding from the state of Michigan, as well as federal sources.

"The local Family Treatment Court in Cass County serves parents who struggle with alcohol and drug addiction, and whose children have been removed and placed in the system," she said. "Since the implementation of Family Treatment Court, we've had an overall success rate of 62 percent in reunifying these families."

Judge Dobrich also notes that this is well above the national average and a number she intends to keep improving upon.

"The grant monies that have helped our problem-solving courts in Cass County certainly contribute to doing better things: saving lives; saving money; strengthening families; and strengthening communities," shared Judge Dobrich.

She added, "We are extremely fortunate in Cass County to have a full continuum of treatment options available to persons struggling with addiction and substance abuse issues by way of the problem-solving treatment courts. From our perspective, treatment courts have been a catalyst for change and the measurements have assisted us in developing that catalyst by measuring it."

Judge Dobrich's commitment to Cass County started early, having grown up there and having gotten to know "the entire community" through her parents' bowling alley. She eventually earned her law degree from Thomas M. Cooley Law School, and returned to the area to practice law.

Judge Dobrich (right) participates in a new conference to launch the 2015 Problem-Solving Court report, alongside Judge Laura Mack, of the 29th District Court in the city of Wayne.

Her passion for helping and serving local families seems to be somewhat of a family business — her husband is a retired police officer, and her daughter is a social worker in St. Joseph.

Whether it is serving as Cass County's first female prosecutor or starting the area's first treatment court, Judge Dobrich continues to blaze trails — now with the help of performance measures. (Not to mention the actual trails she blazed when she hiked the Grand Canyon from rim to rim several years ago.)

An avid yoga practitioner in her free time, Judge Dobrich looks forward to adding yoga to the array of services and treatment options.

"As long as you can measure it as an evidence-based practice, it has potential. The military is using it. It's actually happening in some treatment courts: Judge Karen Khalil's veterans treatment court; also in Washtenaw County," she explained. "Yoga helps with the mind and body; it's about slowing you down and stress reduction, and that is helpful, especially for people who have been traumatized." 🧘

