

Judge Karen McDonald: Protecting Women and Children at Risk

One in three families in Michigan are affected by domestic violence, and women are the victims in 85-95 percent of all reported domestic violence cases.

This statistic compelled Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Karen McDonald to seek out ways to help provide at-risk women and children the protection and resources they need.

Having served for six years in the Family Division, Judge McDonald presides over domestic cases involving divorce, custody, paternity and support, neglect, adoption and juvenile delinquencies, and personal protection orders. She also handles the permanency planning docket and the juvenile drug court.

When questioned about domestic violence cases, she noted that “Children in homes where there is domestic violence face significant challenges and are at increased risk for repeating the same violence and a host of other things in their adult lives.”

It is consequently important to Judge McDonald to address some of the major issues affecting at-risk children and to help alleviate the cycle of repeat violence. Judge McDonald serves on the local Child Death Review Team and Oakland County Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force. Her intensive training from the National Judicial Institute on Domestic Violence prompted her to develop a training program for the Court’s clerks and other staff members to improve the services provided to domestic violence victims who seek personal protection orders.

“The majority of domestic violence is unreported. When victims actually do report, it is so important that they have appropriate access to the justice system,” remarked Judge McDonald. “The judiciary can play a role in this by ensuring that victims feel safe when they go to court and court staff and personnel are trained to interact with victims in a respectful and dignified way.”

Judge McDonald also serves as a member of the Foster Care Review Board Program Advisory Committee, where she advocates for children who are placed in the care of the State of Michigan. She recently received the Joan E. Young Champion of Children Award for her work in this area.

In addition, Judge McDonald was recently honored by Oakland County’s Coordinating Council Against Domestic Violence for providing exemplary service to victims of domestic violence, and specifically, for her work in both seeking out and helping to promote education on the subject.

“I think being a family court judge gives me a unique perspective on the issues facing children and families,” reflected Judge McDonald. “While I enjoy the job very much, I think it is critical to take the knowledge I’ve learned and identify the needs of the community. Speaking and training in the community helps me better understand the people who come before me.”