

## **WATCH still quietly looking over courts' shoulder**

**By KIM ODE**, Star Tribune

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Fifteen years ago, women carrying red clipboards began showing up in Hennepin County courtrooms, watching to see if the wheels of justice stayed on the high road in cases of sexual and domestic violence and child abuse. They were volunteers in a then-new organization called Women at the Court House, or WATCH. It was the first of its kind in the country.

Their presence was not always welcome. Like the fussy neighbor who scrutinizes where your leaves fall, some judges feared the watchers were interested only in finding fault.

But its first annual report was critical not so much of judges, but of a system whose complexity often left everyone -- from crime victims to defendants to their families to court personnel -- feeling confused and like they had been treated disrespectfully.

Little wonder, for the justice system often is a collision of cultures: one side so familiar with the routine that little fazes them, while the other, already emotionally charged, might never have been in a courtroom.

Judge Peter Albrecht said the group changed how he regards not just those before the bench, but everyone in the room.

"Now I always ask if I can help them, to make sure they're in the right place, that they know if a case has been moved or postponed, because often they have no idea," he said. "It's the basic stuff of the judiciary: How do we treat people?"

Walk-in for Justice today

On Thursday, WATCH is sponsoring a National Walk-in for Justice during this, Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Executive Director Marna Anderson said people will gather over the noon hour in the atrium of the Hennepin County Government Center. She intends to use the hourlong event to focus attention on the effect of financial cuts to the court system.

"When nobody is at the Domestic Abuse Service Center to help a woman write out an order for protection, that's a problem for everyone," Anderson said.

Susan Lenfestey, a longtime community activist, founded WATCH after a Minneapolis woman who lived in her neighborhood was raped and murdered by a paroled felon. For a model, she looked to Mothers Against Drunk Driving and its use of citizen monitoring. Now there are about 20 similar chapters nationwide, and a couple of calls come every month from groups seeking assistance in getting off the

ground. WATCH receives no government funding, relying on private foundations and individuals.

Anderson described their work like this: Trained volunteers, both men and women, sit in the courtroom gallery, identifiable only to those who know the symbolism of the red clipboard. They note such things as whether court began on time, if the judge's instructions were clear, and the demeanor of judges, attorneys and deputies. One of the early concerns voiced by some attorneys was that the organization would not be an advocacy group that monitors, but a monitoring group that advocates. Whether those concerns have been borne out is hard to say. The Hennepin County Public Defender's Office declined to comment for this story.

Sometimes the issues being monitored aren't so much about justice as about safety, Anderson said. For example, in a case of domestic violence when both accuser and accused are in the courtroom, observers watch to see if the judge makes sure there are staggered exits, to avert the chance of the parties riding down in the same elevator.

## Eyes and ears

In Albrecht's view, WATCH is akin to the press, serving as "the eyes and ear of the community when it comes to the issue of judges doing their jobs," he said. "It's not about whether we made the right decision or gave the right sentence, but they keep track of how we run our courtroom, whether we're respectful of people -- easily observable things that don't require close legal analysis.

"I think anyone, no matter what the profession, does their job better when someone is looking over their shoulder, if they know they're being evaluated."

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