

Watchdog group calls for judge's resignation after joke at hearing

Group says comment is the latest in a string of inappropriate comments. Monitors say judges must be held to a higher standard.

By [ROCHELLE OLSON](#), Star Tribune

Last update: November 12, 2009 - 12:57 PM

A courts watchdog group is calling for the resignation of Hennepin County Judge Stephen Aldrich, claiming he has failed to curb inappropriate messages to people who appear before him in court, including a recent joke about marriage that mentions murder, at a hearing over a woman's restraining order against her husband.

On Oct. 21, during a hearing to update an order for protection taken out by the woman, the watchdog group WATCH claims that Aldrich said: "I've been married 45 years. We've never considered divorce; a few times murder maybe."

The judge was on the bench this morning and didn't immediately return calls seeking comment. Courts Administrator Mark Thompson did not immediately comment. But leaders from WATCH and the Domestic Abuse Project say the incident was the most recent in a string of insensitive comments by the judge.

WATCH executive director Marna Anderson provided examples in a news release that calls for Aldrich's resignation. She and Carol Arthur, director of the Domestic Abuse Project, say they have tried to work with the judge, his supervisors and the Board on Judicial Standards to no avail. "It just has come to a point where we don't have a choice," Arthur said in an interview.

Arthur said the domestic violence comment gives the unfortunate appearance that the judge was siding with a possible abuser. "We hold out judicial officers to a higher standard because they are our justice system. Matters before them can't be treated as a joke," Arthur said.

State judicial standards require judges to run dignified and respectful courtrooms.

Aldrich is not a gubernatorial appointee, as most judges are. He was elected in 1996 and re-elected in 2002 and 2008.

He recently began a two-year rotation in Family Court, handling divorces and custody issues as well as orders for protection.

Aldrich most recently presided over a case involving a lawsuit against the city of Minneapolis and City Council Member Lisa Goodman. He also has ruled on issues related to airport noise. Before he was elected, he ran his own private practice. In 1992, in a case involving a question of

jurisdiction, he represented a woman who had left Minnesota with her children to find a safe haven from alleged domestic abuse.

Aldrich is 68 years old. His term expires in 2015, but judges are required to retire at 70, so he has only two years remaining on the bench.

Rochelle Olson • 612-673-1747