

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Can two parts of the same court system sharply differ in how they handle domestic violence cases?

MINNEAPOLIS (April 5, 2011) — The response to non-felony domestic violence cases in Hennepin County's suburban courts differs substantially from that of the court in downtown Minneapolis, according to a new report being released tomorrow by WATCH.

Key findings in the report include the lack of accountability in the suburban courts for repeat offenders of domestic violence; a lack of emphasis on victim safety; and the need to improve the environment in suburban courts.

The report, *Improving the Response to Misdemeanor Domestic Violence Cases*, highlighted practices which make it easier for repeat offenders of domestic violence to go undetected. Among these practices are the lack of consequences for violating court orders and insufficient time allotted for thorough pre-sentence investigations (PSIs), according to Marna Anderson, executive director of WATCH.

While the downtown court in Minneapolis allocates one week for PSIs, the Hennepin County suburban courts allocate only four hours. By contrast, Anderson noted, the Ramsey County Courts allocate four weeks for PSIs.

"Four hours is totally inadequate for combing through the records of offenders, especially repeat offenders whose records often span multiple jurisdictions," said Anderson.

"It becomes even more unrealistic in those municipalities which share a part-time prosecutor. Important information is often missed or overlooked that would identify perpetrators as repeat offenders, allowing them to fly under the radar of the justice system because they avoid a criminal record.

"Yet we know that perpetrators of domestic violence tend to escalate their violent behavior until stopped by the courts or, in some tragic cases, serious harm to the partner that sometimes ends in murder. The courts lose a valuable opportunity to track offenders, while the offenders, more likely than not, continue their violent behavior," added Anderson.

Among some of the other findings in the report,

- In 25 percent of the domestic violence cases monitored by WATCH in the suburban courts, no pre-sentence investigation was ordered. This only happened seven percent of the time in the Minneapolis DV court.
- Twenty-five percent of domestic violence defendants convicted in the suburban courts were sentenced to probation without supervision.
- In one-third of the domestic violence cases before the suburban courts, judges failed to explain the no contact order to the defendants.
- Monitors who gathered information for this report documented that it was difficult or impossible to hear the proceedings 54 percent of the time.

Altogether, 31 volunteers and six WATCH staff members spent nearly 2,000 hours monitoring close to 1,500 appearances. The project was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice and Minnesota Department of Public Safety.

Among the report's many recommendations were the following:

- Develop a multi-disciplinary domestic violence steering committee in the suburban courts to oversee how cases are handled and to monitor progress towards an improved response.
- Require that PSIs be conducted in all domestic violence cases regardless of the convicted offense. Allow probation officers more time to complete PSIs.
- Reduce or eliminate probation to the court in domestic violence cases, and create a system for victims to report violations when offenders are unsupervised.

For a complete set of findings and recommendations, and a copy of the report, visit [watchmn.org](http://watchmn.org).

# # #

**For more information, contact:**

Marc Kessler, 651-690-0897

Marna Anderson, WATCH, 612-341-2747, ext. 5