Building Your Own Court Watch Program

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"The best ideas for change come from outsiders who are not biased by the assumptions and history that often blinds insiders to the need or potential for change."
— Hennepin County District Court Judge

WATCH (Women At The Court House), a non-profit organization founded in 1992 and based out of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is considered the preeminent court watch program in the country. Over the past twenty-three years, WATCH’s court monitoring program has helped bring about wide systemic change to Minnesota’s judicial system and has consulted on court monitoring programs across the country. WATCH was founded out of a collective community response to newspaper reports of an ineffective, revolving door justice system that failed to take crimes of domestic violence and sexual assault seriously. Since its founding, WATCH has developed guidelines for developing court monitoring programs throughout the country and has also produced training materials, webinars, and reports, all of which can be found on the WATCH website (www.WATCHMN.org). These include WATCH’s first report: Hennepin County Criminal Courts: A View from the Outside (1994).

Court Monitoring empowers people to create change by:
- Engaging the public in improving the justice system
- Holding the justice system accountable for protecting public safety
- Promoting an open, transparent court process
- Strengthening our democracy and the well-being of our society
When starting up a court watch program, the first step is to identify the key issues and processes that should be monitored. In its first year, WATCH met with members of the justice system, including judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers and police officers, as well as social service agencies and women’s advocacy groups, in order to focus on the unjust trends taking place within the judicial system. Once the key issues are identified, the second step is to develop a methodology to collect usable data surrounding the core issues. WATCH developed several forms, each specific to the hearing type, for its monitors to use. These forms are designed to focus the monitors on specific processes and procedures in the court. The third step is to determine the best way to collect and store data. WATCH developed a volunteer recruiting and training program for monitoring and data collection. WATCH also developed a database so that its data would be readily searchable and usable. It is imperative to be able to effectively use the data collected in order to communicate the benefits of domestic-violence informed decision making, to use that information to illuminate systemic problems, and to accomplish systems change.

In order to maintain a court watch program, there must be a dedicated team of driven individuals who are committed to the mission. WATCH currently operates with two part-time staff, Executive Director Amy Kern and Volunteer Coordinator Ellen Sackrison, and a Board of Directors.

WATCH has developed a model program that has proven to be successful; the necessary steps to establishing your own include: (1) developing your mission and vision; (2) identifying the issue needed to be addressed; (3) setting up and maintaining the daily activities of a court monitoring program; (4) developing appropriate forms and data management tools; (5) establishing a database that identifies the variables you are monitoring; (6) recruiting effective volunteer monitors and providing relevant training; (7) developing methods for obtaining access to court calendars, criminal complaints and any other relevant information; and (8) developing an effective strategy to disseminate the information collected, to communicate the benefits of domestic-violence informed decision making, and to use that information to accomplish systems change.

WATCH has proven that a small, volunteer-driven organization can have an impact on how cases of violence against women and children are handled in the criminal justice system.

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