

Poll: Courts complicated, slow but fair

Eight out of 10 Michigan residents believe state court proceedings take too long, cost too much and are too complicated. They support proposals to reduce court delays and costs, a statewide public opinion survey showed.

At the same time, they gave the Michigan Supreme Court a higher confidence rating than the news media, public schools, the U.S. Congress and the Michigan Legislature. Polls results were reported by the state Supreme Court.

The 26-member blue-ribbon Citizens' Commission to Improve Michigan Courts was named by the Michigan Supreme Court to recommend how Michigan's 240 state trial courts could be made more "user-friendly."

THE FIRST-EVER survey of Michigan citizens' attitudes toward the legal system was done for the Citizens' Commission to Improve Michigan Courts by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR).

Justice Patricia J. Boyle, the supervising Supreme Court justice for the citizens' panel, said the survey will be published as part of the commission's final report which will be released in mid-September.

"Many of the survey's findings confirm testimony the Commission heard at public hearings throughout the state," Boyle said.

MAJOR FINDINGS of the poll:
 • Most citizens believe court proceedings are hard to follow (84 percent), take too long (81 percent) and going to court is expensive (76 percent). Generally, persons who have been to court have a tendency to be more critical of court operations.

• More than one-third (36 percent) have a high level of confidence in the Michigan Supreme Court followed by the news media (26 percent), public schools (25 percent), U.S. Congress (22 percent) and the Michigan Legislature (20 percent). The U.S. Supreme Court (44 percent) ranked first.

• A majority of Michigan residents (62 percent) believe courts should operate at night and on weekends in addition to their regular hours.

• 62 percent favor use of informal procedures and panels of local citizens as an alternative to resolve disputes between neighbors, petty larceny cases and the like.

• 66 percent favor developing criminal trial procedures so that defendants are physically separated from victims and witnesses.

• 54 percent oppose establishing legal insurance similar to car or health insurance.

• 73 percent oppose changing Michigan's present system of electing judges to an appointive system, out 76 percent would favor establishing a judicial performance review committee that would recommend retention or removal of judges.

• 71 percent believe courts do not treat poor people the same as they do wealthy people. (76 percent of the Detroit respondents felt this way, and 68 percent outside residents held this view.)

• 86 percent agreed with the statement that "court decisions are sometimes influenced by political considerations."

'Many of the survey's findings confirm testimony the Commission heard at public hearings throughout the state.'

— Justice Boyle

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Loan program a boon

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"That was half of what we'd normally collect from taxes," said Perry. "We'd normally receive that money over a period of time spanning as late as November. So we can invest that money at 7 percent interest instead of waiting for it. We don't need the money until the bills begin coming in in September, when we start paying teachers salaries and for books."

According to Perry, another, though smaller, bonanza was realized when Birmingham and Southfield Township were able to invest the money for 20 days before turning it over to the Birmingham schools. Grant said Oakland Intermediate received \$14 million in the program, including \$1.2 million from Birmingham, \$207,000 from the city of Farmington, \$2.9 million from Farmington Hills and \$770,000 from Southfield Township.

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