

County court hailed for efficiencies

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Chief Justice Dorothy Comstock Riley wants Michigan to look at a "unified trial bench" as the best answer to more efficient and accessible courts.

In her state of the judiciary address, Riley praised the Legislature for creating a 21-member commission to review the structure of state courts.

Michigan's trial courts include 55 circuit courts, which handle major civil and criminal cases, Detroit Recorder's Court, handling criminal cases in the city, county probate courts, handling estate and juvenile matters, 98 district courts, handling minor civil, misdemeanor and pre-trial criminal cases, and five municipal courts.

"Many states have determined that a unified trial bench is the bedrock upon which meaningful judicial reform has been built,"

— Dorothy Comstock Riley
state chief justice

● In two years the Court of Appeals caseload has leaped 34 percent, mostly in criminal cases.

● The Legislature has defined new crimes: drug paraphernalia, chop shops, animal abandonment, medical waste dumping, food stamp fraud and ethnic intimidation.

● A 1988 law opening public access to juvenile cases has resulted in probate courts confronting shortages of courtroom space, file storage space and staffs to process requests for files.

● In two years, domestic relations cases increased 12 percent. These include: divorce, separate maintenance, paternity, child custody, child support and visitation.

● "Drug activity, once thought to be only an epidemic, is now virtually out of control."

● "The increase in civil litigation is spawned in large part by continuing economic expansion."

RILEY PRAISED many efficiency steps already taken by courts.

Oakland Circuit Court was praised for its videotape recording experiment. Oakland's Friend of the Court office was singled out for its system of storing court documents in computers.

Riley said the quality of child protection has been improved by Foster Care Review Boards operating in Wayne, Oakland and nine other counties.

STATE COURTS are burdened not only by the sheer number of cases exceeding the rate of population growth, but by more laws and demands for work placed on them by the public, she said.

Examples:

Local judges 'most respected'

By Ralph R. Echlinaw
staff writer

Four Oakland County judges were among 25 state jurists named Michigan's "most respected" by Michigan Lawyers Weekly newspaper.

"I can't believe it," said Circuit Judge Edward Sosnick. "It's a nice honor. This is a very lonely job. You generally hear the bad and you rarely hear the good."

Sosnick, a Bloomfield Township resident, has been on the circuit bench for 16 months. Previously he served four years in the 48th District Court.

Sosnick told Lawyers Weekly his most satisfying moment on the bench was getting through his first district court case in 1984, the King Boats trial. King Boats was a Birmingham sheep dog that attacked and killed an 87-year-old woman.

The other three Oakland judges selected were Steven N. Andrews, Hilda R. Gage and Gene Schnelz.

The 25 judges were selected based on a Lawyers Weekly survey of more than 1,500 of its attorney readers. Lawyers Weekly editor Dan Sharp cautioned, however, that judges in the populous counties had an advantage over their more rural counterparts.

With more attorneys in counties like Oakland, it was only natural that Oakland judges would fair well in the contest. "The fact that some-



Judge Edward Sosnick



Judge Hilda Gage

one was not selected doesn't mean they're not doing a good job, especially in the smaller counties," Sharp said. "There are a lot of judges doing good work and nobody knows about it."

JUDGE SCHNELZ, who is known for his humor, agreed with Sosnick that "it's nice to get a pat on the back," adding that it's "usually lower and applied with a foot. You can't get too excited because tomorrow

you might find yourself on the other end of the list."

A Walled Lake resident, Schnelz has been on the circuit bench for 12 years. Before that he was chief judge of the 33rd District Court.

Two of Schnelz's most satisfying moments as a judge, he told Lawyers Weekly, were swearing in his son, Kurt, as an attorney and having his annual picture on the bench with his granddaughter on his lap.

Judge Andrews, a Bloomfield Hills resident, 14-year circuit court veter-

an and chief circuit court justice, was also "very honored to have been selected. It's seldom that we hear such positive statements."

Andrews told Lawyers Weekly the biggest problem facing his court is too many cases and not enough time to handle them. "Our criminal dockets consume an unprecedented and disproportionate amount of our time and energies," he said.

Judge Gage, a 12-year Circuit Court veteran and Bloomfield Township resident, agreed with Andrews. "The volume of cases has reached unmanageable proportions," she said. "You've got to make these snap decisions. Hopefully, you do the best you can, but it's just overwhelming."

Gage said winning the Lawyers Weekly honor was a pleasant surprise. "When we sit up on that bench, it's isolating and we rarely get feedback."

CHARLES CLIPPERT, Oakland County Bar Association president-elect, had high praise for all four Oakland judicial winners. "They're certainly all very qualified and highly respected judges," he said. "For the most part, they're hard working, intelligent people of integrity."

Sharp said most of the winners in his contest wrote "nice and pretty humble letters," but some had a small request: "A lot of them said, 'Gee, can you get me extra copies of your paper?'"

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