Annual Report for Court Watch – 2021-2022

After a hiatus of two years because of COVID-19, Court Watch is back to monitoring once again. Two members of our team began monitoring in November and then another three participated. We began by going to Family Court in the City of Poughkeepsie but it was substantially very different from previous times. Before we could attend court, we had to go online to the Family Court website, select the Judge we wanted to monitor, and then make a special request to the Court Clerk who would then have to approve our request either by phone or email, and follow up by making special arrangements for our arrival. A Court Officer had to be appointed to escort us to a Conference Room where, still maintaining the mask requirement, we would be able to view the proceedings on a huge monitor. All proceedings were conducted virtually; we could not physically enter any courtroom; the Judge, litigants, attorneys, and court personnel, as well as the staff, all appeared on screen. Once checked in, we would sit inside the Conference Room for 3-4 hours, take notes, and fill out our special Observation Form. At the conclusion of the session, an official would enter the Conference Room, seize the confidential Court Calendars which indicated the cases for the day, and formally dismiss us.

It seemed a bit complicated at first, but we adjusted. So far, we have 3-4 monitors who monitor on a continual basis. Hopefully, more veteran monitors will follow, once we return to our usual way of monitoring and we are able to follow a fixed schedule. Recently, we have just been informed that some of the sessions will be conducted in-person, so there will be fewer complicated upfront procedures that have to be adhered to and our traditional methods will inevitably return.

Monitors who have been virtually monitoring have been trying out a new Observation Form. Through several Zoom meetings over a period of several weeks last summer during COVID-19, our team was able to discuss many pertinent issues regarding the old form, hammer out some questionable areas, and make suggestions for a better, more improved, practical form. Our data entry person has already begun to enter some of our data from the new form on a new spreadsheet and, currently, we are in the process of evaluating the form and determining whether or not it is more efficient and user-friendly. We are also in the process of seeing whether or not our data collection can be effectively and efficiently posted on a new assessment spreadsheet we are trying out—or-- if we need to return to our traditional, but very expensive, vehicle: *Survey Monkey*. Only time will tell and reveal if the information we collect is suitable for our assessment needs and if our new spreadsheet really works.

If successful, we will be in a better position to address questionable issues, draw accurate conclusions about possible ways to improve the court, and then be in a suitable position to share our monitoring information with the appropriate persons who might implement some of our recommendations.

Other things we’ve done this year:

Due to our concerns over the ways women were being treated during COVID-19, we invited Dr. Branka Bryan, the Executive Director of Grace Smith House to speak to us via Zoom on April 30, 2021, about how women were coping at the shelter. She noted that there was a serious uptick in the severity of abuse, problems with the use of electronic equipment in reporting abuse, lack of serving the respondent, unpreparedness of key individuals, and many other concerns. Her talk was certainly an eye-opener into the further complications that had erupted during the pandemic and problems that the court faced in handling domestic violence cases.

As a result of Dr. Branka’s talk with us and because of COVID-19, we knew there were significant problems taking place regarding logistical and operational procedures of the court. We were concerned that women who needed Orders of Protection were adversely being impacted. We also knew that the use of sophisticated electronic equipment was having a negative effect on women who didn’t own iphones or didn’t know how to effectively operate electronic equipment for virtual court appearances. For this reason, we wrote a letter to the Honorable Joseph A. Egitto, Supervising Judge at Family Court on May 17, 2021, sharing our concerns with him and asking for assurances that our concerns would addressed.

Recently, on April 9, 2022, our Court Watch team gathered together at the Beekman Arms to honor Jody Miller, Chair of the Dutchess County Commission on Human Rights. Ms. Miller was the executive director of the Mediation Center of Dutchess County and with her team created the award-winning, nationally known *Domestic Violence and Mediation Safety Project*. The information she shared was exceptionally pertinent to us as domestic violence advocates.

Members of our Court Watch Team are also continually updated with seasonal newsletter from Family Services regarding the status of domestic violence cases in Poughkeepsie and the new services Family Services provide to help mitigate problems women face related to domestic violence.

We are also occasionally updated, as we obtain more information, regarding the case of Nikki Addimando, who after having suffered through years of domestic violence, killed her husband and is now serving a 25-year sentence in prison. Some members of our team were present at Nikki’s trial and continue to keep track of her appeals and her future

Last, but not least, we still want to mention that we continue to mourn the death of Sandy Sherman in January of 2021. She was a vibrant and loyal member of our Court Watch team and we honor her, love her, and continue to miss her.

Regarding plans for our future, so far we have no current plans to train new monitors for our team, since we are still struggling to get back to some sort of normalcy. Once we return to a fixed schedule of monitoring, we will be able to take those interested in monitoring to court with us on an exploratory, dry-run basis, and then consider plans to recruit serious new members to our team.

That is all to report for now. We will continue to monitor court cases where domestic violence is an issue and still seek to fulfill our mission of protecting those who are seeking justice in the courts.

Ann Pinna, Chair

May 19, 2022