

Court Watch End-of-Year Report – 2023

PRESENT STATUS

This year has been especially challenging for Court Watch. As a result of COVID, we no longer attend Family Court according to our usual prearranged schedule. Instead, we must go online to retrieve the court calendar, look through the listing of court sessions, make a selection, request the date, time, and judge we wish to observe, inform the Court Clerk who then will confirm our request and prepare an escort officer to accompany us to the appropriate room and give us the prepared court calendar for our observational purposes. All in all, it's a bit more convoluted than before. We are happy, though, that we are once again allowed to enter the actual courtroom. Prior to this, due to COVID protocols, monitors were allocated to a tiny conference room where we observed cases on a huge computer monitor. Now, most court cases are “in-person” and inside the actual courtroom; however, there are still occasional “virtual appearances” of litigants and attorneys. Nevertheless, despite the new logistical format and procedures, there are still monitors who faithfully continue to observe, as they have ever since Court Watch was initiated in 2010. Currently, we have 7 monitors who still wish to remain on our team; however, only a few have been actively monitoring for the past 2 years. Others are evaluating the new procedure to see if it works for them.

RECRUITING AND TRAINING NEW MONITORS

A few new members to AAUW have expressed an interest in Court Watch and would like to be trained as new monitors. We are glad to introduce them to the vigors of what monitoring really entails and will begin by taking them to a few of our court sessions to “shadow” us so they can determine if court monitoring is something they really want to do. In the past, we first trained candidates who thought they wanted to monitor and then, after “classroom” training, brought them into the courtroom. Candidates discovered that once they were in the courtroom, it was not suitable for them. Now, we've reversed our procedure and we take those who are interested into the courtroom to observe first, so they can determine if this is something they'd like to train for.

This year, we expect to possibly train two or three new monitors in the fall, and, hopefully, add a few new monitors to our team. Training to be a monitor is intensive and many candidates in the past who have shown prior interest have dropped out as witnessing difficult cases can be stressful and unsettling. Others have found the commitment of devoting an entire morning or afternoon, once or twice a month on a continual basis, is too vigorous a schedule for them to continue with our program and have dropped out as a result.

COURT MONITORING REPORTS

In the past, we have submitted detailed reports to court judges and personnel and offered suggestions as to the ways court sessions may be improved. The reports are based on hundreds of hours of observations of court sessions and a variety of judges made by our team of monitors who fill out detailed Observation Forms every time they go to court. From these Observations Forms, a quantitative analysis is performed, results are tallied, and a fair and accurate assessment of our observations is made.

In the past, we have had a devoted data entry person who entered all our Observation Forms into Survey Monkey, then analyzed all our data and issued a thorough final report. However, that person has since left AAUW and moved to another state. We did manage to appoint another volunteer to perform our data entry, but that person has since retired from AAUW due to other interests. As of now,

we have no data entry person in place. This, coupled with the fact that we have so few monitors, has compromised our ability to make a fair assessment of our observations of court proceedings. This is further hindered because we are into the process of exploring an alternate vehicle of assessment that is less expensive than Survey Monkey. We will wait until we are on a sounder footing and have made a wise choice as to a proper assessment format, and also have accumulated many more completed Observation Forms in order to reach a fair and accurate evaluation for reporting purposes. When that happens, we will then be able to coordinate our observation data and properly craft a detailed report which we can then submit to the judges and court personnel as we have done in the past.

CONCLUSION & SUMMARY

To sum up, we monitors will continue to observe and monitor Family Court on a regular basis throughout the coming year. We hope to perform a quantitative analysis, and submit a fair and accurate assessment report based on our observations to Family Court judges and personnel. In order to do this, we hope to add one or two additional monitors to our team. Meanwhile, we will continue to do due diligence, to attend morning or afternoon sessions of Family Court, and to oversee that women who are victimized by sexual violence are protected and treated fairly in the justice system. We hope to continue to fulfill our mission of maintaining gender equality and fair and equal justice for all. For now, we'll continue in the vein we have been: trying to make a difference by being "in the room where it happens." and hoping to make positive changes not only by our presence in the courtroom, but by our continuing commitment to advocacy for women empowerment as well.

Submitted by Ann Pinna, *Court Watch Chair*
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