

Minutes
Public Service and Trust Commission
Committee on Self-represented Parties
December 5, 2008

The Public Service and Trust Commission Committee on Self-represented Parties met at 225 Spring Street, Wethersfield, CT in Room 424 on December 5, 2008.

Those in attendance: Hon. Elizabeth A. Bozzuto (co-chair), Hon. Raymond R. Norko (co-chair), Ms. Priscilla Arroyo, Chief Family Support Magistrate Sandra Sosnoff Baird, Atty. Janice Chiaretto, Hon. Henry S. Cohn, Atty. Joseph D. D'Alesio, Atty. Anthony DiPentima, Mr. Jeffrey Dowd, Atty. Steven D. Eppler-Einstein, Atty. Timothy S. Fisher, Ms. Krista Hess, Atty. Daniel B. Horwitch, Mr. David M. Iaccarino, Atty. Norman K. Janes, Hon. Clarence J. Jones, Atty. Hugh C. Macgill, Hon. John J. Nazzaro, Family Support Magistrate Christopher F. Oliveira, Atty. Susan Cohan Reeve, Atty. Mark D. Shea, Hon. Jonathan E. Silbert, Hon. Mary E. Sommer, and Hon. Cynthia K. Swienton.

The meeting was called to order at 2:08 p.m.

1. Judge Bozzuto and Judge Norko welcomed everyone and began introductions of committee members, support staff, and guest Attorney D'Alesio.
2. Judge Bozzuto provided an overview of the strategic planning and implementation process, which began in May 2007 when the Chief Justice formed the Public Service and Trust Commission. The Commission gathered information from a number of sources (focus groups, public hearings and surveys) to obtain different perspectives from branch stakeholders. From this information, the Commission was able to complete the first comprehensive Branch-wide strategic plan, which contains outcome goals for five areas: access to the courts, changing demographics, delivery of branch services, collaboration of the Branch with those who interact with it or have an interest in its activities, and accountability on the part of the Branch to the people it serves. These five areas will be addressed in the Branch's implementation plan, which initially includes thirty-six initiatives to be implemented in phases. The Committee on Self-represented Parties is just one of seven new committees that is a part of this first phase.
3. Judge Norko reviewed the committee charge and the list of subcommittees, which had been provided to the members of the committee prior to the meeting.
4. Several committee members prepared written reports or gave an oral report of existing Judicial Branch programs, activities and resources with respect to self-represented parties. Overall, members agreed that the number of self-represented parties in Connecticut has significantly risen, regardless of the person's income. It appears that people choose to represent themselves because they are either indigent and cannot afford an attorney, or they have comfortable means, but can save money by accessing the legal information available to them through mainly on-line sources. Regardless of the reasons, the interaction can be frustrating for self-represented parties and court staff alike.

Several members commented on current services and resources such as access to the Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks; information that is currently available on the Judicial Branch website; the Supreme and Appellate court system introductory letter to self-represented parties and other Branch-wide publications; and policies in juvenile court that will appoint an attorney if the party cannot afford one. In addition, some Judicial Branch forms have been and will be revised to include the use of plain language principles and readability. Also, the Branch is currently developing a web-based program to assist self-represented parties in filling out Judicial Branch forms, and the Bench Bar/Small Claims Committee will submit recommendations to revise the Judicial Branch website to assist parties in the small claims process.

The committee also discussed the state of non-profit legal services organizations, such as Connecticut Legal Services, which serves a substantial group each year, approximately 25,000 low-income people requiring legal advice and representation. The fate of these programs is unknown as their funding is affected by the country's current economic climate. The Connecticut Bar Foundation's IOLTA/IOTA grants fund two-thirds of these non-profit organizations. It has been reported that these grants will decrease from twenty million in 2007 to a projected four million in the upcoming year. Judge Norko directed the members to read the article in their handouts that describes recommendations from President-Elect Obama's transition team concerning legal services organizations.

Attorney D'Alesio focused the committee on their charge, which was developed from the information gathered from the focus groups, surveys and public hearings during the strategic planning phase. The committee should devise ways to address 1) the changing character of the legal profession, including unbundling of legal services, 2) indigent self-represented parties, and 3) self-represented parties who have means, but voluntarily choose to represent themselves. The committee should also address the core values (fairness, integrity, professionalism and respect) that represent what is important to the people we serve. Support Staff of the various committees under the implementation plan will meet periodically with each other to discuss each committee's activities to be sure there is no overlap of the work being done. Attorney D'Alesio also informed the committee that performance measures will be necessary for any recommendation that is made.

5. Judge Norko discussed the subcommittees that were formed: Forms, Legal Services, Support Services, Technology, and Training. Members were assigned to a subcommittee based on their area of expertise. Subcommittees should review their individual charges and meet at least once before the next committee meeting. They were also advised to review the information given to each member regarding current programs in place to assist self-represented parties, and also investigate what other states are doing. In some cases, there may be more intensive assistance necessary in an area like housing or small claims, while other remedies will be appropriate Branch-wide.
6. The Committee on Self-represented Parties must provide a progress report to the Public Service and Trust Commission on January 29, 2009. A final written report of the committee's recommendations is due June of 2009.

The subcommittees should ideally meet twice before the next committee meeting. Subcommittee members may contact Ms. Krista Hess if they would like to obtain copies of articles, statistics and other information that is available regarding self-represented parties. The subcommittee final report should be a written report of recommendations that answer the subcommittee charge.

The next meeting of the Committee on Self-represented Parties will be January 23, 2009 at 2:00 p.m. at 225 Spring Street in Wethersfield, CT.

7. The meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.