

*Strategies & Priorities
for Minnesota's Judicial Branch
Focus on the Future*



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~ A Message from the Chief Justice ~



Since Minnesotans established their court system more than 150 years ago, the state has experienced tremendous demographic and social change. The cases that play out in our courtrooms reflect those changes and the challenges they present.

Minnesota's judges care deeply about these issues and persistently work to administer justice fairly and efficiently. We are working aggressively to find more effective ways to provide child protection, treat substance abuse and prevent juvenile delinquency. We are assessing the presence of racial bias in our system and working to eliminate it. And we are targeting the problems that bring people into the courts in the first place by exploring innovative programs like problem-solving courts and restorative justice.

The next step for the judicial branch is to prepare for our future challenges by setting and maintaining our strategic priorities.

This document is an overview of our work thus far to articulate the court system's values and goals. But more importantly, it is our blueprint for the future.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kathleen A. Blatz".

*Kathleen A. Blatz
Chief Justice*





Planning for the Future

The Minnesota Court System understands that it must actively plan for the future. That is why several years ago the Conference of Chief Judges led the judiciary's effort to establish a strategic plan. Representatives from the Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, trial courts and court administration formed a steering committee to begin planning. The committee analyzed trends present in the criminal and civil justice systems, and assessed the Judicial Branch's organization and resources. In addition, more than 300 people participated in focus groups to provide information and give their opinions on judicial branch priorities.

The committee's work in 1997 led to the creation of "The Judicial Branch Strategic Plan for the Year 2005", which includes mission and vision statements, as well as the core values that continue to guide the judiciary's goals for the future.

Judicial Branch Mission
To provide justice through a system that assures equal access for the fair and timely resolution of cases and controversies.

Judicial Branch Vision
In the year 2005, the general public and those who use the court system will refer to it as accessible, fair, consistent, responsive, free of discrimination, independent and well managed.

JUDICIAL BRANCH CORE VALUES

- ◆ Judicial independence and accountability
- ◆ Equal justice; fair and respectful treatment of all
- ◆ Customer focused – internally and externally
- ◆ Accessible
- ◆ Affordable
- ◆ Quality – commitment to excellence and a quality work environment
- ◆ Commitment to effective communication
- ◆ Predictability of procedures
- ◆ Balance between individualized justice and predictability of outcome
- ◆ Efficient
- ◆ Innovative and self-analytical

Developing Long-Range Strategic Issues



The 1997 effort established the following as themes or strategic issues that chart the future direction of the Judicial Branch.

Judicial Branch Leadership.

The Judicial Branch must exercise a greater leadership role to establish and advance a justice system agenda through inter-branch and cross justice system policy coordination and collaboration.

Coordination and Collaboration at the Operating Level within the Local Justice System.

The justice system and social service agencies must be fully coordinated and integrated in performing their functions.

Access to Justice.

The justice system needs to be open, affordable and understandable, and provide minimum levels of service to all users.

Accountability.

The Minnesota Judicial System should be accountable to the public.

Expanded Use of Alternative Forums.

The use of alternative forums for different case types should be expanded.

Case Management.

In the handling of cases, Judicial Branch personnel must assume responsibility for the active management of cases from filing to disposition.

Efficiency through the Sharing of Resources.

Greater efficiencies can be realized by consolidation, relaxing venue, making use of regional trial centers and sharing resources across county and district lines.

Crime and the Court's Role in Promoting the Rule of Law.

Courts should explore new ways to expedite the court process, increase the accountability and effectiveness of court sanctions and articulate to the public their sentencing process, considerations and limitations.

Expanded and Innovative Use of Technology.

Technology should be used to improve and expedite the work of the courts, including making justice more consumer-oriented.



Focusing on the future

This is the fourth year of identifying and implementing action steps to achieve the goals of the Judicial Branch strategic plan. After several months of consultation with key court system stakeholders, the judiciary has identified four strategic areas on which to focus its resources in the year 2001.

Access to Justice

In the last decade, Minnesota's court system has seen its caseload increase by nearly 40 percent to more than 2 million cases a year. This trend is expected to continue. We must develop and maintain adequate personnel, financial and service infrastructure in order to ensure the provision of, and access to, justice.

This focus area includes:

- ◆ Securing the judgeships necessary to adequately handle our burgeoning caseload.
- ◆ Continuing a major judicial branch transformation, as the court system transitions from a largely county-focused and funded trial court system to our increasingly unified, state-funded branch of state government.
- ◆ Assessing court employee compensation to assure that the court system attracts and retains competent employees in the midst of a tight labor market.
- ◆ Providing critically needed equipment, training and other expenses to meet the public's demand for judicial services, with an eye on the court system's strategic plan and an end goal of remaining poised to meet the system's future challenges.

Strategic Issues/Themes Reflected:

- ◇ *Judicial Branch leadership*
- ◇ *Access to justice*

Children's Justice

Eighty percent of our prison inmates spent time in our child protection system as abused or neglected children. For too many children, the child protection system has become a feeder system into our adult criminal courts. We recognize the link between childhood maltreatment and subsequent juvenile delinquency and crime. Children must receive priority attention and services while involved in the court system.



This focus area includes:

- ◆ Implementing child protection case processing best practices in 12 pilot sites to more expeditiously and effectively provide safe and permanent families for children.
- ◆ Conducting multi-disciplinary training to enhance child protection stakeholder substantive knowledge and coordination of services.
- ◆ Examining and recommending improvements in the adequacy and coordination of existing juvenile delinquency services in five pilot counties.
- ◆ Developing and implementing juvenile delinquency case processing best practices in two pilot counties.
- ◆ Establishing a standing Advisory Committee on Juvenile Court Rules to assure ongoing examination and updating of procedures and rules governing juvenile cases.

Strategic Issues/Themes Reflected:

- ◇ *Judicial Branch leadership*
- ◇ *Coordination and collaboration at the operating level within the local justice system*
- ◇ *Accountability*
- ◇ *Case management*



Public Trust and Confidence

An overwhelming majority of Minnesotans has confidence in the state's judicial branch as an institution. Minnesotans believe judges are well equipped to do their jobs, and court staff is helpful and courteous.

But Minnesotans also have concerns about the timeliness and cost of bringing a case to court, and the judiciary's treatment of persons of color.

Nearly 40 percent of Minnesotans say they know little or nothing about the court system. In addition, nearly half of Minnesotans say they think the courts are out of touch with what's going on in their communities.

Courts must take an active role in continually assessing the perspectives and experiences of the public, and actively work to educate funding and policy groups, as well as the public, about the judicial system and the challenges that the courts face.

This focus area includes:

- ◆ Initiating new and expanded opportunities for judges, court employees and other court system representatives to educate Minnesotans of all ages about the court system, its constitutional function and the societal issues in which it plays a role.
- ◆ Utilizing the court system's web site and other technology to improve customer service and the availability of basic information for jurors, litigants, educators, students and the public.
- ◆ Compiling and distributing a list of communities of color to assist judges across the state in scheduling outreach events and speaking engagements to bridge the cultural gap between those communities and the court system.
- ◆ Improving the treatment of jurors before, during and after trial — minimizing waiting time, facilitating juror understanding and decision-making, and communicating more effectively with jurors about their role.
- ◆ Communicating more effectively the importance of the independence of the Judicial Branch to our constitutional form of government.

Strategic Issues/Themes Reflected:

- ◇ *Judicial Branch leadership*
- ◇ *Access to justice*
- ◇ *Accountability*
- ◇ *Crime and the court's role in promoting the rule of law*

Technology

Minnesota's judges often must make their decisions without timely, accurate or complete information. Current technology used by the court system is decades old and is poorly integrated with other criminal justice agencies. Effective scheduling, electronic filing and critical judicial support are not possible under the current system.

The replacement of the court's outdated case management system under the MNCIS (Minnesota Court Information System) Project will significantly improve the collection, storage, retrieval, tracking and electronic sharing of trial and appellate court case information for use by courts, other justice system agencies and the public. It will also serve as the statewide court component of the larger state criminal justice integration effort known as CriMNet.



This focus area includes:

- ◆ Selecting a vendor and software package that will best meet the comprehensive requirements of the court and criminal justice system.
- ◆ Completing the detail design and commencing customization of the selected software package.
- ◆ Participating in the development of the CriMNet project.

Strategic Issues/Themes Reflected:

- ◇ *Judicial Branch leadership*
- ◇ *Coordination and collaboration at the operating level within the local justice system*
- ◇ *Access to justice*
- ◇ *Accountability*
- ◇ *Case management*
- ◇ *Efficiency through the sharing of resources*
- ◇ *Crime and the court's role in promoting the rule of law*
- ◇ *Expanded and innovative use of technology*



“Next to doing right, the great object in the administration of justice should be to give public satisfaction.”
- John Jay, first United States Chief Justice.

