



Citizen Outreach by North Carolina Judicial Branch Officials: Comparison of Three Projects

by John Stephens

North Carolina judicial branch officials work with the public as a central part of their duties. These officials come into contact with citizens in open court hearings; when citizens serve as plaintiffs, defendants, or jurors; and during cases that attract significant public attention. Elections determine who serves in many judicial branch offices.

Given the challenge of fostering public understanding and support of and trust in the judicial system, some judicial branch officials have recently tried different methods of citizen outreach in their jurisdictions. They consider these efforts part of an ongoing duty to be responsive and transparent and to address both misconceptions and well-founded concerns citizens have about how the courts operate.

This bulletin reports on three projects undertaken by North Carolina judicial officials to educate constituents about judicial system operations and to engage constituents in discussions centered around some recent criticisms made about judicial system procedures. This bulletin will

- identify common and divergent goals for citizen outreach projects,
- describe the different programs, and
- offer initial guidance for North Carolina judicial branch officials interested in leading similar efforts in their communities.

Executive Summary

In 1996 the Commission for the Future of Justice and the Courts in North Carolina identified public outreach and education as an important challenge for the state's judicial branch officials. These officials may respond to the lack of constituents' knowledge and citizen concerns about judicial system procedures in various ways.

The following three projects are described and compared:

- A Fayetteville district court judge is producing a monthly thirty-minute program about judicial branch and law enforcement issues for the local cable TV access channel. District Court Judge Beth Keever initiated the program in 1993 with another district court judge as co-host. Since 2005 various other local judicial branch officials have joined Keever to co-host the program.
- The League of Women Voters (LWV) of Asheville–Buncombe sponsored a three-session program that was conducted by judicial branch officials from District 28 (Buncombe County). The ninety-minute sessions, held in the courthouse on consecutive Thursday evenings in April and May of 2007, addressed many aspects of court operations. The audience of about forty-five could ask questions. The last session included an abbreviated simulation of court action on a civil suit, including closing arguments where some of the audience portrayed members of the jury.
- A public forum was held in Durham to address criticisms from some of the city's Partners Against Crime (PAC) neighborhood groups. The criticisms stemmed from several well-publicized instances in which a person charged with a crime and out on bail was arrested for a new offense. The PAC groups were concerned about how the bail bond system worked in relation to such situations. The LWV of Durham-Orange-Chatham and the Durham Bail Bond Alliance provided financial and planning support. A panel including judges, the district attorney, public and private defense bar, bail bondsmen, and others presented information and responded to questions and criticisms from the audience in a two-hour evening gathering in April 2007 held in a middle school auditorium.

Analysis of these three efforts identifies the different goals of the organizers, the resources available to them, and the choices they made as they undertook these public outreach projects. Each project required significant time commitments from judicial officials but cost relatively little. Because there appears to be little rigorous study of these types of projects in North Carolina, recommendations for those planning similar projects are modest: clarify goals and the needed resources and develop a specific strategy to balance teaching citizens about the court system with listening and responding to citizens' concerns.

Background

Public Perception of and Trust in the Judicial Branch

Why would judicial branch officials choose to do special citizen outreach? Because citizens attend open court proceedings, serve as jurors, or are exposed to media coverage of many kinds of serious cases, they see the work of judicial officials on a daily basis. Moreover, prosecutors, clerks of court, and district and superior court judges are elected officials and are thus accountable for their actions and performance. Their interactions with citizens during election campaigns probably reinforce a sense of accountability among these officials.

The Commission for the Future of Justice and the Courts in North Carolina has found that "North Carolinians do not know very much about their court system and many are unhappy with

what they see and perceive.”¹ In general, public confidence in the courts is low, at least in comparison to other groups and institutions such as churches, the medical establishment, public schools, the news media, and the state legislature.² In a 1995 survey, local courts were rated favorably by 50.3 percent of respondents while 24.2 percent rated them unfavorably.³ More recent data is similar. The 2003 North Carolina Civic Index reported that 40.8 percent of respondents had “some confidence” and 24.2 percent of respondents had “very little confidence” in the court system.⁴ Data from national opinion surveys reflect a further decline in public confidence in the courts. In 2004, 34 percent of respondents had “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence and 23 percent had “little” or “no confidence” in the courts. In 2007, 19 percent had “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence and 35 percent had “little” or “no confidence.”⁵ Data from other states on public opinion and the courts were gathered from the 1970s to about 2000.⁶ Survey data pertinent to particular North Carolina judicial districts has not been located.

Beyond the survey data, there has been an array of criticisms concerning the court system. Constituents have raised questions about the lack of access for low-income or poorly educated people, the slowness and expense of proceedings, and the equity of outcomes for similarly situated claimants or defendants. The Commission for the Future of Justice and the Courts summarized the range of concerns thus: “The courts are seen as too slow, too lenient and too expensive. More disturbing, the public perceives that the system unfairly favors the affluent, is too easily manipulated by lawyers, and often treats the victims of crimes worse than it does the criminals.”⁷ The commission also responded to the view held by many judicial officials that unfavorable public attitudes rest more on misperception than on actual performance: “The truth is . . . the problems of the courts are the result of both performance and perception. And the perception will not improve without improvements in performance and communication.”⁸ The commission’s recommendations included providing general information to the public as well as creating educational and outreach programs at the circuit level. As a result, some judicial branch officials are finding different ways of communicating with and educating North Carolina residents about the court system.

1. Commission for the Future of Justice and the Courts in North Carolina, *Without Favor, Denial or Delay: A Court System for the 21st Century* (Raleigh, N.C.: Administrative Office of the Courts, 1996), 62.

2. *Ibid.*, 62–63.

3. Detailed reports and more specific analysis can be found in Wilkerson & Associates, *North Carolina Court System Research*, prepared for the Commission for the Future of Justice and the Courts in North Carolina (1995).

4. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, *North Carolina Civic Index* (Chapel Hill: School of Government, the University of North Carolina, 2003), 11.

5. Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Public Attitudes toward Crime and Criminal Justice-Related Topics,” Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007), www.albany.edu/sourcebook/tost_2.html#2_ar.

6. Gene Kroupa and Associates, *Wisconsin Civil Legal Needs Study Final Report* (Madison, Wis.: State Bar of Wisconsin, 2007), 14. For survey responses about legal representation and respondents’ satisfaction with case resolutions and beliefs that “they were fairly treated,” see Bridging the Justice Gap: Gauging the Public’s Unmet Civil Legal Needs, *Wisconsin Lawyer*, April 2007, www.legalexplorer.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Wisconsin_Lawyer&template=/CM/Content/Display.cfm&contentid=64322. See also David B. Rottman and others, *Perceptions of the Courts in Your Community: The Influence of Experience, Race and Ethnicity—Executive Summary* (The National Center for State Courts, 2003), www.ncsconline.org/WC/Publications/Res_AmtPTC_PerceptionsExecSumPub.pdf; David B. Rottman, “Public Perceptions of State Courts: A Primer” (paper presented at the Third National Symposium on Court Management, Atlanta, GA, Aug. 13–19, 2000), www.ncsconline.org/WC/Publications/Res_AmtPTC_PublicPerceptions_PrimerPub.pdf.

7. Commission for the Future of Justice and the Courts in North Carolina, *Without Favor, Denial or Delay: A Court System for the 21st Century* (Raleigh, N.C.: Administrative Office of the Courts, 1996), 62.

8. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

Outreach as an Obligation of Being an Elected Official

Judicial branch officials are accountable to the citizenry through regular elections. From local judicial districts to the state supreme court, the electorate decides who serves. In this sense, those charged with the operation of the judicial system must be responsive to popular will, at least as expressed through elections.

Some judicial officials believe this sense of responsiveness should extend beyond the election period. They deem it wise, as public officials with significant power, to be available outside of their normal work duties to serve as educators of the public. Many judges, prosecutors, and attorneys speak in schools, for example. In addition, some judicial officials want to learn from experiences in which they are accessible and responsive beyond their election campaigns and the regular duties of office. One of the projects described below grew out of a context in which one judge listened to the concerns of neighborhood anti-crime groups.

Limitations of Regular Workplace Duties

A third reason judicial branch officials seek a different kind of exchange with citizens arises from the nature of the day-to-day work of these officials. Clerks, attorneys, judges, and others have a multitude of “transactions” with citizens who engage with the courts in their roles as jurors, plaintiffs, defendants, victims, and lawyers. Judicial officials necessarily inform citizens and clients about the legal system and particular procedures on a case-by-case basis.

As many see it, however, judicial branch officials should not only educate people as individuals involved with a particular legal proceeding; they should also respond to concerns that transcend particular cases. There are a variety of efforts to educate citizens,⁹ but aside from campaign activities that often include forums and informal exchanges with constituents, what are the appropriate venues for the state’s judicial officials to hear citizens’ concerns and critiques? How can problems related to interactions between judicial branch officials, private attorneys, law enforcement, and other key actors be addressed when citizens perceive something is amiss?

Three Outreach Efforts

The three examples presented here range from a long-running public access cable TV program in Cumberland County to two 2007 interactive citizen education/issue discussion forums in Buncombe and Durham counties. These examples were chosen for the following reasons:

- Each project had as its primary goals outreach to and education of citizens by judicial branch officials in settings distinct from case-by-case work and apart from election and campaign activities.
- Information about these projects was easy to access. Documents and interviews provided rich resources for a report of this nature.

9. See, for example, North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts, “The North Carolina Court System,” www.nccourts.org/Citizens/Default.asp; Division for Public Education, The American Bar Association, www.abanet.org/publiced/; National Law-related education programs, www.youthforjustice.org/state.html; North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, UNC School of Government, www.civics.org/.

- The projects were characterized by contrasting purposes, formats, and participants. Moreover, there were different levels of interaction between officials and citizens, and the topics “on the table” for presentation and discussion varied from broad and general to narrow and specific.

The three examples shared two important features. First, participation in each was voluntary; each project was conceived and implemented by the respective judicial branch officials, with no direction from the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) or upper-level judicial branch leaders. In short, the choice of the outreach method and topic was up to the discretion of the judicial branch officials (and other planners) in the three jurisdictions. Second, media and/or civic organizations partnered with the judicial officials to plan and carry out the projects. The Cumberland County television program, for example, depends on the equipment and staff expertise of the local cable TV service provider. In Buncombe and Durham counties, the respective local chapters of the LWV provided financial support and different degrees of planning and publicity. In Buncombe County other partners included the local legal services agency and community organizations.

As of this report, the outreach efforts in Buncombe and Durham counties have been concluded, although there is some interest in future similar forums. The citizen outreach effort in Cumberland County, via the public access channel, continues with new shows on a monthly basis.

Cumberland County—*Dimensions of Justice*, a Monthly Cable TV Show

In 1993 two Cumberland County district court judges initiated a thirty-minute TV program on the public access channel. The program is produced by Time Warner Cablevision of Fayetteville (TWC-Fayetteville). Chief District Court Judge Beth Keever and Judge Pat Timmons-Goodson¹⁰ have chosen the topics to be covered and the guests to be interviewed. Topics have included both court-related matters (e.g., alcohol and teens, DWI, domestic violence) and law enforcement/public safety issues (e.g., identity theft prevention, substance abuse, gangs).

Judges Keever and Timmons-Goodson sought a way to address popular topics and to reach the general citizenry with information about the court system. The program reaches citizens in their judicial district as well as in surrounding counties. As Judge Keever notes, “[The program] is not designed to argue differing viewpoints but rather to be educational and informational.”¹¹ It airs Wednesday nights at 9 p.m.; the same episode repeats every Wednesday for one month.

Each program usually has two hosts and two guests. Question-and-answer and discussion are the primary formats. Judge Keever divides the range of topics and guests into the following categories:¹²

- criminal court
- civil court
- family court
- personalities
- other

Examples of criminal court topics covered by the show are plea bargains (district attorney and public defender relations), alcohol and teens, traffic court and insurance, wildlife violations, and

10. Judge Timmons-Goodson co-hosted the program from 1993 to 2005 and was appointed to the North Carolina Court of Appeals in 1997. Since 2005, Judge Keever has had rotating co-hosts, usually other district court judges.

11. Elizabeth Keever, “Fact Sheet—Dimensions of Justice,” n.d.

12. Elizabeth Keever, “Dimensions of Justice—Topics,” n.d.

criminal defense. Civil court cases have examined medical malpractice, real estate matters, and small claims. In 2005, around the time of the widely publicized Terri Schiavo court battle, Judge Keever had an estates attorney and an ethics specialist from a local hospital as guests. Topics addressed included living wills and family health care decisions. Examples of family court show topics have included child custody, child support, shaken baby syndrome, domestic violence, adoption, “before you marry/remarry,” and the Juvenile Assessment Center.

Shows profiling personalities have hosted guests whose work is relevant to Cumberland County residents appearing in court: the sheriff, the mental health director, the State Highway Patrol colonel for that region, the director of the State Bureau of Investigation, and new District 12 court officials (mainly superior and district court judges). Finally, episodes covering topics in the “other” category have addressed elections, substance abuse, the Utilities Commission, Internet security, and child predators. There have been a few exceptions to the interview/discussion format. Programs have included a mock demonstration of a court case mediation, a controlled drinking experiment, and a self-defense demonstration.

Two recurring topics relate to annual events. First, the December program usually focuses on security during the holiday season, such as providing tips to prevent theft while shopping. Also, at the end of each session of the North Carolina General Assembly, Keever often hosts state Senator Tony Rand. Rand represents much of Cumberland County and is a senior legislative leader. Senator Rand describes the highlights of new laws affecting the court system.

The thirty-minute show has two fourteen-minute segments, which are taped in advance of airing. There is a one-minute public service announcement midway through the program. A general outline of the topics and questions is discussed with the guests before the program is taped.

Judge Keever appreciates the strong working relationship she and Judge Timmons-Goodson developed with TWC-Fayetteville. A standard public access user contract sets out the expectations of the hosts and the TWC production staff. Judges Keever and Timmons-Goodson and the staff create a “rundown sheet” that provides an outline for each program. There is no charge for use of the studio or editing services.

Other North Carolina judicial officials have attempted to produce a similar program in their communities, but none have lasted as long as Judge Keever’s.¹³ She attributes the longevity of the Cumberland County program, in part, to the TWC-Fayetteville space, equipment, and director/editor, which all play a role in making the show run regularly and smoothly. A three camera setup provides a variety of shots for each program. There are some basic graphics (names of the guests and so forth) and sometimes a shot of a map, diagram, or document, but there are no split screens or other more complicated production demands. TWC-Fayetteville does not archive videos of the shows, but Judge Keever has retained VHS tapes of shows from approximately the first ten years.

Judges Keever and Timmons-Goodson have been pleased with the show’s results, demonstrated primarily through citizen awareness and recognition of the benefits of the show and guest appreciation for the opportunity to transmit information easily, effectively, and in a congenial setting. There has been no formal or external assessment of the program.

13. Durham County Chief District Court Judge Elaine Bushfan produced a weekly 30-minute program that aired on cable television public access in 2001.

The Asheville–Buncombe County Reality Courtroom Series

The Asheville–Buncombe County Reality Courtroom Series was an educational effort to introduce citizens to the local court system. It included a range of topics and presenters, culminating in a mock closing argument in a hypothetical motor vehicle accident case. The series was presented on three consecutive Thursday evenings, with ninety-minute sessions each night, from April 19 to May 1, 2007. Members of the Asheville–Buncombe County LWV were the primary organizers.

The purpose of the series was to orient residents to portions of the state's justice system, including criminal and civil court procedures. Civil matters received greater attention than criminal matters. The program focused on the Twenty-Eighth Judicial District, which serves only Buncombe County. Program organizers hoped to educate community members about the courts, build relationships with other organizations for the purpose of sponsoring future educational programs, create networking opportunities within the legal system, generate a positive reputation for the LWV, increase LWV member understanding of judicial system issues, and provide a forum for the LWV to address selected topics.

Organizers sought participants from among Buncombe County residents and were especially interested in engaging residents from the African American and Hispanic communities. The organizers contacted leaders of African American and Hispanic programs and organizations. Specifically, they sent a letter to key leaders and convened a meeting to discuss the interests and goals of the court officials and the LWV. This input session influenced the approach to the three-session educational program.

The Civic Education Committee of the LWV, led by Ruth Christie, planned the program. District Court Judge Sharon Tracey Barrett (who is also a member of the LWV) agreed to serve as moderator and helped to plan the program. Other sponsors and supporters included Pisgah Legal Services, the Asheville–Buncombe Community Relations Council, and various Buncombe County court officials. The cost to implement this program was \$750. The Asheville–Buncombe County LWV provided \$250 and received a \$500 grant from the Open Society Institute's Program on Law and Society.

Organizers used a variety of methods to attract participants in an effort to reach all parts of the community. The program was announced via radio and in newsletters, schools, and community calendars. Flyers were distributed to community groups, in schools and minority neighborhoods, and to each Catholic Church in the diocese. Newspaper articles appeared as well.

Organizers also contacted all middle/junior high and high schools in the county seeking social studies teachers. They arranged for CEU credit for the teachers and encouraged them to bring their students. They used key contacts in various organizations, such as Catholic Social Services, to reach Hispanic residents.

To make the sessions accessible to Spanish-speaking residents, the LWV arranged for simultaneous interpretation. However, as the first of the sessions approached and planners did not identify a clear need for an interpreter, the LWV chose not to offer this service due to the relatively high cost.

The sessions were held in a Buncombe County courtroom. Planners knew the downtown location would not be easily accessible for some of the residents they targeted. However, it was centrally located and program organizers could more easily demonstrate how people worked and interacted in the courtroom itself.

Judge Barrett served as a moderator (and occasionally as a presenter) for the sessions. As presentations were made, audience members were encouraged to write down their questions on index cards. The index cards were passed to Judge Barrett, who screened the questions (rephrasing items to sharpen queries, avoiding duplicate queries, and so forth). Judge Barrett described the kinds of questions that attorneys and judges could and could not answer (for example, they could not speak about specific cases). Each session concluded with a fifteen-minute question-and-answer period.

During each session a different group of presenters spoke about their duties and roles in the courtroom and how what they do fits into the trial court system in Buncombe County. Some presenters, such as the clerk of court (or an assistant clerk) and a bailiff, spoke at two or three sessions.

The first session provided an overview of the North Carolina court system and described the basics of both the criminal and civil courts, with very short presentations by participants. The session outlined the general responsibilities of the clerk of court, bailiff, district attorney, public defender, attorneys for the plaintiffs and defendants, and judges. Handouts provided an informational foundation for the subsequent two sessions. At each session Judge Barrett reminded audience members that the focus was not on federal or appellate courts.

The second session concentrated exclusively on the criminal courts. The district attorney, an assistant public defender, and staff from the clerk's office made more in-depth presentations. The presenters described what they do in the courtroom as well as the tasks required to prepare cases for court. They explained distinctions between superior and district court and day and night court. Three different fact patterns were used to demonstrate the differences between infractions, misdemeanors, and felonies.

The third session focused exclusively on civil courts. Presenters described the differing jurisdictions of superior court, district court, family court, and small claims court. A hypothetical case was presented in which a driver had been injured in a motor vehicle accident and the extent of her injuries was at issue. Discussion about the case filing, testimony, evidence, and discovery was brief so that audience members could volunteer to sit as a mock jury and hear a truncated version of closing arguments as a district court judge presided.

Sessions included many practical pointers for the lay person about how the courts work and emphasized the importance of having legal representation in court. The program provided general information about the criminal and civil litigation processes, including helpful tips for citizens about where offices and courtrooms are located and resources citizens can use to get answers to questions about their cases.

The materials provided to the audience included the following:

- Felony punishment chart (shows effects of previous convictions)
- *Judicial System in North Carolina* (recently updated by the AOC)
- A glossary
- Copies of several publications from the AOC website
- A list of resources related to the judicial system
- Fact patterns relating to the hypothetical cases

The first two sessions were videotaped.¹⁴ The videotape was shown several times during the summer of 2007 via the Buncombe County cable access channel. There are also plans to create an edited DVD to use in presentations to various groups. Finally, the video will be added to the LWV archives in the Special Collections at UNC-Asheville's Ramsey Library.

14. Organizers had planned to videotape all three sessions, but there was a miscommunication concerning the third session.

Overall, the organizers were generally pleased with the results of the program. The attendance was good: fifty people attended the first session, forty-three attended the second, and forty-two attended the third. Less than 25 percent of the attendees were LWV members. There were a few Hispanic attendees. Organizers differed in their reactions to the level of Hispanic participation. Some felt the number of Hispanics attending was disappointingly low, but others thought the program represented a good introduction to the Hispanic community, providing useful contacts for future programs. Some organizers noted that locating the program in the courthouse may have been a deterrent to Hispanic attendance.

Exit surveys were conducted at the conclusion of the third session, and there were several positive comments from participants. Ruth Christie, Civic Education Committee Chair for the Asheville–Buncombe County LWV, prepared a two-page report that summarized the event.¹⁵

The Durham Bail Community Forum

In the fall of 2006, Chief District Court Judge Elaine Bushfan attended neighborhood Partners against Crime (PAC) meetings and heard citizens' concerns about people who had been arrested, and were free on bail, committing new crimes. Newspaper stories and other media reports had raised questions among the citizens about these "repeat offenders." Some constituents felt the first offense was sufficiently serious to question whether bail should have been made available in the first place. Other constituents criticized the system of bail in Durham County in general.

In response Judge Bushfan and other officials connected to the bail system decided to hold a forum to explain their roles in the bail process and to respond to questions and criticisms from people in the audience. The program was held April 24, 2007, at a middle school auditorium and entitled Bail, Innocence and Public Safety—Durham Community Forum. It was co-sponsored by the LWV of Orange-Durham-Chatham counties.

The purposes of the forum were as follows:

- To explain the purpose of bail
- To listen to and answer questions from the audience
- To demonstrate that judicial branch officials are listening to and trying to address community members' concerns

A planning committee was composed of several people who were panelists in the forum. The trial court administrator for Judicial District 14 was the primary organizer of the planning group and worked closely with a representative from the LWV of Orange-Durham-Chatham counties. Other key parties advised and assisted the organizers. The trial court administrator, for example, asked for the assistance of a facilitator from the School of Government at UNC-Chapel Hill.¹⁶ In addition to the panelists listed below, a concerned citizen who was an active PAC member advised and participated in some of the planning sessions.

The LWV and the Durham Bail Bond Alliance provided financial contributions to the program. The trial court administrator and an LWV volunteer headed up publicity efforts and handled on-site arrangements. The LWV arranged for audio engineers and videotaping. Publicity included press announcements to area newspapers and flyers to and contact with the local public radio station.

15. League of Women Voters of Asheville–Buncombe County, "Report of North Carolina Judicial System Program A Reality Courtroom Series," 2007.

16. John Stephens, coordinator of the Public Dispute Resolution Program at the School of Government, worked with this group from October 2006 to April 2007.

The forum was held in a single two-hour session (7–9 p.m.) on Tuesday, April 24, 2007. Jan Richmond, LWV chapter president, led the welcome and closing portions of the program.

The panelists included the following:

- Chief District Court Judge Elaine Bushfan
- Superior Court Judge Orlando Hudson
- Chief Magistrate Chet Dobies
- Gudrun Parmer, from the Pretrial Services Program
- Omar Beasley and Tony Woods, bondsmen
- District Attorney Mike Nifong
- John Fitzpatrick, private defense attorney
- Lawrence Campbell, public defender

John Stephens from the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government participated as the person arrested and facing bail in two hypothetical situations (see below). He also facilitated questions from the audience about the hypothetical scenarios. LWV member and former Durham mayor Sylvia Kerckhoff facilitated an open question-and-answer segment.

Planners consciously avoided holding the forum in a courthouse or other government facility. Instead they chose a middle school as the location to symbolically emphasize accessibility to community members (and from a practical standpoint, the school was on a bus line).

As part of the forum, two scenarios were presented to demonstrate the steps in setting bail, to explain how an accused person contacts a bondsman to obtain bail, and to describe the conditions for revoking bail. For each scenario audience members were given a mock arrest report, with information about the accused person's prior offenses to approximate what a magistrate reviews, to accompany the oral report provided by the arresting officer. Then, a list of possible bail amounts was presented to the audience and audience members voted by holding up their hands for which amounts they would choose (including no bail). Afterward the magistrate stated the amount of bail he would set and explained how he assessed the factors in his bail-setting decision.

The forum proceeded through the two scenarios (the offender in the first scenario was arrested on a new charge while out on bail) and the presenters answered some questions from the audience. The last fifty minutes of the forum was open for comments and more questions.

Audience members were provided an information packet that included an agenda, a glossary, panelists' biographies and a description of the responsibilities of their respective offices, information about the two scenarios and mock first appearance summaries, a list of possible bail amounts, and a bail bondsman Q&A information sheet. The LWV distributed its brochure, and a second handout included information about the Durham County Detention Facility (i.e., the county jail): a description, a list of inmate programs, statistics for 2006, comparative information on average daily population (2002–2006), demographics on population by race and kind of offense, and arresting authority.

The panelists sat at a table in front of the stage with individual microphones so they were at the level of the audience. There was one microphone in a center aisle from where citizens could address the panel. The videotape of the forum was broadcast on the Durham government cable TV channel and is available on the website of the LWV of Orange-Durham-Chatham counties (www.lwvdoc.org).

Approximately ninety people attended the session, and the *Durham Herald-Sun* and the *Raleigh News and Observer* published stories about the event.¹⁷ Other judicial branch officials attended,

17. Brianne Dopart, "Victims' Mothers Say Forum Skirts Issue," *Durham Herald-Sun*, April 25, 2007; Stanley B. Chambers, "Judges Tell How Bail Works," *Raleigh News & Observer*, April 25, 2007.

including two district court judges who addressed the audience briefly during the open question-and-answer period.

There was no formal assessment of the forum via a survey of the audience. A brief survey was distributed to the panelists, but only three people filled it out. However, the reflections of the LWV leaders and members who attended were positive. In general, the forum met or exceeded the expectations of the panelists and the LWV organizers. Two respondents identified the scenarios and the audience members voting on the level of bail they would assign as positive parts of the forum. Respondents also felt the forum accomplished its goals of having residents ask questions, make comments, and feel heard about their concerns. One respondent believed follow-up with the PAC groups was needed because of the low attendance of PAC members at the forum.

The biggest criticism of the forum concerned the inadequate lighting and the high temperature in the school auditorium. The placement of the panelists' table in front of the stage did not allow for sufficient lighting of the panelists. Additionally, many of the overhead wide-area lights were not operable. Fans were used to cool the room, but because they made hearing difficult, they could be used only intermittently.

Analysis of the Three Programs

The differences between the approaches to the three programs reflect the divergent goals of the presenters, the perceived needs of their constituents, the resources available to the presenters, and the methods used to reach the general citizenry of their respective jurisdictions. The Cumberland County TV program allows for passive observation by citizens, but not interaction between citizens and the presenters. The Buncombe and Durham forums allowed for face-to-face exchanges but had limited audiences, compared to the possible reach of a cable TV program broadcast several times a month.

This comparison emphasizes a central choice judicial branch officials face in designing outreach programs for the general citizenry: Should the focus be on a type of one-way communication that offers information but is of limited value in responding to questions or criticisms, or should it be on face-to-face forums that allow for some kind of interaction but will usually reach only a small segment of the community?

It may also be important to place these particular programs into their respective larger contexts. The *Dimensions of Justice* program can, over time, provide information which either anticipates or responds to citizens' suggestions to Judge Keever. Moreover, it offers a controlled, relatively safe setting for public officials to discuss issues and convey information.

The Buncombe forum was characterized by an effort to invite everyone in the jurisdiction, but organizers were particularly motivated to reach out to the county's Hispanic and African American population. Organizers believe the forum helped lay the groundwork for other information exchange programs, forums, or other methods of interaction and education. Finally, the Durham forum grew out of one judicial official's contact with citizens through neighborhood anti-crime groups. The forum could thus be viewed as part of an ongoing interaction between neighborhood leaders, law enforcement, and judicial officials motivated by a common interest in a safer community.

All three programs cost relatively little but demanded significant time commitments from judicial branch officials, LWV members, and others. The repeated production of Cumberland County's *Dimensions of Justice* has probably yielded particular efficiencies in program planning and filming. The other two forums, because they were short term, took more planning. There may be additional returns, however, if other similar programs result from these experiences.

The motivations behind each of the three outreach efforts differed. The Buncombe forum arose primarily as a result of prompting by the LWV for community education and outreach to Hispanic and African American residents. The Durham forum was the most focused event, given the impetus of a district court judge trying to respond appropriately to her constituents' question "Why are people let out on bail if they will just commit new crimes?" Judge Keever reports that she was motivated to create *Dimensions of Justice* after her participation in the American Bar Association Judges Conference in 1993. It was there she learned about other judges using TV shows on public access channels to better inform residents about the courts.

Recommendations

There does not appear to be previous systematic reporting and comparison of North Carolina judicial branch officials' outreach efforts (aside from campaign and formal school-based settings). Thus, at this stage any recommendations for future similar efforts must be tentative.

Organizers should first clarify their goals and the resources needed to create an outreach program or series of programs. To learn more about the experiences described here, contact the organizers and participants.¹⁸ They are likely to have helpful suggestions and advice for others planning citizen outreach programs.

Secondly, organizers should be mindful concerning two dimensions of citizen outreach: "telling" vs. "listening and responding." A purely educational focus is important to help correct factual misunderstandings but may not be an appropriate way to respond to citizen criticisms of one or more aspects of judicial system operations. When organizers have attempted to create a more responsive and interactive type of program, however, limitations concerning talking about individual cases have

18. Contact information for the organizers, as of January 2008:

Dimensions of Justice:

Chief District Court Judge Beth Keever
P.O. Box 363
Fayetteville, NC 28302
910.678.2901

Buncombe Courts Education Workshops:

Barbara Panarites and Ruth A. Christie
League of Women Voters of Asheville–Buncombe County
abc.nc.lwvnet.org/
bpnarites2@charter.net
828.236.5987

Durham Bail, Innocence and Public Safety Forum:

Bessie Carrington, League of Women Voters of Orange–Durham–Chatham counties
P.O. Box 3397
Chapel Hill, NC 27515-3397
919.419.1650
bessiec@mindspring.com
The video of the forum is available at www.lwvdc.org.

Kathy Shuart, Trial Court Administrator, Judicial District 14
201 E. Main Street, Suite 278, Durham, NC 27701
919.564.7203
919.560.6877 (fax)
Kathy.Shuart@nccourts.org

proven frustrating to citizens. Participants in these programs were concerned that media reports about particular cases or situations were incomplete or misleading, and a public outcry resulted. Holding a public forum is thus not without political risk, even if it is held far away in space and time from a local election in which judicial branch officials are on the ballot. As noted by the Commission on the Future of Justice, many court officials think misinformation and misperception are the primary causes of citizen dissatisfaction with the court system. Nonetheless, an outreach program that includes some kind of response to citizens' questions, comments, or criticisms may have significant positive effects in a particular community.

This bulletin is published and posted online by the School of Government to address issues of interest to government officials. This publication is for educational and informational use and may be used for those purposes without permission. Use of this publication for commercial purposes or without acknowledgment of its source is prohibited.

To browse a complete catalog of School of Government publications, please visit the School's website at www.sog.unc.edu or contact the Publications Division, School of Government, CB# 3330 Knapp-Sanders Building, UNC Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3330; e-mail sales@sog.unc.edu; telephone 919.966.4119; or fax 919.962.2707.

©2008

School of Government. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill