



State of the J U D I C I A R Y

2015
State of Nebraska
Chief Justice Michael G. Heavican
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Nebraska Supreme Court

Michael G. Heavican, Chief
John F. Wright
William M. Connolly
Kenneth C. Stephan

Michael McCormack
Lindsey Miller-Lerman
William B. Cassel

State Court Administrator

Corey R. Steel

State Probation Administrator

Ellen Fabian Brokofsky



State of the Judiciary 2015

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Legislature, and fellow Justices of the Nebraska Supreme Court. I would like to thank the members of this legislative body, and specifically thank Speaker Galen Hadley, for inviting me to address you this morning.

It is an honor for me to report on the accomplishments of the judicial branch during the past year and to discuss the future of the courts. First, let me introduce my fellow Justices.

To my immediate right is Justice John Wright of Scottsbluff. Next to Justice Wright is Justice Lindsey Miller-Lerman of Omaha.

To my immediate left is Kenneth Stephan of Lincoln. And to Justice Stephan's left is Justice William Cassel of O'Neill.

Justice William Connolly of Hastings and Justice Michael McCormack of Omaha are unable to be with us.

Today I will speak to you about change in the Judicial Branch's service to children in the courts; sentencing alternatives; guardianships; and access to justice across Nebraska.

Service to Young People

Throughout the nation states are reforming their juvenile justice systems. Here in Nebraska, young people who are charged in juvenile court with breaking the law and status offenses are the focus of our juvenile justice system.

With the passage of LB 561 in 2013, and in line with those national reform efforts, the Legislature transferred to the Office of Probation Administration, a division of the Nebraska court system, the responsibility for supervision of most of these juvenile law violators. Previously, these juveniles were under the supervision of the Department of Health and Human Services and were frequently made wards of the State in order to gain access to rehabilitative services.

This shift of direction is based on these fundamental principles: 1) fewer young people should be made wards of the state, be incarcerated, or placed in group homes; 2) more youth should be provided with treatment in their homes and local communities; 3) parents and guardians should always be involved in their children's rehabilitation; and 4) local community

providers of mental health, substance abuse, and other services should be utilized whenever possible.

In Nebraska, approximately 1,000 fewer juveniles are state wards today than in 2012, and the number of service providers around the state has increased over 45%. I note several projects deserving special recognition.

The first of those projects is the “crossover” program in Douglas County, which successfully redirected approximately 170 children from the juvenile justice system last year. The crossover program identifies children who fall under the umbrella of both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Rather than having a child simultaneously go through two systems, the crossover program provides a way to address the needs of both the child and the systems together. This enables us to focus on the rehabilitation of children and their families without redundant hearings and duplicative supervision.

In the past year Gage, Lancaster, and Dodge Counties initiated similar crossover programs. Sarpy County will do so this year. Probation supports the efforts of each of these counties and, as prescribed by last year’s LB 464, will provide leadership and technical assistance to crossover projects in other counties in the state.

In another promising program, Senator Bob Krist and State Court Administrator Corey Steel are part of a committee working with the National Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative, known as JDAI. That committee is examining statewide juvenile detention practices in order to ensure that only those young people who pose a true community safety risk are incarcerated.

This national initiative seeks to provide alternatives to detention so that a juvenile’s delinquent behavior can more appropriately be addressed. The pilot sites in Douglas and Sarpy Counties have had great success in reducing the number of juveniles in detention.

When Douglas County began JDAI in 2011, its detention center averaged nearly 200 juveniles daily. But through the efforts of JDAI, the daily average has been reduced by approximately 50%. Likewise, Sarpy County’s staff-secure facility had previously housed between 20-25 juveniles per day, but now also averages half that number. This was accomplished by county, state, and private partnerships as well as the Legislature’s leadership and commitment to providing funding for counties to develop detention alternatives.

Similarly, in 2011 nearly 450 boys were admitted to the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney; in 2014, that number was approximately 175. In 2011, 140 girls were admitted to YRTC at Geneva; in 2014, that number was approximately 50. This significant reduction is a direct result of the efforts of our juvenile courts and probation staff, providing intervention and treatment services closer to home for young people and their families.

However, many challenges remain. Specifically, probation's limited ability to access Federal programs such as Medicaid and Title IV-E Reimbursements promotes over-reliance on the state's general fund rather than maximizing Federal dollars already available to Nebraska. Also, foster care, especially in greater Nebraska, is badly needed. The judiciary and the probation system support state planning efforts and legislation to rectify both of these issues.

Sentencing Alternatives

The courts and probation are also involved in adult criminal justice reform. This past year the Judicial Branch, in cooperation with the Legislative and Executive Branches and other state institutions, participated in the Council of State Government's Justice Reinvestment Working Group (CSG).

CSG's comprehensive analysis of Nebraska's adult criminal justice system offers new strategies and policy reforms intended to improve the state's delivery of justice services. Particularly worth mentioning is CSG's finding that people sentenced to probation have lower recidivism rates than people sentenced to prison for similar offenses. CSG also emphasized the value of increasing the use of sentencing alternatives.

Today I will speak about two effective sentencing alternatives available in our courts. Because 80% or more of the individuals involved in the justice system struggle with alcohol or drug abuse, both of these sentencing alternatives target adult offenders whose criminality often correlates to their use of alcohol and drugs.

The first sentencing alternative is problem-solving courts. This is one of the most successful and cost-effective responses to the problem of addiction and associated crime, both nationally and in Nebraska. The second alternative is the Specialized Substance Abuse Supervision program, otherwise known as SSAS. However, as mentioned in the CSG report,

while both SSAS and the problem-solving courts are showing positive outcomes, they are not available in all areas of the state.

First, I will address problem-solving courts. Nebraska currently has 16 problem-solving courts including drug, young adult, and DUI courts that served over 1,000 people in 2014. Assuming that half of these individuals would have been sentenced to incarceration, the cost savings to taxpayers was a minimum of \$15 million.

A 2012 statewide evaluation of Nebraska's drug courts reported that 95% of those who successfully completed the program remained crime-free one year post-graduation. Drug courts emphasize education and employment. This has resulted in 95% of active participants being gainfully employed or attending school full-time.

The second alternative I mentioned is the SSAS program. SSAS provides an opportunity for otherwise prison-bound substance abusers to be intensively supervised by probation while receiving treatment.

Like problem-solving courts, SSAS has been shown to lower recidivism. Last year I reported that 91% of the individuals who were successfully discharged from SSAS in 2013 continued to remain crime-free one year later. This trend hasn't changed. SSAS participants also have a very high rate of employment, with an average of 94% of SSAS graduates gainfully employed.

In 2014, LB 907 was enacted authorizing 16 new SSAS officers. Adding these officers has doubled the capacity of the SSAS program. It will cost just under \$2.5 million to supervise individuals within SSAS this year, which is a substantial savings when compared to the cost of incarceration.

Thank you to Senators Krist, Mello, and Cook for assisting with this legislation.

Because of LB 907, probation was not only able to expand SSAS, but was also able to open new reporting centers in Grand Island, Columbus, and Norfolk. This brought the total number of reporting centers across the state to eleven. These reporting centers, located in Sarpy, Otoe, Douglas, Lancaster, Dawson, Buffalo, Dakota, Scotts Bluff, Platte, Hall, and Madison Counties, offer over 150 rehabilitative and support services to individuals who are under supervision.

LB 907 also provided funding to begin to identify mental health issues frequently suffered by individuals involved in the criminal justice system. Previously unavailable mental

health services were made accessible to probationers, problem-solving court participants, and parolees who were in need of treatment.

I would like to thank the six behavioral health regions and numerous public and private entities who have joined with probation to increase access to these behavioral health services. Of particular note are the substance abuse and mental health services now available in rural areas, thanks to video technology assistance provided by the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Boys Town which have agreed to assist us in greater Nebraska.

Whether through sentencing alternatives, specialized programs, services, or technology, the courts and probation continue to collaborate with the other two branches of government. We also work with both public and private entities to confront these criminal justice challenges as we strive to improve the lives and safety of all Nebraskans.

Guardianship

I will now briefly turn to legal guardianships in Nebraska. Both the Legislative and Judicial Branches took steps in 2014 to address the needs of some of Nebraska's most vulnerable populations: incapacitated or dependent adults and children.

During the 2014 session, the Legislature approved the Public Guardianship Act. Prior to the passage of the Act, a suitable guardian was not always available when needed. The creation of the Office of Public Guardian changes that. A special thanks to Senator Coash for the sponsorship of LB 920, along with Senators Brasch, Davis, Schilz, Seiler, Watermeier, and several former senators who worked to make the Office of Public Guardian a reality.

The State Court Administrator has hired a director for the Office of Public Guardian, who is currently working to carry out the charge it was given. The work will be expedited, to the extent possible, to prepare for appointments yet this year. The office will also recruit, educate, and support current and future guardians and conservators throughout the State of Nebraska.

Access to Justice Across Nebraska

Clerks

I would like to discuss access to justice. First, I would like to recognize our partnership with Nebraska's county officials in exploring innovative ways to provide consistent access to all our courts.

The Judicial Branch has established a pilot program in Polk County where the county court clerk magistrate, who is a state employee, will also serve as the county's clerk of the district court. The program's goal is to increase efficiency by offering all court clerk services within one office.

This program was initiated by the county and is the result of cooperation between county officials, area judges, and Judicial Branch staff. The pilot project was made possible through state legislation passed several years ago, which allows county officials and the Administrative Office of the Courts to work together to provide essential court office functions.

Centralized Case Management and E-filing

This type of innovation is possible due to Nebraska's statewide computerized court case management system, known as JUSTICE. We are fortunate to be one of the few states that has established a statewide system which enables us to share and analyze case information across jurisdictional boundaries and promotes consistency for attorneys and citizens who interact with the courts. Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the inception of the JUSTICE system.

One of the many benefits of a statewide case management system is the ability to provide online access to court records 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. This access allows people to attend to court business on their own schedules and reduces the time it takes for court staff to process data and payments. Available online services include the ability to pay traffic tickets and court fines and conduct court case information searches. Court documents can conveniently be e-filed and viewed online instead of necessitating travel to one of Nebraska's 93 courthouses.

An average of 16,000 payments on civil, criminal, and traffic cases totaling over \$1.5 million are made online each month. And each month nearly 40,000 documents are e-filed by

attorneys and litigants. This use of technology results in numerous efficiencies within the court system, reducing staff time and ultimately benefiting all Nebraska's citizens.

Self-Represented Litigants

But these access success stories are counter-balanced by access challenges. A major challenge is the number of people needing or choosing to represent themselves in court. Self-represented litigants are often unfamiliar with the law and court processes and frequently find themselves at a disadvantage when navigating the court system.

The Supreme Court's Committee on Self-Represented Litigation has spent countless hours developing forms and instructions to assist these individuals. This year the Committee was awarded a grant from the "Center on Court Access to Justice for All" to conduct a strategic planning process.

Court of Appeals' Chief Judge Frankie Moore of North Platte has assembled a planning committee which includes all entities offering free legal assistance to low income Nebraskans and others who choose to represent themselves in court. We are very pleased to partner with Legal Aid, the Nebraska State Bar Association, Nebraska's public libraries, and both the University of Nebraska College of Law and Creighton Law School in addressing these issues.

Although we are making great strides, one factor contributing to the increase in self-represented litigation in many areas of Nebraska is a lack of attorneys. Last year members of this body added important language into LB 907, allowing rural attorneys in underserved communities to apply for assistance with student loan repayment. We have great hopes that this type of financial assistance will be of mutual benefit to our newly-graduated attorneys and to our rural communities. Again, I applaud the recent efforts of the Legislature in the passage of LB 907.

Language Access

In previous years I have called your attention to the increasing need for language access in our courts. The Judicial Branch continues to contend with the need for more language interpretation and translation services.

Pursuant to state statute, interpreters are used for all appropriate court proceedings in both criminal and civil cases. Interpretation is frequently necessary not only for defendants, but for victims, witnesses, parents of juveniles, and those interacting with probation.

In 2014, we supplied interpreters in 46 different languages for approximately 24,000 appointments in courtrooms and probation offices across the state. This is an increase of 20% over our 2013 numbers.

Spanish remains the language with the greatest demand for interpretation services. After Spanish, our most used languages are: Nuer, Arabic, Vietnamese, Somali, and American Sign. New to Nebraska's courts this past year were: Bengali and Telugu, spoken in India; Kirundi a Bantu language spoken in Central and Southern Africa; and Sorani, a Kurdish dialect spoken in Iran and Iraq.

Conclusion

Last year I reported to you that Nebraska's Judicial Branch was growing, was dynamic, and was busy. This past year, we were busier and even more dynamic. Our judges and our court and probation staff remain committed to the American values of equal protection, due process of law, and equal access to justice for all our citizens.

The Supreme Court is proud of the many accomplishments of our court family. We appreciate the support the Legislature has provided to the Judicial Branch, and we look forward to continuing to work with you, our constitutional partners, in serving Nebraska in 2015.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.



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