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Bench & Media Committee

Bench-Media Committee Formed to Include Journalists, Federal Courts, and State Courts

NEBRASKA SUPREME COURT PARTNERSHIP

NEBRASKA STATE BAR FOUNDATION AND U.S. DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA

PEOPLE COMMITTEE -- MEDIA COMMITTEE -- BENCH-MEDIA COMMITTEE

Written by Janet Bancroft, Public Information Officer, Nebraska Supreme Court

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The Nebraska Bar-Press Guidelines, written in June 1970, called for a Continuing Committee for Cooperation:

“The members of the bar and the news media recognize the desirability of continued joint efforts in attempting to resolve any areas of differences that may arise in their mutual objective of assuring to all Americans both the correlative constitutional rights to freedom of speech and press and to a fair trial.”

This type of committee, which has not existed for the past quarter of a century, has been revived in the form of a Bench-Media Committee through the Public Education Outreach Promoting Law and Equity (PEOPLE) Committee of the Nebraska State Bar Foundation. At the request of Chief Justice Mike Heavican, the PEOPLE Media Committee has undergone a significant transformation this past year. The original group of judges and lawyers has expanded into a partnership with the U.S. District Court for the District of Nebraska and added several new members, including journalists. The inaugural



PHOTOS: (Top) Joe Duggan, Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln chats with Lori Pilger, Lincoln Journal Star; Bill Kelly, Nebraska Educational Television, Lincoln; and Mike Flood, Big Apple Radio & News Channel Nebraska. (Bottom) United States Magistrate Judge-designate Susan Bazis talks with Rose Ann Shannon, KETV 7, Omaha.

meeting of the Bench-Media Committee was held on May 20, 2016, with 15 judges, 11 journalists (one of whom is an attorney), and 3 attorneys (one of whom represents the media when legal issues arise) in attendance. The Bench-Media Committee is co-chaired by Nebraska Supreme Court Justice-designate Jeff Funke and Sarpy County Court Judge Todd Hutton.

With the understanding that an informed public is dependent on an informed media, the judges and attorneys on the Bench-Media Committee are poised to work together with journalists by providing workshops and other forums to share insights on the workings of the judicial system and to give context to the complexities of litigation. With the restructuring of the committee to include journalists, it is hoped that members of the media will be available to provide judges with a look into the world of journalism.

There is a natural tension between the media and the court system that has always, and will always, exist. Coordinating efforts, however, serves to more accurately and regularly inform Nebraskans of the important role of the judicial branch. Establishing working relationships through the Bench-Media Committee structure serves to address challenges inherent in disseminating the courts' work product to the public in an environment where the public expects and relies on media as their primary source of information.

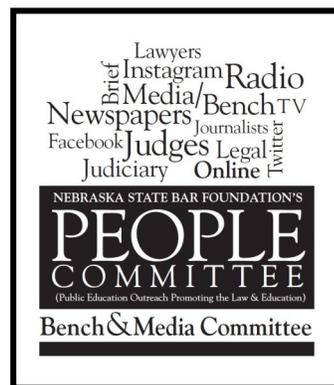
While judges are prohibited from commenting on pending cases, committee members are committed to working with journalists to provide background information on the process by which the judges anticipate reporters will see cases move through the judicial system.

One of the Bench-Media Committee's top priorities is to update and publish the "Reporters' Guide to Media Law and Nebraska Courts," as requested earlier this year by the Nebraska Broadcasters Association. The updated guide will serve as the base document for future educational programs. The Bench-Media Committee has been divided into three teams (members listed below): Uniform Court Rules and Practices, Media Education, and Judges Education.

Journalist and judicial committee members were selected based on experience with teaching, participation in past Bench-Media Committee outreach events, stated interest in mentoring, and geographical diversity. Each member of the Bench-Media Committee is also assigned to a regional or statewide team to make sure that resources are shared across Nebraska.

With this renewed effort, the judiciary, attorneys, and the Nebraska State Bar Foundation are committed to preserving and protecting a healthy relationship between the judicial branch of government and the media. Quoting Chief Justice Heavican: "*A healthy democratic society can exist only if the people of the state have respect for their legal system. That respect comes not from being awed by the system but, rather, from understanding that system.*"

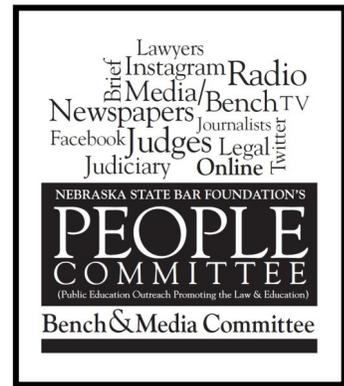
There are two factors upon which the survival of democracy depends: a free press and an independent judiciary. It is of vital importance for the courts and journalists to understand one another and support educational programming.



PEOPLE Bench-Media Project Teams

Uniform Court Rules and Practices - Project Team

Co-chairs: Justice-designate Jeff Funke, Nebraska Supreme Court, and
Mike Flood, Big Apple Radio & News Channel Nebraska
Justice Stephanie Stacy, Nebraska Supreme Court
Judge Jeff Wightman, Lexington
Judge Leigh Ann Retelsdorf, Omaha
Judge Derek Weimer, Sidney
Shawn Renner, Attorney, Lincoln
Jacque Harms, KNOP TV, North Platte
Lori Pilger, Lincoln Journal Star
Todd Cooper, Omaha World-Herald
Sheryl Connolly, Ex-officio, Trial Court Services Director



Media Education - Project Team

Co-chairs: Judge Todd Hutton, Sarpy County Court, and Bill Kelly, NETV, Lincoln
Judge Randin Roland, County Court, Sidney
Judge Tom Otepka, District Court, Omaha
Maunette Loeks, Star Herald, Scottsbluff
Stephanie Hedrick, 1011 Now, Lincoln and Central Nebraska
Dave Schroeder, KRVN Radio, Lexington
Sheryl Connolly, Ex-officio, Trial Court Services Director

Judges Education - Project Team

Co-chairs: United States Magistrate Judge-designate Susan Bazis and Rose Ann Shannon,
KETV 7, Omaha
Judge Paul Korslund, Retired District Court Judge, Beatrice
Judge Holly Parsley, County Court Judge, Lincoln
Margery Beck, Associated Press, Omaha
Joe Duggan, Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln
Tom Locher, Attorney, Omaha
Steve Guenzel, Attorney, Lincoln
Sheryl Connolly, Ex-officio, Trial Court Services Director
Carole McMahon-Boies, Ex-officio, Judicial Branch Education Director

Resource Members:

Judge John Gerrard, District Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Nebraska, Lincoln
Chief Justice Mike Heavican, Nebraska Supreme Court
Judge Doug Johnson, Separate Juvenile Court, Omaha
Judge Jim Doyle, District Court Judge, Lexington
Corey Steel, Ex-officio, Nebraska State Court Administrator
Sheryl Connolly, Ex-officio, Trial Court Services Director

Staff to the PEOPLE Committee:

Doris Huffman, Executive Director, Nebraska State Bar Foundation
Janet Bancroft, Public Information Officer, Nebraska Supreme Court