



AAUW COURT MONITORING NEWSLETTER – SPRING 2013

Hello Court Watchers,

It's been quite a while since we last gathered together to discuss court monitoring issues and determine where we are and where we would like to be. With this Newsletter, we would like to update you on what we are presently doing to reorganize, reinvigorate and revitalize our court monitoring group and our practices in order to achieve our goals. We have some news of some changes we are making to improve our methods and procedures as well as our organizational structure. We hope you will stay on board with us, welcome some of the changes, and continue the great job you are already doing. We also hope that you will make frequent suggestions for improvement anytime you see the need to do so. We are here to listen to you in our mutual effort to make us more efficient, more effective, and purposeful. In particular, we want to make you feel more comfortable and meaningful. Our mission is to expose systemic problems with judges and their courts in order to ultimately provide fairer and more equal treatment for all who are involved in the legal system, and it is clear that it takes a joint, concerted effort to accomplish our task. We hope you will continue to be a part of the AAUW court monitors group now and in the future. We need selfless, dedicated people like you.

New Changes & New Procedures:

1. **Leadership:** Mary Lou Heissenbittel, our fearless leader, has decided to step down from her role as coordinator. Her position will be taken over by Karen Gomba, Carol Foy, and Ann Pinna. (It takes 3 people to replace her!) We call our group "The Triumvirate" and we hope we can bring a variety of skills to oversee and work with our dedicated group of volunteers. We will continue to rely on the expertise of Leah Feldman, Director of Domestic Violence Services of Dutchess County, a program of Family Services, and Judy Lombardi, Director of Outreach & Support Services at Grace Smith House, who will continue to provide us with expert information regarding the workings and nuances of the legal system and its personnel and also provide us with continuing information and advice

regarding the background, various aspects, and frustrations that surround particular cases as well as general issues involving cases of domestic violence. Our intrepid Elaine Andersen will continue to function as our communications/e-mailing coordinator. Joanne Dyson will act as our data collection specialist.

2. **Communication:** It is our hope that we can communicate more clearly and more frequently with all court watch monitors. Occasionally, one feels she is “out there” on her own and not accomplishing anything meaningful. Far from that notion, the committee firmly appreciates all that you are presently doing and hopes to encourage you to realize the importance of your task and that your voice is being heard. We also want to keep you informed of new developments, trends, or developing news which may affect your observations and may even alter the way you evaluate or interpret your observations and findings.
3. **Group Share Meetings & Lectures:** From time to time, we hope to gather together for conferencing and collaboration, and offer you a meeting place where you have an opportunity to be involved in a “group share” –a place where you can share stories of what is going on in the courts, cite your reactions to the things you see and hear, share your observations of judges, find answers to any questions you may have, or simply vent your frustrations. We expect to invite speakers who are experts in the field of domestic violence or the legal profession in order to educate you further and to illuminate pertinent areas of interest and concern.
4. **Master Calendar:** We hope to create a Master Calendar which cites all of our court monitoring volunteers, the dates each person monitors monthly, and the court and judge(s) they monitor. We would like to keep closer track of our volunteers and their commitment to our program in order to ensure a variety of judges and courts are continuously being assessed.
5. **Updating Court Monitoring Evaluation Forms:** Our court monitoring sheets have been evolving over the course of time as we see new areas we may wish to cite or on which we wish to comment. New sheets may incorporate more opportunity for personal anecdotal observations as well as the more preferable check-off boxes which are extremely quantifiable and objective and which provide us with a more accurate and comprehensive analytical and assessment tool. We are currently in the process of modifying the sheets and, as you use these sheets, we welcome your comments regarding their practicality, appropriateness, and ease of response.
6. **Assessment:** We have entered all the paperwork you submitted from your previous court monitoring sessions, evaluated it, and have drawn some conclusions regarding areas where

judges are doing a great job and areas that may require some improvement. For a more detailed account of our findings, court monitors may contact Ann Pinna.

7. **Sharing our Findings With the Judges We Monitor:** In an attempt to make our findings known to the judges, Mary Lou and Karen have graciously agreed to present our findings to the judges at a brown-bag lunch on April 5. They hope to compliment the judges on what we see them doing as right and also make them aware of areas in which they might improve and make things better and fairer for all concerned parties.

8. **Criminal Court Monitoring Initiative:** Besides Family Court, we anticipate moving more vigorously into the area of monitoring Criminal Court. Already, Leah, Mary Lou, and Judy have met with Assistant D.A. Marge Smith to discuss previous issues of not being able to hear the proceedings and not knowing which cases involve domestic violence. Ms. Smith identified some judges who could be approached about making accommodations for our monitors. We hope to provide training sessions for those who are interested in moving into monitoring Criminal Court proceedings which we feel provide an additional resource for assessment. More details concerning training sessions will follow at a later date.

9. **Volunteer Recruitment & Retention:** We hope you can interest others in the importance of what we are doing and perhaps recruit some friends of yours so that we have a dedicated and loyal cadre of court monitors to accomplish this important task.

10. **The Importance of You:** The job you are doing, though you may not see immediate improvements, is, nonetheless, highly important and a critical focal point in ensuring fair and equal treatment of both Petitioners and Respondents in the courts. Sometimes just seeing monitors in the courtroom may modify a judge's demeanor, attitude toward both abusers and victims, and maybe even affect their decision-making. We hope you will continue to assist us in this important endeavor.

SURVEY

Will You Help Us?

We are asking all of you (Veterans & Newcomers) to cite whether or not you still want to join or continue with our court-monitoring program and, also, if you can commit to at least one day per month to go into the courts, monitor a judge, and then submit an evaluation sheet.

Please be so kind as to provide answers to the following questions so we can update our records and maintain accuracy and accountability. We are attempting to collaborate and communicate more efficiently and effectively. Our goal is fairness for all. We hope to hear from you.

Please answer the following questions so that we can update our records: [Newcomers need only fill out questions that are applicable.]

- 1. Please provide your Name, Address, Phone, E-mail**
- 2. Do you wish to be (or continue to be) a court monitor?** (If your answer is “NO”, then you need not answer the remaining questions. Please let me know your status so that I can remove you from the list and further e-mail distribution.)
- 3. What court are you currently monitoring?** (ex. Family Court or Criminal Court in the City of Pok, Wappingers, Hyde Park, etc.)
- 4. If you are a Veteran Monitor, what day(s) of the month and what week of the month are you presently in court as a monitor?** (ex. 3rd Thursday of every month).

Do you wish to continue with this same day and week per month, or do you wish to change? If so, what is the NEW day and week per month you wish to change to?

- 5. If you are a NEW MONITOR, coming on board for the first time, what day of the week and what week of the month are you able to commit to?** (ex. 3rd Thursday of every month) ***Please Note: Continuous and regular monitoring is required for accurate statistical analysis.
- 6. Is there any judge in particular whom you currently monitor? Do you wish to continue monitoring this judge?**
- 7. Do you wish to engage in a special training for monitoring in Criminal Court?**

8. **What are your suggestions for topics or ways we can improve the court-monitoring experience for you?**

**We will make every attempt to match you with the judge that you want and the day that you seek. However, please understand that we may have to modify your desires due to scheduling and evaluative constraints.

Please return your answers via e-mail to Ann Pinna: ajpinna@aol.com---or---you may e-mail the survey section to Ann Pinna: 5 Thornberry Way, Poughkeepsie, NY 12603. Call Ann if you have any questions at (845) 462-3140.