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Minority advocate group succeeds

By: DIANE WETZEL , The North Platte Telegraph

Minority residents are more likely to get a fair shake from Nebraska's justice system, thanks to the volunteers and advocates of the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee.

While their title is a mouthful, their purpose is pure.

In January 2002, the Minority and Justice Task Force released its final report, concluding a two-year study of racial and ethnic bias in the Nebraska court system and legal profession.

It is the most comprehensive report of a state justice system completed by a state task force or commission.

The study covers a variety of issues, including:

- ◆ Interpreter services
- ◆ Jury composition
- ◆ State courts' employee diversity
- ◆ Judicial diversity
- ◆ Law school diversity
- ◆ Conduct of judges, lawyers, court employees and probation officials

The major recommendation resulting from the report was to establish a standing committee to implement the task force's recommendations.

The Minority and Justice Implementation Committee, made up of a racially and ethnically diverse group of judges, lawyers, and community leaders, has just completed its second year of implementation.

Linda Crump of the University of Nebraska is the co-chairwoman of the MJIC.

"What is exciting is that the committee is always looking for solutions," Crump said in a telephone interview Thursday. "Right now there is pending legislation to allow access to data for research. In order to have great things happen, we need accurate information."

In January 2004, State Senator Ernie Chambers introduced a bill that would allow access to pre-sentencing reports for the purpose of research. In January 2005, he introduced a bill that would authorize the Nebraska Supreme Court to adopt a uniform juror qualification form and allow access to the forms for the purpose of research.

"Some ask how you can measure experience and perception," Crump said. "To me, perception is reality. We need to unearth issues and make sure that reality isn't perceived poorly because of communication.

"One of the things that the MJIC has in place is looking to see if we have current and fresh jury polls," Crump said. "Communities need to be plugging into what should be a jury of peers."

The legislation introduced by Chambers would allow researchers to examine each stage of the jury selection process to ensure that racial and ethnic minorities are not excluded.

Language barriers are another issue.

"You would be amazed at how many non-English languages are spoken in Nebraska," Crump said. "How can you have access if you don't understand what is going on?"

In an effort to ensure equal access, the MJIC has developed translated packets of information to be shared with defendants.

"We are starting with Spanish and also not assuming everyone is a reader," Crump said.

If non-English-speaking detainees are advised of the bond schedule and can post bond, it has the potential to relieve jail overcrowding.

"We are not talking about dangerous criminals," Crump said, "just people who didn't have the language skills to understand the process."

The MJIC is working along with other state agencies and is in the process of implementing a Racial Justice Initiative to commit the State of Nebraska to a morally searching, permanent effort to study, address and

change those practices that may disadvantage minorities.

Funding is always an issue, Crump said.

"When one thing is done we are not saying we solved the problem," she said. "Instead we ask what we can do next."

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