



Changes reported in minority justice

BY BUTCH MABIN / Lincoln Journal Star

Nebraska's legal system has become fairer to minorities since the state Supreme Court created a minority justice committee three years ago, committee members said. But more needs to be done.

"The committee has made significant progress in a short amount of time," Supreme Court Judge John Gerrard, a committee co-chairman, said Tuesday. "(B)ut not all of our goals can be accomplished in a few short years."

The court created the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee in May 2003 in response to a task force's two-year examination of racial bias in the justice system. The committee released its third-year progress report this week.

Gerrard and his co-chairwoman, Linda Crump, highlighted several accomplishments brought about by the committee's efforts.

Crump said summer pre-law institutes at Nebraska and Creighton law schools had attracted undergrads from across the country and led to more minority law school students in the state.

And, she said, minority representation on juries increased substantially thanks to legislation supported by the committee that required counties to update jury pool lists annually.

Before the legislation, some counties had not updated their lists in 20 years, she said. One result: Counties that saw a recent influx of minority people were not reflecting those demographic changes in their juries.

Greater minority representation on juries is important for several reasons, Gerrard said.

It promotes greater respect for the law among minority communities, he said. And jury participation helps new arrivals unfamiliar with the U.S. justice system understand how it operates.

"Oftentimes, they're from another country where you distrust the legal system and don't want to have anything to do with it," Gerrard said. "So, what can happen is they'll take the law into their own hands."

In another area, Gerrard said the availability of bilingual bail-bond forms in county jails had had a clear effect. The committee learned about the need for the forms in public hearings around the state.

Gerrard said non-English speakers arrested for minor violations sometimes spent several days in jail before their



Linda Crump (left) and John Gerrard co-chair the task force

court appearances because no one explained to them the bail-bond system.

He said a judge told him the bilingual forms had made “a marked difference.”

Among the issues the committee wants to look at more closely are the disproportionate incarceration rates between minorities and whites. A subcommittee is gathering data on the issue, Gerrard said.

“Minorities are being incarcerated more,” he said. “The question is, why?”

The committee planned to meet in August to discuss whether its mission should be expanded.

“It’ll be a summit on what’s been accomplished,” Gerrard said. “Also, are there goals out there we’re not seeing?”

Reach Butch Mabin at 473-7234 or bmabin@journalstar.com.