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Reform work begins on legal system

GRAND ISLAND - The work of the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee is beginning what a co-chairwoman describes as a very long car ride in a journey to bring change to the legal system.

Linda Crump said the committee so far hadn't even yet gotten into the car.

She was one of five committee members who gathered here Sunday to discuss findings of the Minority and Justice Task Force Final Report. She said she didn't want the report to become just another document sitting on the shelf.

"We want to do something," she said. "We want to make a change."

The committee is a joint initiative of the Nebraska State Bar Association and the state Supreme Court. It was established to examine and address issues of racial and ethnic bias in the justice system.

Crump said when Nebraska's statistics were compared with national statistics, it was learned that in Nebraska, blacks and Natives are more likely to be arrested. She said the only state that arrests more Natives than Nebraska is Iowa.

When it comes to arresting juvenile African-Americans, Crump said, Nebraska is third, behind Colorado and South Dakota. She said young minorities come into the system at a higher rate in Nebraska than they do nationally.

She also said only four of the state's 144 judges were minorities - all black.

Evidence also indicates Nebraska's juries don't represent its minorities, Crump said. She said the jury pools in many counties desperately need to be updated. In one county, she said, the jury pool hadn't been refreshed in 26 years.

Committee member Carlos Monzon said Grand Island had "perhaps one of the best jury pools when it comes to minorities."

However, he said lawyers sometimes strike minorities out of a jury systematically - something, that to him, is alarming.

Monzon also said he doesn't feel using drivers license and voter registration records is an appropriate method of comprising jury pools. He believes there should be a broader method.