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Heed the call to action on courts' behalf

Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice John V. Hendry described the findings of the Minority and Justice Task Force as a "call to action."

We agree.

And what's even more praiseworthy about the 260-page report from a group of 40 judges, agency directors, members of the public and lawyers is that it makes specific recommendations for change.

Consider some of the task force findings:

- The makeup of juries does not reflect the ethnic diversity in Nebraska. Many jury pools, which are drawn from driver's licenses and voter registrations, haven't been updated for years.
- As a group, minorities in Nebraska are 5.8 times more likely to be incarcerated than white Nebraskans.
- Blacks in Nebraska are 5.5 times more likely to be arrested than whites. Natives in Nebraska are 3.4 times more likely to be arrested than whites. Blacks and Natives are between 1.2 and 1.8 times more likely to be arrested than minorities in Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota and Wyoming.
- Only four of the state's 144 judges are minorities. None of the state's court reporters are minorities.

Interpreter services are "close to woeful," said Nebraska Supreme Court Judge John Gerrard, who co-led the task force with Dan Harris, an Omaha attorney. There are only six certified interpreters in the state.

Officials in the judicial system and legal community should waste no time implementing two recommendations the task force said required immediate action.

Old jury pools should be refreshed, this time using additional resources such as tax rolls, utility customer lists and city directories.

Training and education of interpreters should be improved. Judges and lawyers should be better educated on when to call for the services of an interpreter.

The task force also made recommendations aimed at long-range improvement. Law schools must do more to attract minority students and faculty members. Law firms must broaden their recruiting and hiring.

Courts should adopt goals that aspire to diversify the court's work force.

The task force findings did not come as a surprise to members of the state's minority communities. In fact the findings should come as little surprise to white Nebraskans. The findings are similar to those found in study after study across society.

But, as Chief Justice Hendry said, "If there is one institution in this society that should be completely free of bias it must be the courts." It could hardly be put more succinctly or accurately. The task force deserves plaudits for its thorough, honest assessment of the judicial system and its perceptive, urgent recommendations for improvement.

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