

STATE OF THE COURT 2005

Chairman Bunney, members of the Pierce County Council, I am Jim Orlando, immediate Past Presiding Judge of the Pierce County Superior Court. Judge Stephanie Arend is the new Presiding Judge and I know you will enjoy working with her over the next two years. I would like to thank the Council for the support shown to me and the court during my term as Presiding Judge. It is my privilege to speak to you now as I present the State of the Court address for 2005.

I once read a powerful quote from Barbara Jordan in which she stated, “ What the people want is simple. They want an America as good as its promise.”

Judge Kevin Burke, a national leader on court reform, extended that thought, and has written: “The same can be said of what this nation wants of its courts. [The nation] wants a court--a judiciary- -as good as its promise”.

We all know that courts can be measured for speed and efficiency. We have internal and external performance audits and measures that track how many cases are processed and at what speed. But to provide justice is more than ‘processing the most’ and ‘being the fastest’. Are we fair? Do we treat people with respect? Do we listen to them? Do they understand our orders when they leave?

I am proud of the work our bench has undertaken to improve

justice for the citizens of this community.

Under the leadership of Judge Larkin and Judge Cuthbertson at juvenile court, Pierce County Superior Court has embarked on a dedicated mission to reform juvenile detention and improve the lives of children in this community, holding them accountable for their actions, while finding ways to keep children with their families and out of detention. This has significantly reduced the number of juveniles in detention without increasing juvenile crime or threatening community safety.

On the dependency side, the dependency court process has been re-created to have judges and commissioners work more closely with families in crisis, allowing judicial officers the ability to better control cases thereby helping families reunite more quickly. The process is designed to be fair, with clear and consistent court orders that will be followed.

By providing a model that listens fairly to the people involved and holds them accountable through clear orders and expectations, our Methamphetamine Family Drug Court provides countless success stories of families brought together again; parents overcoming the devastation of methamphetamine abuse.

Our Family Court Project, led by Judge van Doorninck has seen a substantial increase in resolutions in family court cases; with its focus on those cases where families in crisis need prompt resolution of custody and support issues.

We are also active in domestic violence projects such as the community kiosks and community justice center, and continue

to work closely with law enforcement, the prosecutor and victim advocates to protect families faced with the fears caused by domestic violence and abuse.

These are just a few of the many projects that our 21 judges, six court commissioners and Superior court administration are actively involved with on a daily basis.

The ever-increasing success of many of these programs in the last year is directly attributable to a less adversarial environment and court that is focused on problem solving.

Yet the daily dilemma in many of the projects remains to be finding a way to meet the needs of the litigants – to be problem solvers – while dealing with a staggering caseload.

Can we do more? Can we be leaders in a judiciary as good as its promise? We can, with continued hard work, diligent dedication and with the unwavering support of the County Council and the Executive.

Pierce County is a wonderful place to live, but it is a county encumbered with complex social problems: Drug addiction, sex offenses and offenders, and domestic violence threaten this community and burden our court with more cases than we can handle.

In 2004, 1487 defendants were sentenced in drug cases, both for dealing and non-dealing. King County, with a much larger population, sentenced 1156 defendants in the same category. Spokane County, almost identical in size to us, sentenced just

526 defendants in the same category. Sadly, Pierce County leads the State in having the most meth labs and dump sites.

In 2004, more sex offenders were sentenced and sent to prison in Pierce County than any other county in the State. Pierce County sentenced 54 defendants as sex offenders; King County sentenced 47 offenders.

Drug and sex cases often take longer to resolve than other types of cases and as a result our criminal backlog has increased to over 1700 cases, an increase over last year of more than 300 pending cases. In April and May, Court Administration will be starting a special emphasis on the oldest cases in our system, those over 270 days, to move them to trial or have them resolved prior to trial. This project means that civil cases set at that same time will be temporarily halted and all our resources will be devoted to the criminal backlog.

We have just received current statistics demonstrating the lethality of domestic violence in this county. One third of the homicides in Pierce County last year were related to domestic violence. One half of the homicides investigated by the Pierce County sheriff were caused by domestic violence. Our domestic violence filings on the civil side continue to rise, requiring that we spend more time on hearing these high priority cases.

The statistics that demonstrate the very real problems we face as a court, the problems that burden our court system go on. Criminal cases continue to increase and the court, as 'fast' as it tries to be and as efficient as it strives to be, cannot keep up at

the same pace. And we are continually asking, What can be done?

I am convinced, and studies have shown, that the most effective way to resolve criminal cases is to prevent them in the first place. Criminal cases are prevented through education, drug and alcohol treatment for offenders, and by strengthening families in Pierce County.

Strong families are the foundation for a strong community. Studies have shown that children raised in crisis, exposed to drugs and domestic violence are more likely to repeat those behaviors.

Along with our past efforts at improving the lives of children and families in this community, still more is needed and we need your help. Some of you have met with us and are familiar with the Unified Family Court project we are starting. Our State Supreme Court has adopted by court rule a requirement that we have a Unified Family Court in place by the end of 2006. This concept is not new; it has been used successfully throughout the country and in three counties in this state, King, Thurston and Snohomish.

Right now, we are in the process of creating a model that will work for Pierce County. We believe in the benefits of a Unified Family Court as a tool to strengthen families. It can provide a more holistic approach to identifying issues confronting families in crisis and to creating a court process that will lead to consistent resolutions for these issues. This model requires that the Superior Court work with the Executive and the County

Council to provide enough resources to make the program successful. The Unified Family Court cannot be implemented with the number of judicial officers that we have now. Your help is needed to provide additional judicial officers to meet the immediate and future needs of the Unified Family Court and the Pierce County Superior court as a whole. And with those additional officers, adequate space will also be needed.

What the people of Pierce County want IS simple. The people of Pierce County want a justice system that is accountable, accessible and responsive. We share those beliefs and will continue to work with you to create a justice system that is as good as its promise.

Thank you very much.