



Wisconsin Court System

Interbranch communication: the Wisconsin plan

Background

Good communication among the judiciary, the Legislature, and the executive branch is critical to good government. Actions taken by one branch affect the business of the others. The legislative and executive branches set the budget. The Legislature creates substantive law that changes the workload of the courts. The quality of legislative drafting affects cases, many of which involve statutory interpretation. And, on a more personal level, the Legislature sets the compensation of judges, including salary, benefits and retirement.

The judiciary is important to the legislative function as well. If the legislative process is considered as a continuum, the judiciary is at the far end, interpreting and ruling on legislative enactments.

Much has been written about barriers to interbranch communication. Some barriers exist by constitutional design, ensuring that the three branches remain separate, equal and independent.

Orientation for new legislators

In 1997, for the first time, the Legislature invited the Supreme Court to participate in the Wisconsin Legislative Council's orientation for new legislators. The justices and the director of state courts explained their respective roles and the structure of the judicial branch as well as the branch's relationship to the legislative and executive branches. This has become a regular event.



Justice Patience Drake Roggensack addresses new members of the 2017-18 Legislature in the Supreme Court Hearing Room as Justice Rebecca Grassl Bradley, left, looks on.

District meetings

Wisconsin is divided into 9 judicial administrative districts for purposes of trial court administration. Judges and court administrators may invite legislators to district meetings and solicit agenda items. At the meetings, judges and legislators make presentations, but the most valuable exchange is more informal. Legislators who attend these meetings find themselves better informed, and these meetings have paved the way for better ongoing communication.

Joint meetings of the Supreme Court and legislative committees

In spring 1997, the Supreme Court began hosting breakfast and coffee meetings with legislative committees that handle court-related matters. The meetings have been conducted biennially. During the meetings, the justices and legislators identify areas of mutual concern, such as Supreme Court rule-making procedures, judicial substitution, juvenile justice, court interpreters, treatment courts, and more. Legislative and judicial staff, and representatives of the State Bar of Wisconsin are also on hand.

Interbranch seminars

Seminars that bring together legislators, judges, and executive branch staff have helped to improve communication while providing valuable continuing education. The first seminar was offered in fall 2001 and focused on statutory interpretation. In fall 2004, the seminar centered on safeguarding against wrongful convictions, in 2007 the topic was exploring strategies for reducing costs of incarceration, and in 2009 the seminar explored adapting to innovation. The most recent seminar, held in October 2013, was entitled "The Fourth Amendment and Emerging Communications and Tracking Technology."

Ride-Along Program

In 1993, the Director of State Courts Office initiated the Judicial Ride-Along Program, an effort designed to give legislators a better understanding of the court system and to improve two-way communication. The program invites legislators to spend a half day on the bench with a circuit court judge from their district. In the first round of the program, more than 70 percent of



Justice Brian Hagedorn



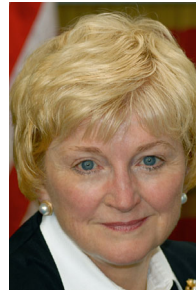
Justice Rebecca Grassl Bradley



Justice Ann Walsh Bradley



Chief Justice Annette Kingsland Ziegler



Justice Patience Drake Roggensack



Justice Rebecca Frank Dallet



Justice Jill J. Karofsky

legislators participated. In previous years, Rep. Robert Brooks (R-Saukville) rode along with Ozaukee County Circuit Court Judge Paul V. Malloy, and Rep. Todd Novak (R-Dodgeville) and Sen. Janis Ringhand (D-Evansville) visited Judge James R. Beer in Green County. Newly elected legislators are regularly invited to participate, and veteran lawmakers participate as their schedules permit. The program has been expanded to county board

supervisors and members of the media.



Sen. Janis Ringhand (D-Evansville) and Green County Circuit Court Judge James R. Beer sit at the bench during Ringhand's visit to the Green County Courthouse in 2015.

Court with Class

The winner of two national awards, Court with Class is a program run by the Wisconsin Supreme Court and the State Bar of

Wisconsin. The program brings high school classes from around the state to the Capitol to watch an oral argument in the Supreme Court Hearing Room and meet with a justice for a question-and-answer session. Legislators whose districts are sending a school are notified and

invited to join the discussion or stop by to greet the group.

Issue-oriented tours

In addition to providing opportunities for interaction with judges in one-on-one and group settings, the Director of State Courts Office has designed issue-oriented tours for groups and individuals – from both the legislative and executive branches – to provide information on issues of interest, such as court automation or the use of language interpreters. We welcome the opportunity to share information and introduce staff.



Court with Class groups arrive to observe oral argument.

For further information about any of the programs described in this handout, legislators and staff are encouraged to contact Chief Legal Counsel Karley Downing at (608) 267-5277 or karley.downing@wicourts.gov or Court Information Officer Tom Sheehan at (608) 261-6640 or tom.sheehan@wicourts.gov.