



Wisconsin Court System

Public Outreach and Court Education Programs

“We must never forget that the only real source of power that we as judges can tap is the respect of the people.” -Justice Thurgood Marshall, Chicago Tribune, August 15, 1981

The Wisconsin Court System has designed a number of outreach and education programs to enhance public understanding of and confidence in the courts. These programs are built on the notion that the courts need to work every day to strengthen their relationship with the communities they serve.

The foundation for the courts’ partnership with the public is treating litigants, witnesses and jurors with respect, resolving disputes promptly, efficiently and in accordance with the law and ensuring access to all, without physical, language or financial barriers. The court system’s programs for public outreach, education and input exist to enhance this partnership.

Justice on Wheels

The *Justice on Wheels* program gives people in other parts of the state a chance to watch an oral argument of the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Since 1993, the program has brought the Court to Green Bay, Eau Claire, Wausau, Milwaukee, La Crosse, Superior, Janesville, Kenosha, Baraboo, Rhinelander, Juneau, Appleton, Stevens Point, Racine, Portage, Fond du Lac, Elkhorn, Wautoma, Hudson, Oshkosh, West Bend, Portage, Monroe, Sheboygan, Waukesha, Lancaster, Jefferson and Montello. More than 10,000 people have witnessed or participated in *Justice on Wheels*.

The proceedings attract a standing-room-only crowd and are sometimes aired on cable-access television to make them available to a larger audience.

Local attorneys give warm-up sessions – an explanation of the case to be heard and a short civics lesson – immediately before each argument. Local schools join in the event, participating in essay contests and sending students to shadow local judges and court staff ahead of time. Attorneys also travel to the schools to talk about the cases and the Court.

Court with Class

Court with Class, begun in fall 1996, is a joint venture of the Wisconsin Supreme Court and the State Bar of Wisconsin. *Court with Class* brings high school students to the state Supreme Court to hear oral argument and meet with a justice over the lunch hour. The program has won two national awards for public service.

The Supreme Court and State Bar provide a teaching kit to help teachers prepare the students in advance, and alert the media and legislators from the school district to the visit.

Every public and private high school in the state, as well as home-schooled students, are invited to participate in the program. Available slots go quickly. *Court with Class* brings an average of more than 2,500 students to the Supreme Court each year. For more information, contact the Supreme Court at (608) 266-1298.

Judicial Teaching Institute

In February 1999, 30 high school teachers participated in the first-ever Wisconsin annual justice teaching institute in Madison. On the faculty were Supreme Court justices,

circuit court judges, attorneys, and university professors. The Institute was made possible by a grant from the Constitutional Rights Foundation and was programmed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, the State Bar of Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin Department of Curriculum and Instruction.



Wisconsin Supreme Court justices greet a gallery of spectators on their Justice on Wheels trip to Montello, Wisconsin in 2019.

From 2001 to 2011, the institute was offered again annually. With funding from the Wisconsin Humanities Council and the Municipal Judges Association, the Supreme Court and State Bar published a book, *Connecting to the Courts: A Teacher's Guide to the Wisconsin Courts*, which is available online at: www.wicourts.gov/courts/resources/teacher/teacherguide.htm



Teachers from public and private high schools around Wisconsin participate in a moot court exercise at the Wisconsin Supreme Court. The exercise is designed for the teachers to replicate with their students.

Case of the Month Project

The *Case of the Month* is an Internet project that brings together several resources to teach about the cases decided by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Each month during the Court's session (September through June) a case is profiled. Cases are selected for their potential to improve civic literacy. All deal with relevant and important issues, and many relate to topics of interest to students.

Case of the Month is on the court system website at www.wicourts.gov/courts/resources/teacher/casemonth/index.htm. For more information, call the Wisconsin Supreme Court, at (608) 266-1298.

iCivics

iCivics is an innovative web-based civics education project launched by retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The site features interactive online educational games for middle-school students, as well as teaching guides and lesson plans for teachers. Justice O'Connor visited Madison in May 2010 to help launch the project in Wisconsin.

For more information, visit www.icivics.org.

Judicial Speakers Bureau

The *Judicial Speakers Bureau* helps organizations connect with judges and clerks of circuit court who are available to share their expertise with the public. The bureau works with civic groups, social organizations, professional associations, schools, law enforcement groups, veterans, senior citizens, and others to find an appropriate speaker. There is no charge for the service or for the speech. For more information, contact Court Information Office at (608) 261-6640 or tom.sheehan@wicourts.gov.

Judicial Ride Along

Modeled after a Minnesota program of the same name, the Judicial Ride-Along Program began in November 1993 to improve the courts' relationship with the Wisconsin Legislature. Since that time, many state lawmakers have participated in the program, each spending a half day on the bench with a circuit court judge.

In evaluating the program, both judges and lawmakers say that bringing the two branches of government together was very worthwhile. Legislators appreciated witnessing the impact of the laws they pass.

The program also has been made available to county board supervisors and members of the news media.

Media Relations Activities

2018 marked the 40th anniversary of approval of the Wisconsin courts being open to electronic and photographic media. In an effort to help media report court activities accurately, the courts have held periodic seminars for the news media.

The Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, Wisconsin Newspaper Association, Wisconsin Broadcasters Association, and the Society of Professional Journalists joined forces in March 1997 to present the first-ever Appellate Court Seminar for the News Media. Designed by media representatives and judges to educate reporters and news managers, the seminar included lectures on how the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals operate, tours of the Wisconsin State Law Library and Supreme Court chambers, and a question-and-answer session.

The Court Information Office has also developed a reference manual for media coordinators (members of the media who are designated to work with their local judges on access issues). The court system and the State Bar of Wisconsin Media-Law Relations Committee sponsored the manual, and occasional training sessions.

The Court Information Office on a regular basis produces press releases on Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, and circuit court initiatives, and the Court Information Office responds daily to a variety of media requests.



Juror Appreciation Program

September has been designated by the Wisconsin court system as a time to

recognize the importance of jurors to the American justice system. Co-sponsored by the Wisconsin court system and the State Bar of Wisconsin. Juror Appreciation Month honors the participation of the almost 200,000 individuals who are summoned to serve in Wisconsin each year.

For further information about the Wisconsin Juror Appreciation Program call the Office of Court Operations at (608) 266-3121.

Volunteers in the Courts: A Partnership for Justice

This initiative of the Wisconsin Supreme Court is designed to benefit the courts by using the help of the public and to foster community confidence in the courts by involving the public directly in the courts system's work.

The *Volunteers in the Courts Program*, which started in 1996, has been singled out as a national model of court/community collaboration. A full directory of court connected volunteer programs in Wisconsin is available at www.wicourts.gov/services/volunteer/catalog.htm.

Court Information on the Web

The court system's website contains up-to-the-minute opinion releases from both the Wisconsin Supreme Court and Court of Appeals. Oral argument of the Supreme Court can be heard live or by looking up archived cases. Also posted are calendars for both courts' hearings, information on a wide variety of court system initiatives, circuit court case information and dozens of different forms that may be downloaded and completed for filing. Certain frequently used forms may be completed online with the help of a "Wizard."

A special Teaching Resources section can be found at www.wicourts.gov/courts/resources/teacher/index.htm.

RESOURCES & MATERIALS:

Portraits of Justice: The Wisconsin Supreme Court's First 150 Years, a book that tells the stories of 77 justices who have served on the Wisconsin Supreme Court since statehood, is available on the website. Portraits of the justices accompany the biographies. The book was produced by the Wisconsin Supreme Court and published with additional funding from the Wisconsin Humanities Council and State Bar of Wisconsin. Portraits of Justice was distributed to the state's public libraries and many historical societies.

The book is available for purchase through the Wisconsin Historical Society Museum Store. It may be purchased for \$10.95 by calling (800) 621-2736.

Famous Cases of the Wisconsin

Supreme Court features 25 cases selected for their great importance, their interest, or simply their use as examples of the type of cases this court has handled at any given time in history. Summaries were compiled by Wisconsin Supreme Court staff and interns and are written for a lay audience. Available on the website.

Wisconsin's Legal History, a series of articles by Joseph A. Ranney, an attorney and author, highlights many of the important people and events that have shaped Wisconsin law. Written for a lay audience. Available on the website.

The Wisconsin State Law Library provides access to legal research resources for state officers and employees, attorneys, media, and the public. Reference staff will provide assistance in person, or by telephone, fax, or e-mail. Library tours and workshops on using legal information are also available.

The library's website, www.wilawlibrary.gov, provides access to the Wisconsin State Online Law Library (an automated catalog of library resources), links to government and law-related resources, e-mail addresses of library staff, and more.

The library is located at 120 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. (second floor). The entrance is one block off the Capitol Square. The library is open Monday through Friday. For more information, call (800) 322-9755.

Rope of Sand, a play commissioned by the Wisconsin Supreme Court with funds from the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Commission, told the story of a fugitive slave named Joshua Glover who escaped to Wisconsin in 1852, but was captured two years later and jailed in Milwaukee to await return to Missouri. Local abolitionists, led by newspaper publisher Sherman Booth, broke down the jail door and freed him. Glover went on to Canada and freedom, but Booth faced a protracted legal battle for his part in the escape.

Rope played out the tug of war between the state and federal courts. More than 1,000 people, including the governor and Supreme Court justices, attended the play's four sold-out performances in 1998. Several judges,

lawyers, and professors spoke to community groups prior to and after the play to educate them on the legal issues. The playwright has corresponded with theater groups both within, and outside of, Wisconsin regarding future performances.

The script is available to Wisconsin schools free of charge; contact the Wisconsin Supreme Court at (608) 266-1298 or download at www.wicourts.gov/courts/resources/teacher/docs/ropeofsand.pdf

Stand the Storm, a half-hour documentary on the 1854 fugitive slave case Ableman v. Booth (see *Rope of Sand* entry for full description) was produced by



Sherman Booth

Wisconsin Public Television in cooperation with the Wisconsin Supreme Court. It made its statewide debut on December 16, 1998, on Wisconsin Public Television. Interviewed for the piece were: Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson; Milwaukee Judge Carl Ashley; University of Wisconsin Professors Richard Ralston (African-American Studies) and Michael McManus (Civil

War History); and Historian Ruby West Jackson. The documentary juxtaposes the modern civil rights movement with the events that surrounded this court battle and puts into context this important moment in the state's history. The project was funded by a grant from the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Commission. The documentary can be purchased for \$9.95. To order a copy, call Wisconsin Public Television at (608) 263-4575.

County Courthouse/Legal History packets were assembled, with help from judges, county historical societies, Supreme Court staff and interns, for each of Wisconsin's 72 counties. They were intended to give brief histories of Wisconsin's county courthouses, but became excellent sources of legal lore and county court/jail/judge history that continue to be used in speeches and handouts throughout the state. Each judge in the state received a packet about his or her county court history. This information was also distributed to all counties to help with Law Day celebrations.

Call the Wisconsin Supreme Court at (608) 266-1298 to request a history packet for your county.

Justice in Their Own Words is an oral history project undertaken by the Wisconsin Supreme Court and Director of State Courts Office. To date, more than 30 of Wisconsin's long-serving active, reserve, and retired judges have been interviewed for this project. Wisconsin State Historical Society oral historians advised Court staff on the project and court reporters volunteered to transcribe the interviews. The four volume series is available at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Law School, Marquette University Law School, Wisconsin State Law Library, and the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

Publications

The following publications are available:

- Judicial Speakers Bureau Guide
- The Third Branch* (an electronic quarterly for judges, clerks and court staff)
- Connecting to the Courts: A Teacher's Guide to the Wisconsin Courts*
- Wisconsin Supreme Court Table of Pending Cases (a monthly listing of cases, with a short synopsis of the issue each presents)
- Supreme Court Case Synopsis (monthly, plain-English summaries of upcoming cases)
- Supreme Court seal flyer (a one-page explanation of the symbolism of the seal)
- Court with Class brochure
- Press releases about Supreme Court, Court of Appeals and Circuit Court matters
- Short handouts describing the function and recent activities of various Supreme Court agencies.
- What's Happening in Court?* (An activity book for children visiting court as participants in a case or as observers. An interactive version is posted on the court system Web site.)
- Supreme Court photo with brief history of the Court

In addition to these programs, the Wisconsin court system cooperates with a variety of State Bar of Wisconsin outreach efforts including the high school mock trial program.

More information on the programs, resources and publications listed here are available through Court Information Officers Tom Sheehan at (608) 261-6640 (tom.sheehan@wicourts.gov) or by writing to: Court Information Officer, Wisconsin Supreme Court, P.O. Box 1688, Madison, WI 53701-1688