

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed: Courts' Outreach Programs Have Lasting Impacts on Communities

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Courts throughout the United States are impacting communities with important outreach programs. Both our local and district courts have successfully participated in a variety of such programs. As a former judge, I believe that our local community programs are essential to educate the public, especially our youth, on the inner workings of the courts, the role of courts and the judicial system in our society, and other significant issues.

I recently attended the 73rd Judicial Conference in Lancaster, Pennsylvania sponsored by the Third Circuit Court of Appeals. For those who do not know, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals is the federal appellate court which handles all appeals from the District Courts of the Virgin Islands. Other jurisdictions which are a part of the Third Circuit are

New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania. Judges and lawyers from all over the Third Circuit were in attendance.

During the conference, there was a breakout session which I joined on the Third Judicial Circuit Courts and the Community Committee. I was very impressed with the myriad of community outreach programs undertaken by courts throughout the Third Circuit, including our own district courts, during 2016. The following is a list of some of the programs:

1. Judge chats which enabled school students and judges to sit and talk about judging and the judicial system. Students ranged from 4th grade to college.
2. A high school fellowship program offered by the District Court of Delaware, where high school students competed to participate in a summer work program with judges and other federal employees who work at the court and are paid a stipend.
3. Kids and the Court program that was offered five times last year in St. Thomas to 5th and 11th grade students to interact with court staff.
4. Reading programs in which judges went to elementary schools to read their favorite books to students.
5. Mock trial programs in Pennsylvania and St. Croix where high school students argued legal issues before a panel of judges.
6. Constitution Day activities centering on presidential leadership skills.
7. Bill of Rights Day activities where judges spoke with students on timely issues of interest, such as the role of the courts and the citizenship process.
8. A judges and journalists program, which included a one day workshop on the topic of "Judges and Journalists: Accuracy and Access", in which judges learned about the issues facing journalists today and journalists developed a better understanding of the role and responsibilities of a judge.

We were informed by the new Chief Judge of the Third Circuit, Judge D. Brooks Smith, that he had recently proposed a new community outreach initiative for court literacy and adult education centering on civics education, especially the four pillars of court literacy: separation of powers; judicial independence; rule of law; and jury service. According to the handout that was provided, this program will provide "a counterweight to perceptions and stereotypes about the courts, judges, and lawyers as portrayed in news and entertainment media. Courthouse programs create opportunities to interact with the human face of the judiciary."

Our local Superior Court has had its own outreach programs too which have tremendously impacted the youth. In 1981, then Presiding Judge Verne Hodge established a program to keep the youth out of the courtroom and in school known as the Rising Stars Youth Steel Orchestra. It began as a summer program to teach students how to play the steel drum and was so successful, that it expanded to operate all year round. Not only is the graduation rate for participating students is an amazing 90%, but students also develop their musical talents and have the opportunity to travel.

Additionally, in 1994, during my first year on the bench as a judge, I developed and then oversaw, with the participation of the court's staff, the Virgin Islands High School Appellate Moot Court Competition for high school seniors. It is an annual interscholastic program in which students study current legal issues and present arguments before a panel of judges. Lawyers are assigned to serve as mentors to students. As incentives,

scholarships are awarded to the top students. Originally, the Superior Court was an active participant with the V.I. Bar Association, but over the years, its participation has diminished, with the District Court assuming some of those responsibilities. This year, the Moot Court Competition will celebrate its 23rd year and is still going strong.

Our courts should continue to sponsor outreach programs because of the tremendous impact they have had on our community. As budgets for the operations of the courts are reduced, these programs should not be cut, because ultimately, it is the people who will suffer the most without them.

Submitted on Saturday by: Soraya Diase Coffelt, former attorney general and judge.

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