

REFORMING THE MUNICIPAL COURTS OF ST. LOUIS COUNTY, MISSOURI

Recently, Missouri's municipal courts have experienced a flurry of changes to revamp fine, fee and bail procedures that have spread nationwide. This swell of activity was sparked by a U.S. Department of Justice review of the Ferguson City Police Department's actions to quell rioting after Michael Brown, an unarmed African American, was fatally shot in 2014 by a white city police officer. The report painted a dire picture of police enforcement leading up to the riots and highlighted improprieties and collusion among police, city and municipal justice officials to raise city revenues by increasing fines, fees and punishments for traffic and ordinance violations. These revelations prompted the state's Supreme Court to engage the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to examine the Ferguson Court and other state municipal divisions.¹ The NCSC's investigation and report, funded through State Justice Institute (SJI) reengineering funds, proposed 45 reforms ranging from governance and leadership improvements to fiscal and financial changes.

Although the report suggested there likely were questionable operations and revenue practices occurring in over 900 municipalities throughout the state, the NCSC was most disturbed by problems it encountered in St. Louis County, home to Ferguson and 80+ municipal justice systems. At the same time, though, the NCSC was impressed by the resolve it witnessed on the part of the Supreme Court and St. Louis County Circuit Court Presiding Judge Douglas Beach to stimulate reforms both statewide and locally to correct problems noted by the NCSC.

To aid in these efforts, the State Justice Institute (SJI) funded two initiatives for St. Louis County: (a) a technical assistance grant to devise strategies to improve court processes and procedures and act as a model for other regions of the state, and (b) a curriculum grant to design and produce a workshop for judges, prosecutors and municipal court leaders on newly promulgated Supreme Court minimum operating standards for municipal divisions. The workshop was also envisioned as a prototype that would help shape similar circuit court programs statewide.

Judge Beach retired from the Bench in September 2018 but has been retained on a contractual basis by the state Supreme Court to continue the municipal court reform efforts in St. Louis County and to advise the new Presiding Judge of the Circuit Court, the Hon. Gloria Reno; the Supreme Court; and the Missouri Office of the Courts' Administrator (OSCA) about future reforms and improvements. Judge Beach is also the 2017-18 NAPCO President and host of NAPCO's 2018 Annual Leadership Academy and Conference in St. Louis.

¹ Missouri's Constitution permits cities and towns to create municipal divisions (a/k/a municipal courts) to adjudicate infractions and ordinance violations occurring within municipalities. Legally, municipal divisions are branches of the state circuit courts.