



Board Workshop / Discussion Agenda

15 West Kellogg Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55102
651-266-9200

February 10, 2026 - 1:30 p.m.

Courthouse Room 220

WORKSHOP

1. **Judges' Women's Group**

[2026-042](#)

Sponsors: Community Corrections



Board Workshop / Discussion

Request for Board Action

15 West Kellogg Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55102
651-266-9200

Item Number: 2026-042

Meeting Date: 2/10/2026

Sponsor: Community Corrections

Title

Judges' Women's Group

Attachment

1. Presentation
2. News Articles



2/10/2026

Judges' Women's Group

A supportive community of trust for justice-involved women.

 RAMSEY COUNTY
Community Corrections

Agenda

- I. Introductions and Presenters
- II. About the Judges' Women's Group
- III. Participation Spotlights
- IV. Recognition and Gratitude
- IV. Questions and Discussion



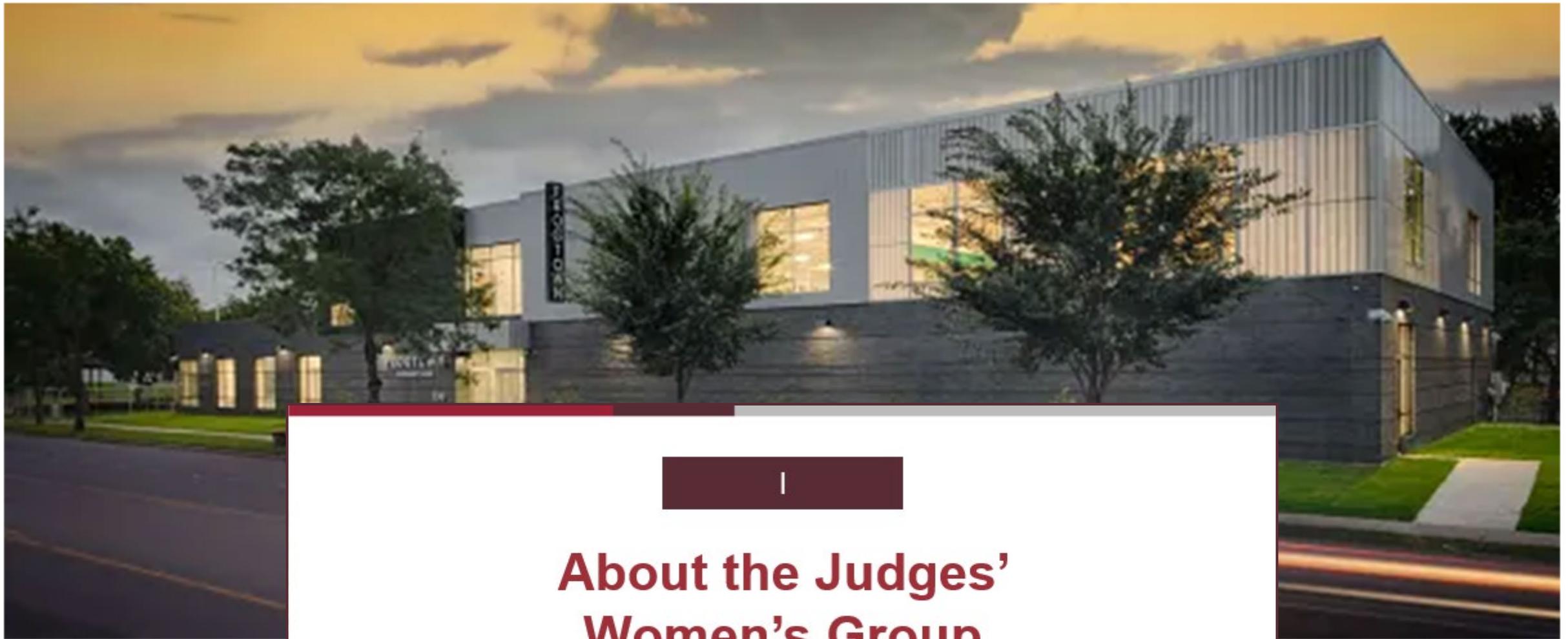
Introduction and Presenters

I. Introduction

- Nadir Abdi, Deputy County Manager, Health & Wellness Service Team
- Gloria Reyes, Deputy County Manager, Safety & Justice Service Team
- Monica Long, Director, Community Corrections

II. Presenters

- The Honorable Sara Grewing, Chief Judge, Minnesota's Second Judicial District
- The Honorable Maria Mitchell, Judge, Minnesota's Second Judicial District
- The Honorable Nicole Starr, Judge, Minnesota's Second Judicial District
- Fulisha, Participant, Advisory Circle, Women's Group
- Brenda, Participant, Advisory Circle, Women's Group



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About the Judges' Women's Group

About the Judges' Women's Group: History and Purpose

- 2002: Men's Group Begins
 - Created by Judge Stephenson (retired) and Probation Officer Daryl Pridgen (retired).
 - Meets bi-weekly at the Wilder Foundation.
 - Judge Timothy Carey currently co-leads with Judge Stephenson and a group of male volunteers.
- 2018: Women's Group Begins
 - Created by Chief Judge Grewing and Judge Nicole Starr for women at the Ramsey County Correctional Facility.
- 2019: Women's Group Moves to the Community
 - Group meets at Dunning Recreation Center, Midway YMCA.
 - Emma Koski (public defender), Gail Moerke (Ramsey County Community Corrections Department staff), and Judge Maria Mitchell join as facilitators.

About the Judges' Women's Group: History and Purpose

- 2024 - Present: Weekly Meetings at Wilder Foundation, then Frogtown Community Center
 - Muteeat Lawal (Assistant Hennepin County Attorney), Lyndsey Olson (Saint Paul City Attorney) and Veronica Walther (Minnesota Office of Administrative Hearings) join as facilitators.
- What Happens at Group?
 - *Improve the lives and health of women involved in the court system through Probation and Child Protection.*
 - Satisfies court-ordered probation conditions: Pro-social activity and Sober Support Group, assistance with employment resources and housing stability.
 - Focus on restorative practices and Seeking Safety curriculum.



Mission and Vision Statement

Our Mission

We provide healing-centered programming and community-based support for justice-involved women, creating safe spaces to build resilience and support the reclamation of self.

Vision Statement

To cultivate a trusted space where justice-involved women reclaim their lives through healing, dignity, and purpose, supported by a collaborative Oversight of judges and community partners.

Our Guiding Principles

- **Safety and Stability:** We create a consistent and predictable environment that prioritizes the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of all participants and children.
- **Equity:** We actively work to dismantle systemic barriers and uplift justice-involved women, particularly those from marginalized communities.
- **Dignity and Respect:** Every woman's story matters. We honor lived experiences and approach all interactions with empathy and professionalism.
- **Collaboration:** Our work is shared work. Each advisory oversight contributes unique expertise to support the group's mission.
- **Accountability with Care:** We model the same integrity we seek to inspire—following through on commitments, maintaining boundaries, and communicating transparently.
- **Growth and Learning:** We adapt, reflect, and evolve to meet the changing needs of our participants and community.

Leadership Framework

The Ramsey County Judges Women's Group operates through a shared leadership model built on collaboration, accountability, and equity. Rather than a traditional hierarchy, the group is guided by an *Advisory Circle* - a small leadership team that governs key areas of operations.

The **Advisory Circle** is responsible for developing and maintaining its area's processes, ensuring clear communication, and supporting consistent implementation across the group.



About the Judges' Women's Group: Programming Spotlights

- Narcan Education
- Seeking Safety Curriculum
- Housing Outreach and Supports
- Workforce Development
- Alpha Kappa Sorority Hat & Scarf Drive
- We Resolve! Empowering Justice Involved Individuals



About the Judges' Women's Group: Government Supports

- Office of the Ramsey County Attorney: Volunteer / Facilitator Support
- Ramsey County Community Corrections: Financial and Administrative Support
- Ramsey County Community Corrections: Volunteer / Facilitator Support
- Ramsey County – Saint Paul Public Health: Clinic 555
- Ramsey County – Saint Paul Public Health: Mother's First
- Ramsey County Workforce Solutions: Resume Building
- Ramsey County Contractor Juliet Mitchell: Business Etiquette
- Ramsey County Sheriff's Office: Picnic Support and Community Outreach

About the Judges' Women's Group: Government Supports

- City of Saint Paul City Attorney's Office: Volunteer / Facilitator Support
- City of Saint Paul Parks & Recreation: Waived permit fees for annual family picnic
- City of Saint Paul Fire Captain Brittany Baker
- Hennepin County Medical Center: Heart Health Education
- Mendota Heights Police Department: Women's Self Defense
- Minnesota Secretary of State: Voting Rights and Responsibilities
- Minnesota's 2nd Judicial District: Volunteer / Facilitator Support
- Minnesota's 2nd Judicial District Court Reporters: Wellness Fair
- State Board of Public Defense – Ramsey County: Volunteers

About the Judges' Women's Group: Community Supports

- Alpha Kappa Sorority: Hat & Scarf Drive
- Alpha Kappa Sorority: Mental Health Practitioner's Presentation
- Breaking Free: Healing from Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation
- Keystone Community Services
- Legal Rights Center of Minnesota: Expungement Education
- Minnesota Institute of Arts: Giants Exhibit and Employment Opportunities
- Minnesota Black Prosecutors Association
- Pillsbury House: Safety Plans and Domestic Violence
- Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood
- Sound Bowls
- The New Justice Project Minnesota
- Twin Cities Diversity in Practice: Picnic Volunteers
- Volunteer Lawyers Network

The background of the slide is a scenic landscape. On the left, there is a dense forest of trees with autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. On the right, a wide river flows through a valley, with a town or city visible in the distance under a bright, hazy sky. A white rectangular box is centered over the image, containing the title and a decorative element.

III

Participant Spotlights

Participant Spotlight: Who We Serve

- The group serves:
 - Justice-involved women residing in Ramsey County.
 - Justice-involved women residing in any county who are on probation to Ramsey County Community Corrections.
 - Women in Ramsey County with justice-involved children.
 - Women in Ramsey County with child protection involvement.
- The group met 47 times in 2025.
- The group served 187 individual Ramsey County residents.
 - 46% of participants were currently or formerly on probation to Ramsey County Community Corrections.

Participant Spotlight: Fulisha

“All I had was a hope for a better life. I was in a room full of powerful women. I felt like such a special woman.”

- Oldest in a six-child single parent household.
- Mother struggled with addiction and mental health issues.
- Child protection involvement both as a child and an adult.
- Achieved seven years of sobriety; experienced relapse when third child was born premature.
- Checked self in to treatment while on probation and involved with child protection.
- Got clean from meth but still struggled with mental health and housing stability.
- Completed dialectical behavioral therapy.
- Regular attendee of the Judge’s group for many years.
- Have achieved stable housing and employment – paying full rent & a manager at work!

Participant Spotlight: Brenda

“This group helps me feel purpose. I am helping women that are just like me find their voices; helping them see that it is possible to grow and heal. This group is a game changer. It has helped me grow and change for the better – it has given me the platform to be the best version of myself.”

- Mother to four - grandmother to many.
- Experience with addiction, incarceration, homelessness.
- Experienced mental, physical and verbal abuse.
- Experience being abused and being an abuser.
- Child protection involvement – removal of children from home.
- Have attended group since October 2022; now part of the Advisory Circle.
- Continue attending and helping women just like me!

IV

Recognition and Gratitude



Recognition and Gratitude

- February 2025 *Minnesota Women's Press* profile.
- October 2024 *Pioneer Press* mention.
- December 2023 *Star Tribune* profile.
- Judge Nicole Starr, Judge Maria Mitchell, and Chief Judge Sara Grewing were awarded a **2025 Minnesota District Judges Foundation Community Service Award** for their work with the group.

Recognition and Gratitude

“Brenda Roth, a participant, credits the group for helping her confront past trauma and find strength. “The support here has been life-changing,” she says. The weekly gatherings, held at the Wilder Foundation, focus on conversation, healing, and community-building. She wishes this kind of healing had been possible before her incarceration. “Someone who understood that I needed treatment would have helped.”



*Healing Together: A Women’s Support Group
Transforms Justice in Ramsey County
Minnesota Women’s Press
1/29/2025*

Recognition and Gratitude

“Do you remember last year when our group received coats?”

This morning, after my meditation, I cried. These past seven years have been incredibly rough. Yesterday I worked the Gopher football game, and while getting ready, I thought about everything I’ve been through. The long johns I put on were bought for me by the Women of Nations shelter. The wool socks and waterproof gloves were also provided for me by them. When I first arrived at that shelter, I had nothing like that—I came with only two bags of belongings.

As I put on my winter coat and walked outside, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude. That jacket kept me warm.”

-Women’s Group Participant

Recognition and Gratitude

“We’re not there for the same reasons, but we’re all talking about our day. It helps create the bond and trust. I’m the city attorney, but I am not there on a different level, the way it feels in court. We are together in a circle — all just women and human beings talking.”

- Lindsey Olson, Saint Paul City Attorney

Healing Together: A Women’s Support Group Transforms Justice in Ramsey County;
Minnesota Women’s Press, 1/29/2025

"At a recent meeting, a woman who lived in a shelter when she began attending has now held onto her job for a year, managing a gas station," said Starr. "Another woman who was homeless for eight years is finally housed and gets to see her son every week."

- Nicole Starr, 2nd Judicial District Judge

Ramsey County legal experts help troubled women find their worth
Star Tribune, 12/8/2023



Questions & Discussion

Healing Together: A Women's Support Group Transforms Justice in Ramsey County



PHOTO SARAH WHITING

reported by
Mikki Morrissette

Brenda Roth (center) serves food to the support group with Mutteat Lawal and Gail Moerke.

A unique support group in Ramsey County is fostering healing and change for women involved in the legal system. Founded three years ago, the group brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds, including women re-entering society, judges, attorneys, and other community members, to share experiences and support one another. The group is exploring ways to manage its rapid growth while maintaining its core mission of mutual support and healing.

Brenda Roth, a participant, credits the group for helping her confront past trauma and find strength. “The support here has been life-changing,” she says. The weekly gatherings, held at the Wilder Foundation, focus on conversation, healing, and community-building. She wishes this kind of healing had been possible before her incarceration. “Someone who understood that I needed treatment would have helped.”

The women’s group started with fewer than a dozen people. Today there are nearly 70 people attending the weekly gatherings for 1.5 hours of conversation and food. “We’ve had people from different counties in Minnesota [coming] to see and listen who were very impressed,” says

Roth. “There’s so much healing going on. Everyone, no matter where they are in life, share their stories with us and show that they have imperfections. That makes me want to be better because, dang, they’ve experienced things that I’ve experienced.”

Group members support each other in practical and emotional ways. “Every adversity I’ve had thrown at me, they’ve helped me through,” Roth says. “Sometimes it’s just showing care and concern. Or they can help you get your driver’s license back. Some days there are so many women there that we only get to check in, but that is still fulfilling. Because we all want to help the next person. What an ugly place I have been in — I don’t want to see others there.”

Emma Koski, public defender

Emma Koski joined the group as it started three years ago. At the time, founding judges Sara Grewing and Nicole Starr wanted to make life easier for women who have experienced barriers that led them into the court system. Since then, Koski says, the group has evolved to “being like a safe, supportive space of women who want to see each other succeed and to recognize the struggles that we’ve all

been through. We recognize that we can relate to each other more than we ever thought we could.”

One woman wondered “why would these important people want to sit in a room with me?” After being involved, Koski says, the woman realized that everyone struggles with work, time management, and parenting. “I think she’s gained confidence knowing that other people care. It’s important that women know there are people in all fields, including judges and prosecutors, who want to see them do well. We don’t all want everyone to be locked up, which I think for some of them is a surprise. It’s helpful to understand that a judge wants to see you out in the community.”

Koski says the experience of this connection has made her a better public defender. She has also benefited personally from the group. She has otherwise tended to be guarded — not realizing people will listen if she needs support. “One of the great things is that we can take off our work hat and just put on our human hat. We’re an extended family now — the kids all hug you when you arrive.”

Maria Mitchell, Ramsey County judge

As a previous public defender for 15 years, and a volunteer, Maria Mitchell understands some of the issues facing people who appear for trials and sentencing in her courtroom. She is involved with the group because otherwise she is not consistently talking to people about issues on the street and the barriers getting in their way.

“Being in this group keeps me grounded,” Mitchell says. “I have learned about the capacity to reinvent self from the women in the group. I started reading about indigenous healing of self from emotional trauma, and that has become my main goal. It feeds my spirit to learn how to be more restorative. If you are invested in the community, then you are not going to want to harm the community.”

She says the justice system is not yet capable of doing restorative work. “There is an epidemic of loneliness, and that is when you often make bad choices,” Mitchell says.

“You want to be around people who are encouraging and make you know that you matter. Even though not everything [that comes out of group] is good, it is refreshing to see positive things when you see so much negative all week. I want to make change, and being in court doesn’t necessarily fulfill that for me.”

Mitchell says the key for many participants in the group is to learn how to be vulnerable and “talk about hard stuff and process it so it doesn’t come out sideways. Healing, in my mind, is the root of everything. We all have generational trauma, including family members suffering from alcoholism and physical abuse. I have seen in court more than five people who saw their mother murdered in front of them — that has lasting impact on them.”

Lyndsey Olson, city attorney

As the Saint Paul city attorney, Lyndsey Olson is the chief prosecutor who discusses high-level cases with her team and builds programs that include “how we think about our role of prosecution, how we think about justice and our mission.”

One program, Ethos, is a restorative justice program that connects people who have committed crimes and people who have experienced trauma. “I think it’s our duty as prosecutors to help people come full circle after they commit crimes, and particularly with misdemeanors — we’re not talking about folks who are committing violent felonies. A lot of times our folks don’t need jail. They need trauma healing, reintegration, community support, and wraparound services in order to be successful.”

Olson shares information and resources in the group, such as how to find an attorney in another state to respond to a warrant. “Just being able to say, ‘Here’s what you do, and I can provide a resource to contact,’ is helpful. It might otherwise cost \$450 to find an answer to a simple question.”

She acknowledges that the group is about much more than sharing information. “We acknowledge that we

continued on next page

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Minneapolis



(l-r) Emma Koski, Gail Moerke, Veronica Walthers, Diana Vang, Brenda Roth, Nikki Starr, Lyndsey Olson, Fulisha Fulmer, Monica Long, Muteeat Lawal, Sara Grewing

have very different experiences because of age, race, our socioeconomic status, our job, our justice-involved past — but we all have things that bond us as human beings and as women. That is genuinely shared in a very raw way.”

The group has grown quickly because people bring others who are working on staying sober, getting into housing, finding a job, wanting to get an education.

“There are amazing stories of transformations. I feel fed by the group. I take joy in their success. Many of them are extremely brave and strong and amazing individuals that have done a lot of work. It’s inspiring.”

The group uses the Seeking Safety curriculum to help shape conversations. It can be stressful for participants to open up about heavy topics such as addictions and trauma in a group setting. When she is tapped as facilitator, Olson sometimes uses light-hearted prompts, such as a session when she asked everyone to share a song that uplifts or gives them a sense of connection.

“I talked about how music affects your brain, how it feeds you, why that is, and how it connects your emotions,” Olson says. “We played bits of the songs people mentioned. It can be a happy minute to bond with people and not talk about the most traumatic thing that happened to you. People need that too.”

Lessons to Share

One of the growing pains the group is figuring out is how to accommodate a growing number of people and help them feel safe. “So many of the women that have been incarcerated are there because of unhealed trauma,” Mitchell says. “It

would be nice to heal trauma before they are involved in the justice system. Healing from this group is primarily about simply being in community with others, but we’re not therapists.”

The group has offered tapping and breathing exercises for healing, cosmetic cleansing as self-care, and housing assistance. Two guest speakers included someone from a domestic abuse shelter and a female police chief who talked about individual safety plans and taught self-defense. A judge brought in her sister, who taught CPR. After a woman witnessed an overdose on the train, Ramsey County chemical health people came in to talk about and give out Narcan. Others have talked about what good therapy looks like and how to

advocate for the care you need. Members of the group have been directed to WomenVenture and Propel for Nonprofits to try to create a paid peer-to-peer network.

What helps the strength of the group, Mitchell says, is having consistent justice-involved people and volunteers. Ten people are on a planning email to help facilitate the conversations. One to two people moderate each evening’s conversation on a rotating basis. A prosecutor orders food, which is served to make sure there is enough for everyone. Someone in the public defender’s office does the bookkeeping. Mitchell keeps a suitcase of age-appropriate activities in her car for child care, which could range from 1–16 kids. Roth organizes a summer picnic.

The director of Ramsey County Community Corrections, Monica Long, strongly believes in the group to give people options to break cycles that prevent them from leading safe and supported lives. Says Mitchell, “We started off with money from a racial equity fund in the county manager’s office. After that ran out, Monica made room in her budget so we can give participants a hot meal and gift cards.”

The group requires that people check in and stay the whole time. Says Olson, “We want everyone to respect the people that want to get something out of it. We want people to be part of the conversation and meet others.”

Participants do not all live in Ramsey County, since many women have to find less expensive living options elsewhere. One woman drives two hours each way to be in the group.

Olson adds that it is important that everyone participates on a level playing field. “We’re not there for the same reasons, but we’re all talking about our day. It helps create the bond and trust. I’m the city attorney, but I am not there on a different level, the way it feels in court. We are together in a circle — all just women and human beings talking.” **WMP**

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LOCAL NEWS

A younger bench in Ramsey County: Chief Judge Sara Grewing oversees Second Judicial District during a changing time for judges

On July 1, Grewing was elected by her judicial peers as chief judge, a two-year term overseeing the administration of all 29 judges in the district



Minnesota State Auditor Julie Blaha, right, is sworn for her second term by Assistant Chief Judge Sara Grewing, Second Judicial District, Monday, Jan. 2, 2023, in St. Paul,



By **FREDERICK MELO** | fmelo@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

PUBLISHED: October 13, 2024 at 6:56 PM CDT | UPDATED: October 15, 2024 at 9:32 AM CDT

Once a week, Judge Sara Grewing joins two other Ramsey County judges at a voluntary women’s group, currently held at the Wilder Foundation in St. Paul, where they meet with ex-offenders in transition and other women who have had brushes with the justice system.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys come out to share a meal and discuss “how the system could have served them better,” said Grewing, who launched the effort in 2022 at the Ramsey County workhouse. The goal, she said, is to help the women navigate the courts and its appendages, if not life, and avoid making the kinds of mistakes that could land them back behind bars.

“I certainly get so much more than I give in going to these discussions,” Grewing said.

The effort at the workhouse proved so popular several inmates asked if the judges could continue their seminars and work sessions on the outside, so the women’s group moved to the Midway YMCA until it ran out of space there.

A few weeks ago, some 36 women showed up at Wilder, many with kids in tow. Some women have brought their mothers or best friends.

“What’s cool is a lot of the women we started with are now facilitating meetings,” said Grewing, who was first appointed to the bench by Gov. Mark Dayton in 2015.



Sara Grewing (Courtesy photo)

Grewing's efforts have not gone unnoticed within the Second Judicial District, which spans Ramsey County. On July 1, she was elected by her judicial peers as chief judge, a two-year term overseeing the administration of all 29 judges in the district. She's assisted by Assistant Chief Judge Kelly L. Olmstead.

Court case backlog ebbs

Some of the toughest challenges facing the court system in recent years have begun to abate. A heavy case backlog compounded by a quick transition to remote hearings in 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, now seems under control, thanks in no small part to efforts by the state court system to set target deadlines and other metrics. Still, the county remains the most diverse in the state, and homicide numbers, requests for interpreters and the fentanyl crisis have all proven time- and labor-intensive.

"We have double the number of interpreter cases in Ramsey County as compared to the statewide average. Over 7% of our cases require an interpreter, and the statewide average is 3%," Grewing said.

The Second Judicial District has seen its felony cases increase 172% since 2018, quadruple the 44.8% increase statewide. And there's been a significant turnover in the judicial benches within the district, "so onboarding, training new judges and capturing as much institutional memory as we can is really important," she said.

The district's judges are also running younger. The majority of judges in the district have 10 years of experience or less on the bench. Judge John Guthmann, who retires next month, is the last judge in Ramsey County who was appointed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty. The remaining judges were either elected or appointed by Gov. Tim Walz or Mark Dayton.

Other changes are apparent since the pandemic. How justice is delivered via Zoom remains a hot topic, said Grewing, who once presided over a complicated three-week bench trial involving [the estate of St. Paul resident J.P. Collins — including allegations of possible criminal wrongdoing](#) — entirely through her computer. Ramsey County does not host jury trials online, but other court appearances can still be conducted remotely.

"I don't love it," Grewing said. "But I also recognize you can't park downtown for less than \$20. So if I can handle your theft charge on Zoom, and that's what justice has to look like, I understand it. We hope that we can appreciate everyone's humanity who comes into court, and I'm just not always confident I'm able to do that on a screen."

From music to law

Grewing, who grew up in St. Cloud, obtained her undergraduate degree in music and vocal performance from the University of Minnesota, though she acknowledged her singing career was short-lived. "It did not take off," she quipped, during an interview at a downtown St. Paul coffee shop. She obtained her law degree from the former William Mitchell College of Law (now known as Mitchell Hamline School of Law), where she went on to serve as a trustee for nine years.

Grewing worked as an associate attorney at Flaherty and Hood, served as an assistant Hennepin County Attorney, and served as U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar's state director for five years. She was the political director for Klobuchar's 2006 campaign and served for five years as the St. Paul City Attorney under then-Mayor Chris Coleman. Grewing also has served on the board of directors for the St. Paul Public Schools Foundation and as a member of the president's leadership circle of Minnesota Women Lawyers.

She previously co-chaired the Second Judicial District's Equal Justice Committee, which holds community outreach and listening sessions on targeted topics, such as jury participation in the Black community. The Ramsey County courts, she said, have been even more engaged than some nearby jurisdictions in enrolling "high risk, high need" cases in specialty drug and veterans courts, which offer defendants an opportunity to avoid conviction and or have their cases expunged if they undergo intensive probation.

"People who graduate from treatment court do extraordinarily well," Grewing said. "The recidivism rate is low. But you go to a graduation and they say 'this person had to provide 150 urine analyses.' That's pretty typical. It's not for everybody. There are people who say, 'I'd rather (plead guilty) and opt for probation.'"

Election season

Two sitting Ramsey County judges who have been heavily involved in the treatment courts and carry the first name of Tim — Judge Timothy Mulrooney and Judge Timothy Carey — [face challengers in November](#) with the last name of Yang, as in Winona Yang and Paul Yang, respectively. If that’s not confusing enough for voters, Carey’s challenger has a similar name to sitting Ramsey County Judge P. Paul Yang.

Many states require at least 10 years of courtroom experience before allowing a person to become a judge — and judges surveyed by the National Judicial College say [at least six years should be requisite](#) — though Minnesota has no such requirement. Winona Yang, a legislative aide to Ramsey County Commissioner Mai Chong Xiong, graduated from Mitchell Hamline School of Law in 2021 and was accepted to the Minnesota State Bar that December.

Greving noted that whoever wins in November will hit the ground running, as all the Ramsey County judges are on a rotation overseeing murder trials and temporary restraining orders.

Otherwise, judges are not allowed to make official endorsements in judicial races, and Greving said she’s even taken care to avoid the appearance of backing her husband, Judge Jon Schmidt, who is on the ballot in a retention election for the Minnesota Court of Appeals, to which he was appointed by Gov. Tim Walz in September 2023.

“I couldn’t even endorse him,” she said with a laugh.

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NO SECTION

Ramsey County legal experts help troubled women find their worth: 'We lift each other up'

Judges and lawyers step outside court to interact on a personal level with people who have run afoul of the law.

By Jane Turpin Moore

For the Minnesota Star Tribune

DECEMBER 8, 2023 AT 6:00AM



"Our goal is helping people see they're worthy and that someone cares about them," said Judge Nicole Starr. (Richard Tsong-Taatarii, Star Tribune file/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Gavels and black robes are left behind when several female Ramsey County judges,

attorneys and law clerks arrive at the St. Paul Midway YMCA each Wednesday evening.

Stepping away from courtrooms to support women who have been on the opposite end of the justice system has become a passion, as organizers bear witness to the positive differences that the interactions foster.

"We're gathering as women in the community, not touting anybody's title or fancy letters after their name," Sara Grewing, assistant chief judge of Minnesota's Second Judicial District, said of the Women's Community Group.

"Our goal is helping people see they're worthy and that someone cares about them," said Judge Nicole Starr.

Starr, Grewing and Judge Maria Mitchell, along with Assistant Ramsey County Attorney Muteeat Lawal and several other judicial system professionals, dedicate a minimum of two hours weekly to creating a safe, sober and supportive space where attendees can eat, relax, learn and relate in a nonjudgmental environment.

Six years ago, Starr (a past public defender) and Grewing (a former St. Paul City attorney and chief of staff to the mayor of St. Paul) were two years into their tenure on the Ramsey County bench when a spark was lit.

"I missed the real connections I formerly made with folks [as a public defender]; you have a different relationship with the public as a judge," said Starr.

And Grewing's earlier professional experiences hadn't put her in direct contact with the type of constituents whose offenses she was adjudicating in her new role.

"We decided to go to the Ramsey County workhouse on Friday nights, starting with the idea we'd like to make the system more responsive to the women and families we serve," she said.

Sitting in discussion with incarcerated women in the workhouse's education room was surprisingly useful.

"We got some of the best ideas and feedback there," said Grewing.

For instance, they discovered that a lack of transportation was a common reason for missing court appearances.

Enter COVID-19. More women on electronic home monitoring meant fewer on-site. One

participant asked Starr, "Have you ever thought of doing this on the outs?"

"We hadn't," said Starr, "but when we asked, 'Would you come?' they said 'Sure.' And sure enough, they do."

Joined by Judge Maria Mitchell, who logged 15 years as a public defender and five years as a Ramsey County prosecutor before her appointment to the Second Judicial District bench in June 2022, the Women's Community Group gained momentum after switching to Wednesday evening meetings at the St. Paul Midway YMCA.

A diverse crowd – roughly 50% white and 50% ethnic minorities – of 15 to 40 women assemble weekly.

"We provide a hot meal, a small Aldi or Walmart gift card and a bus token for transportation," said Mitchell, adding that the program is funded by Ramsey County and federal grant dollars.

Child care is provided (Grewing is often the kid-wrangler) so participants, all of whom are there voluntarily, can focus on enjoying the meal, conversation and any educational component that the coordinators plan for the night.

Discussions a highlight

In that safe, sober, all-female space, the discussion circle is the centerpiece of every meeting.

"We're all moms, sisters, daughters or aunts so we have those points of commonality," said Grewing.

Added Mitchell, "We provide each other support, try to come up with solutions and offer advice."

They relate to the attendees simply as other women. They're careful to avoid conflicts of interest, never discussing any pending cases or offering false assurances.

"In a conversation with some gals, one said, 'My judge doesn't like meth,'" said Starr. "We're honest with them, so I had to say, 'To be fair, no judge likes meth,' and without being mean or shaming we explained that meth isn't healthy, safe or legal.

"Community Women's Group is a place where we can have those conversations, and even if it's just for those couple of hours, attendees are in a sober, trauma-free place where

people listen and encourage them to make healthy, smart choices."

Another priority is providing educational segments on topics pertinent to participants' lives.

"We've had a self-defense specialist teach basic self-defense moves – very useful because so many of them have been victims of or exposed to domestic violence," said Mitchell. Other evenings have included visits from WomenVentures, housing partnerships, MN TRIO and educational organizations.

Sharing their stories

Growing up in New York, Lawal was surrounded by an "atmosphere of domestic violence." She freely shares with women who are in the midst of their own struggles that she's a single mom who weathered much stress and hardship to emerge intact on the better side of life today.

"I can tell them, 'I went through this and look where I am now,'" said Lawal. "I know it can be hard to see the future, be positive and make smart choices when everything in your life is going wrong.

"We lift each other up every time we meet, which is really nice."

Because every attendee has been justice-involved in one way or another – some as victims, some as offenders, some with CHIPS (child in need of protection or services) cases – organizers strive to instill in them the confidence to keep trying for improvement.

"The folks we see are definitely working through hard stuff, yet they come with an incredible sense of hope," said Starr.

"We emphasize that 'this too shall pass,' and that we are all stronger than the obstacles placed in front of us," she said. "They've seen a lot, but they still show up with the idea that tomorrow could be better."

Starr is motivated to continue sacrificing her scant free time – she's also an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota Law School and is studying for a divinity degree – because of the gains several of the group's participants have achieved.

"At a recent meeting, a woman who lived in a shelter when she began attending has now held onto her job for a year, managing a gas station," said Starr. "Another woman who was homeless for eight years is finally housed and gets to see her son every week."

The Women's Community Group coordinators perform this service quietly and with no expectation of public kudos. Yet their work hasn't gone unnoticed; in late September, Mitchell, Grewing and Starr received the Minnesota District Judges Foundation's Community Service Award.

"Anytime judges can be in the community and show their humanity, it helps the system overall," said Grewing.

Lawal added, "Things happen in life, but we're there to support them in any way we can – because we're all human."

There are no easy answers, but Mitchell sees the Women's Community Group as a step in the right direction.

"If I felt that what I was doing in court was enough, I wouldn't be doing this," she said. "But it's not enough."

Jane Turpin Moore is a Northfield writer.