

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



(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

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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.