



THE CATALYST

The newsletter of the
ISBA's Standing Committee on Women and the
Law

[May 2010, vol. 15, no. 3](#)

Spring into action by volunteering—The Court Watch Project

By Megan V. Rose

When the new City of Chicago Centralized Domestic Violence Courthouse opened its doors in October 2005, many in the Chicago community hoped that a better facility would result in better handling of domestic violence cases. Several years later, it is clear to the domestic violence advocacy community, and the community at large, that infrastructure notwithstanding, real changes are still needed to improve the process for domestic violence survivors seeking justice through the court system. Determining the needs for change, and the corresponding recommendations, present a unique challenge: how to identify areas for improvement?

Enter the Court Watch project, a special project of the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network. The Court Watch program, staffed completely by volunteers, record their observations of domestic violence proceedings for inclusion in a public report of recommendations for improvement in the process for survivors of domestic violence. The volunteers range from law professors to psychology students to retired persons- all with an interest in the justice process for victims of domestic violence.

Formed through a truly serendipitous alignment of professionals, resources, and volunteers, the Court Watch program represents an opportunity for the Network to reach out to the greater Chicago community to work together in identifying areas for improvement in the justice process.

A historically strong voice for the domestic violence advocacy community, The Battered Women's Network was already attuned to the lack of progress at the court. In fact, during the summer of 2008, the Network's Legal & Legislative Issues Committee identified the existing courtroom practices for domestic violence cases as an area of concern.

During this time period, a *Chicago Tribune* article highlighted the poor conviction rate of domestic violence cases in Cook County. Also at this time, Chief Judge Evans assembled a 14-member committee to "ensure that the Circuit Court of Cook County remains on the cutting edge in providing a safe and secure environment for the hearing of domestic violence matters." Network Executive Director Dawn Dalton was appointed to and currently sits on this committee.

Other fortuitous events soon followed: the Network was approached in the summer of 2008 by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and offered placement of a newly-created AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer position placed to create and implement a Domestic Violence Court Watch project. The offer was quickly accepted, and the Project officially began in November 2008, after a thorough examination as to the appropriate steps to create a solid Court Watch Project. The VISTA volunteer continues to recruit and retain the volunteer base and form relationships within the community to ensure the continued success of the program, including the recently-formed partnership with Loyola's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL). CURL came on board to assist in data management and analysis of the courtroom observations. A group of CURL students is currently constructing a database to interpret the volunteer observations and identify trends in the data.

Interest in and community support for the project continues to be phenomenal. To date, four community volunteer trainings have been held (with a fifth planned for June 2010). The result is 60 community-based volunteers currently monitoring the courtrooms at the City of Chicago Centralized Domestic Violence Court, and first annual report planned for release at the end of the summer. ■

Megan V. Rose is the current Americorps VISTA Volunteer and Policy Advocate/ Courtwatch Program Coordinator for the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network. For more information regarding upcoming trainings and/or a volunteer application, please contact Megan at megan@batteredwomensnetwork.org

« [Back to the May 2010 Newsletter](#)

[Login to read and post comments](#)

© Illinois State Bar Association