

Court Monitoring Initiative Report 2015 – Ann Pinna

As you well know, one of the missions of AAUW is gender equality. In particular, our local branch of AAUW seeks to prevent violence towards women and children and is committed to the fair and thoughtful treatment of victims of domestic violence within the court system.

With this in mind, a court monitoring initiative was established in 2011 by Mary Lou Heisenbuttel whereby interested AAUW members could train to become court monitors. Four years later, AAUW's commitment to the court monitoring initiative is still going strong. Dedicated AAUW members continue to be trained to go into Family Court for the purpose of monitoring cases where women are involved, particularly in cases of domestic violence. The goal of the court monitoring initiative is to make sure that victims of domestic violence are treated fairly and justly and that any egregious systemic concerns involved in the Family Court justice system are exposed and, hopefully, improved.

Last year, training for the monitors was composed of a series of meetings that included attorneys and experts in the field of law and domestic violence as well as meetings devoted to improving one's experience in the courtroom.

This spring, our court monitoring initiative got an additional boost when it was invited to join in a partnership, with The Fund for Modern Courts in NYC. The Fund for Modern Courts is a statewide court reform organization, and, like our own local AAUW branch, is committed to improving the judicial system. The Fund has gone into various courts throughout NYS and has been very successful in improving the administration and quality of justice in NY courts.

Our local branch has accepted this opportunity to collaborate with the Fund for Modern Courts for a limited time of one year. During this time, our local court monitors have received on-going training from The Fund which has supplied monitors with new, more detailed observation forms and will continue to provide speakers throughout the next few months to enhance our monitors' knowledge of the court monitoring process and the judicial system.

Our local branch of court monitors continues to work with the Fund who is assessing the results of all the data collected by our court monitors. The Fund will continue to collect data for a few more months, after which time, they will issue a final report based on their findings and recommendations. The results will then be reported to the judges and other appropriate personnel with the hope of improving some of the concerns in the justice system. The partnership with the Fund for Modern Courts has been a great opportunity for our local branch of monitors to learn more about other courts in NYS and to collaborate with others who have more experience and can offer creative new ideas. Essentially, the Fund for Modern Courts broadens and enriches our knowledge of the court system and helps improve our monitoring process. Hopefully, our mutual goals will serve as an on-going beneficial relationship with the Fund.

Currently, our local branch has 25 volunteers who have signed up to do court monitoring and who go to court at least one time per month to evaluate court proceedings. We are always looking for more volunteers who are willing to dedicate at least one time per month to attending court, filling out necessary forms, and submitting their forms for data entry. The court monitoring initiative stands ready to accept any AAUW member who is looking to make a difference for women who need help.