



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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American Bar Association trains state court stakeholders on cultural competency

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. – A consultant to the American Bar Association (ABA) came to Elkview this month to train court stakeholders, including probation officers and program directors, about new ways to define and think about culture and how perceptions of other cultures shape attitudes and behaviors.

Cultural Consultant Catherine Beane presented “Building Community Trust: Improving Cross-Cultural Communication in the Criminal Justice System” to a group who met March 10 at the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence building.

The ABA offered this technical assistance to the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia at the behest of the Court’s Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Coordinator, Valerie Turner. Ms. Turner arranged the training as part of a broad-scale plan to address DMC in the West Virginia juvenile justice system.

Disproportionate Minority Contact refers to the number of minority youth exposed to the juvenile justice system when compared to minorities’ representation in the juvenile population as a whole. West Virginia has examined this issue, most recently through hiring a full-time coordinator in 2008. Ms. Turner took the position in 2009 and has remained laser-focused on improving West Virginia’s place in what is a national problem – all states are addressing DMC to some degree.

States benefitting from federal funds must comply with certain, often unfunded, federal mandates. In this case, the federal Department of Justice would limit funds to states that do not demonstrate work and progress toward eliminating juvenile justice problems such as detaining status offenders, separating youths from adults in adult facilities, and DMC within the juvenile justice system.

Federal law requires that states submit plans on dealing with DMC and demonstrate progress in doing so. In the past fiscal year, DMC has been the single requirement that has stayed within acceptable limits set by the Department of Justice, thanks in large part to Ms. Turner’s full-time attention to the issue.

A federal representative auditing West Virginia’s progress led a workgroup in a round of applause, lauding Ms. Turner’s efforts. “DMC is a tough issue, and it requires persistence and ongoing support to effectuate positive, long-lasting change. It felt really good to know that somebody noticed that I’m taking the time to do my job to make sure DMC is being addressed,” Turner said.

Steve Canterbury, Administrative Director of the Courts, said, “Ensuring justice is a constant process, rarely if ever a final product. In no other area is this process as complex as with minority matters. Not only is there, inevitably, racial prejudice involved, but poverty and varying social mores come into the mix as well. In the brief time she has been with the Court, Ms. Turner’s work has taken us a long way towards identifying – and, thus, solving – many of these disproportionate, unjust problems.”

Ms. Turner first examined West Virginia’s problem by assessing the extent of DMC in West Virginia, and then she identified existing resources to address the problem. Ms. Turner has worked with local and regional service providers to maximize their benefits to the community, and she has offered trainings such as the Cultural Competency training and others. For example, Ms. Turner was invited to meet with law enforcement to recommend a curriculum for addressing their front-end contact with the juvenile justice system.

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