

## **Washington County Chancery Court to create Domestic Abuse Court**

September 23, 2010

The Washington County Chancery Court is the recipient of a federal grant to develop a Domestic Abuse Court.

Chancery Judge Marie Wilson, who sought the grant, said, "The ultimate aim is to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in this area."

Judge Wilson said, "People have been killed as a result of domestic abuse. We just felt like it needed to be addressed in a different way. Obviously what we are doing was not working."

The grant, in the amount of \$172,609, is provided by the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women. Susan B. Carbon, director of the Office on Violence Against Women, notified Washington County authorities of the grant award by letter on Sept. 22.

Carbon said in the letter, "This grant award, made under the Court Training and Improvements Program, is to provide support to court and court-based initiatives that aim to improve civil and criminal court functions, enhance court infrastructure and improve court responses to victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. With this award, the Washington County Chancery Court will establish a civil domestic abuse court to improve the judicial handling of domestic violence, dating violence and/or stalking cases, ensure offender accountability, and promote informed judicial decision making"

Judge Wilson expects to coordinate a program which will accept referrals of victims and defendants from Municipal, Justice, County and Circuit Courts. The Domestic Abuse Court, operated within the Chancery Court, will assess the needs of the victim and the accused offender, help both sides get legal representation, refer them to counseling and a behavior modification program, and monitor their progress.

The Domestic Abuse Court will be a problem-solving court, operating in a manner similar to a Drug Court. Drug Courts require participants to get help for their problem, and supervise them to ensure that they continue with treatment.

"We are hoping to reduce recidivism," Judge Wilson said. "We are hoping that through this process, they will be less likely to repeat this behavior. We are talking about behavior modification."

Circuit Judge Betty W. Sanders of Greenwood, whose district includes Washington County, encouraged Judge Wilson to pursue grant funding for the Domestic Abuse Court. "I thought it would be an excellent mechanism for helping both the victims and the defendants in these cases," Judge Sanders said.

Judge Sanders sees third-offense criminal felony domestic abuse cases. "They have been down this road twice and have been to either Municipal or Justice Court, and they just didn't get it. So now they are looking at incarceration."

Judge Sanders said a behavior modification alternative to incarceration offers a chance for people to work out their differences peacefully.

More information about Domestic Abuse Courts and other problem-solving courts is available from the National Center for State Courts at <http://ncsc.org>.

More information about the D.O.J. Office of Domestic Violence Against Women grant program is available at <http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/court-training.htm>.

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