

Rhode Island Supreme Court's Permanent Advisory Committee on Women and Minorities in the Courts

The Permanent Advisory Committee on Women and Minorities in the Courts (“the Committee”) was established in October 1999 as an outgrowth of the Women in the Courts Committee. The naming of a permanent committee recognizes the court’s commitment to a system of justice where no one is disadvantaged, or even perceived as being disadvantaged, based on gender, race, religion, national origin or sexual orientation.

The Committee’s goal is to identify problems and make recommendations that “ensure fair and equal treatment for all parties, attorneys, court employees and other persons who come in contact with the state courts.” To accomplish this, the Committee is charged with “examining all levels of the state judicial system, including a review of court statutes, rules, practices and conduct, and raising awareness about the problems and effects of bias in the judicial process.” The Committee serves in an advisory capacity; therefore, formal recommendations are submitted by the chair on behalf of the Committee to the Chief Justice for consideration.

Pursuant to an Executive Order, established by the Chief Justice, the Committee is made up of members to include: judicial officers representing the various courts in the unified judicial system; non-judicial employees representing those courts, a representative from the Department of the Attorney General; a representative from the Office of the Public Defender; active members of the Rhode Island Bar; and members of the general public who are broadly representative of the community.

It is through the recommendations of this Committee, and its various subcommittees, that many initiatives have been recommended and facilitated over the years. Some of those initiatives include: an informational flyer for court users entitled “Your Day in Court,” which has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Cambodian and Russian; an “Equal Justice for All” booklet, with a protocol to ensure fair treatment to all who must access the court system; and a report with recommendations on gender bias based upon a survey completed by members of the Rhode Island Bar. It is also due, in part, to the recommendations of this Committee that the Supreme Court established an Office of Court Interpreters, since 2004, readily available for non-English speaking court users. Currently, the Committee has three (3) subcommittees: the Education Subcommittee; the Employment Subcommittee; and the Forms Subcommittee.

Education Subcommittee

The Education Subcommittee has been responsible for recommending various trainings and seminars to further educate those in the court system. Over the past years, the subcommittee has been responsible for a number of initiatives, including diversity awareness training for judges, a Spanish workshop for court employees, and some members have participated in a discussion panel on diversity for new attorneys admitted to the Rhode Island Bar. Presently, the subcommittee sponsors Diversity Awareness Seminars for employees of the Rhode Island Judiciary (Judiciary) and Capitol Police, and Sheriffs that are conducted once or twice a year. The seminars are four (4) hours and address the issue of cultural competence and diversity in the work place, as well as when dealing with the general public.

Employment Subcommittee

This subcommittee examines diversity among the judicial workforce in an effort to increase diversity among the court employees. It is through the recommendations from the Employment Subcommittee that the full committee has made suggestions to the Chief Justice, resulting in the following:

- The expansion of the definition of a job applicant utilized by the Judiciary to include elements outlined in 69 Fed. Reg. 10152 to 10156; and
- A new method of collecting applicant demographic data was implemented, shifting from obtaining information from those selected to be interviewed, to a new process where applicants submit data on a voluntary basis at the time the application is submitted.

Forms Subcommittee

The Forms Subcommittee has identified various court forms, signs, and informational documents to be translated from English to Spanish to make the court more user friendly for non-English speaking litigants.

Access to Justice

In March 2013, the Rhode Island Supreme Court was selected by the American Bar Association (ABA) as a grant recipient under the ABA Access to Justice Commission Expansion Project. With the award, the Judiciary has embarked on a one-year project to complete the planning phase needed to develop an Access to Justice Commission. The Judiciary expects to have a planning document to serve as the foundation of this initiative completed by August 2014.