

Orienting Reporters to the Courts

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR COURT MANAGEMENT

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Once upon a time, reporters were assigned to the court beat or covered the courts as part of the crime beat. They spent time getting to know the judges, attorneys, and court staff, and generally worked to build expertise. These reporters could be relied upon to track issues and produce reports that were, by and large, thorough and accurate. When the time came to move on to a new beat, they trained their replacement.

Today, many media outlets have eliminated the beat system beyond the occasional “consumer” or “medical” beat that can morph to fit nearly any topic. The evolution toward general assignment reporting began long before the economic downfall, but the recession has solidified and confirmed that there is little room for specialization in newsrooms that are doing more with less.

The dearth of trained reporters who understand the justice system is something administrators must address because of the profound effect it has on the courts. Judges and court staff find themselves spending more time explaining basic court procedures to reporters and dealing with issues that arise when reporters fail to follow the rules. In the end, the news coverage may bear little resemblance to what actually occurred in court.

As many judges and court staff have discovered, there is an opportunity here. Administrators can work with journalists to help them understand the courts. Doing so opens the lines of communication that can help to improve accuracy and put the court in a position to pitch stories on important issues and initiatives that might otherwise go unremarked.

This opportunity, however, is tempered by other issues. Training reporters is a time-consuming proposition, which often does not produce the immediate and desired change in the level of accuracy. The process is perpetual. During my 17 years as court information officer in Wisconsin, I have oriented dozens of

reporters to the trial and appellate courts. The correlation is unsubstantiated, but they seem to resign or transfer to the business desk immediately following my orientation – and so a new training cycle begins.

I continue to provide orientation to new reporters covering the courts for one fundamental reason: it needs doing, and no else does it. In most markets, journalists who are new to the courts will benefit from an orientation from court staff and judges. How can the court accomplish this? The following are three suggestions:

1. Provide individual orientations

When a new reporter is assigned, the individual should be contacted directly and offered a tour of the local courthouse. The reporter should be introduced to key staff and given written materials that he/she might find useful. Written materials may include a copy of the judicial ethics code, the rules covering cameras in court, flowcharts that lay out the anatomy of a civil and criminal case, a glossary of common legal terms, and a court system directory. The court should ensure that the reporter understands you are available to explain procedures but cannot comment on specific cases.

Some judges find it helpful to invite the reporter to “shadow” the court for a half day on the bench. This is particularly helpful in establishing a working relationship with the reporter, and it gives the court an opportunity to suggest ideas for future stories.

2. Conduct judge-journalist roundtable discussions

The court should periodically (at least every two years) conduct a two-hour roundtable session with the media. The agenda may include an update on a few key justice issues and a discussion of court/media relations (what’s working, what’s not). The judges should be present, with a tour of the facilities included. The session should be “on-the-record,” in that many reporters will need to produce a story in order to be given the time to attend. The written materials provided at the individual orientations should be provided and discussed.

3. Speak at meetings of journalist associations

There are a number of practices the court can implement to orientate reporters to the justice system. One suggestion is to contact the director of your state’s newspaper association or broadcasters association and suggest an agenda topic for the next annual conference. These groups are always looking for relevant, substantive presentations. A few ideas that have worked well include truth-in-sentencing, how judges make decisions, the jury system, alternatives to incarceration, specialty courts, and a day in the life of a judge.

A small amount of time spent explaining procedures and engaging in dialogue will improve the accuracy of coverage.