

FAX COVER SHEET

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July 30, 2018

VIA FAX AND REGULAR MAIL
(888) 510-2208

Freedom From Religion Foundation
Mr. Andrew Seidel, Staff Attorney
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Mr. Andrew Seidel, Staff Attorney
P.O. Box 750
Madison, Wisconsin 53701

Dear Mr. Seidel:

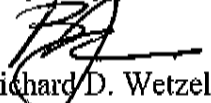
Thank you for your letter to the Knox County Common Pleas Court dated July 25, 2018 prompted by a report from a concerned Mount Vernon resident and regarding a recent article appearing in the local newspaper. I have given your letter thoughtful consideration, and I appreciate your effort to bring these concerns to my attention.

In response to your letter, please find a copy of the Knox County Common Pleas Court Community Education and Outreach description, which I provided to the Mount Vernon News for their article that appeared June 28, 2018.

Please be advised that, in response to your letter, the Court will discontinue the practice of allowing the prayer group use of the Courthouse.

The most profound challenge facing our community today is the ongoing battle against the epidemic of drug abuse and repeat crime. Our community is committed to this struggle. There is much yet to do, but the Knox County Common Pleas Court will continue making every effort to educate and engage the entire community as a means of increasing public awareness and support for the challenges of the drug epidemic in order to make our community safe and productive for all.

Very truly yours,


Richard D. Wetzel
Judge

KNOX COUNTY COMMON PLEAS COURT
COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Part of the responsibility of any elected official, public agency or government organization is to provide education and outreach to the community they serve. In addition to fostering a greater public awareness of the agency's function, outreach efforts enhance public confidence through openness and transparency. Likewise, our Court has prioritized public engagement as a means of building public trust through education and community outreach programs whenever possible, both inside and outside the Court. Court proceedings are always open to the public and, when Court is not in session, members of the public are encouraged to visit the courtroom in order to learn more about the judiciary process.

As a part of our community education and outreach efforts, the Judge has made presentations to numerous community groups in the courtroom. In addition to providing educational opportunities to public school students on legal and community service careers, the Court has hosted moot Court and debate teams, and Mount Vernon Nazarene University classes. The Judge has also hosted and made presentations to participants in the Leadership Knox program on the topics of community leadership development, community service, and the role of the Court in the community.

The Judge, members of the Court staff and probation officers have all committed to active participation in speaking to local community organizations, including local Town Hall meetings to address the growing drug crisis. The Judge and probation staff have prioritized relationship development with the many local organizations dedicated to serving the "at-risk" population, including United Way, Women United, TouchPointe, Riverside Recovery, New Directions, Freedom Center, BHP, Opportunity Knox, local civic organizations and the Knox County Health Department. The Court also facilitates participation by various agencies and community service leaders in the Community Corrections Committee meetings, which are held quarterly in compliance with the Community Corrections Act, including Mental Health and Addiction Services, Developmental Disabilities, The Freedom Center, BHP, Knox County Sheriff, Municipal Court, Opportunity Knox, and Job and Family Services. Additionally, the Court's Deputy Chief Probation Officer, Josh Gutridge, serves on the local board of the Metropolitan Housing Agency.

Most recently, the Court has expanded programs and services offered to probationers through a partnership with community education and treatment programs at the Court's Adult Court Services Department located at the Alpha & Omega House. This property, recently acquired by the county commissioners, houses Probation Staff and state Adult Parole Authority officers in a central location that facilitates cooperative efforts of local service agencies in providing education and treatment programs to individuals under Court supervision. These programs include Adult Education offered by Opportunity Knox and Knox Technical Center, as well as counseling services offered by BHP, Riverside Recovery, The Freedom Center, and TouchPointe.

All of these efforts highlight the Court's commitment to the community we serve, as well as the dedication to improving services and outcomes. In Knox County, however, the number of felony cases in the Court of Common Pleas has nearly doubled in the past 5 years. Because the Court recognizes the growing scope of increased local drug use and crime, the Court is actively recruiting the support and engagement of the entire community, including the local churches.

As part of the education and outreach to the community, and consistent with state and federal recommendations for faith based community outreach initiatives, the Court has endeavored to connect the Knox County churches with the services provided by the Court and other local community service agencies. The Judge has met with local pastors and churches, as well as the Knox Network of Christian Ministries, to encourage broader community participation and support of the local agencies and organizations working to overcome the drug epidemic in our community. As part of the Court's education outreach efforts, local pastors and church members have been invited to observe public court proceedings. The Judge has also made the courtroom available to members of the church community on Friday afternoons after business hours when the Courthouse is closing, to meet and discuss their concerns and ongoing efforts in the community to serve the "at risk" population. The Judge typically gives attendees a brief update on events of the week, and then he leaves them to have discussion among themselves and to engage in prayer on behalf of the community, if they wish. No Court staff or Court resources are used in this activity, other than the use of the courtroom.

There is much yet to do, but the Knox County Common Pleas Court is making every effort to educate and engage the entire community as a means of increasing public awareness and support for the challenges of the drug epidemic in order to make our community safe and productive for all.