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President's Column

Bonnie Sudderth

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." His words are as true today as when they were first uttered. It is an observation that we, as human beings, should never forget. It is an observation that we, as judges, should be ever mindful.

Every day, all across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, judges go about the business of dispensing justice. But absolute justice, like any other ideal, can never be fully realized, because its achievement would require human infallibility. Nevertheless, while it may never be fully realized on this earth, the quest for justice is an endeavor of the noblest order. For judges in courts of law and equity, it is the ultimate endeavor of our profession. It is upon that endeavor that our system of justice is premised, and without which our system of justice would fail.

Judges from across our countries are faced every day with increasing caseloads, more onerous mandates, and legal problems inextricably linked to social ills over which we exercise little control. Each day, judges are faced with the prospect of doing more, with less, at a faster pace.

Yet, all across our countries judges are stepping forward to meet the challenge of justice. Court-community collaborations, providing opportunities for courts to participate in broader community justice initiatives, are springing up across our nations. From the Peacemaking Project of the Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation in Arizona and New Mexico, to the Midtown Community Court of New York City, to the Handgun Intervention Program of Detroit, judges from all over our continent are responding to the challenge of justice by developing and instituting coherent community justice programs so that justice can be achieved not only through the legal process but in the broader community sense as well.

Judges are diligently addressing the need for justice through problem-solving courts as well. Over the past decade, substance abuse courts, mental health courts, and other problem-focused courts have been established to enhance the core values of the justice system with considerations of the psychological and physical well-being of individuals who come in contact with the court system. These courts of "therapeutic jurisprudence" seek justice by embracing therapeutic outcomes through recognition and development of individual and systemic responses to particular issues confronting the individuals who appear in their courts.

The Trial Court Performance Standards are being adopted in

court systems throughout our land, signifying our commitment to five basic principles in the pursuit of justice: (1) access to justice, (2) expedition and timeliness, (3) equality, fairness and integrity, (4) independence and accountability, and (5) public trust and confidence in our judicial system. The Trial Court Performance Standards were developed not only for the purpose of trial court improvement, but in a larger context in order to define a philosophy that promotes justice in all aspects of our court systems.

A cornerstone of the American justice system has always included the concept that judges will protect the basic rights of the individuals and decide cases fairly. In our ever-changing, ever-demanding world, the role of judges and justice has expanded beyond mere protection of basic rights and fair procedural adjudication. Justice now embraces a larger concept—the concept that in order to achieve justice, citizens must have access to and confidence in the justice system.

The American Judges Association is actively involved in promoting the ideal of justice by providing continuing education and highlighting programs such as court-community collaborations, therapeutic jurisprudence, and the Trial Court Performance Standards. The AJA provides its members exposure to new and innovative approaches to legal, judicial, and societal problems that face our courts every day. Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is neither appropriate nor desirable in such a diverse society, members of the AJA are free to take the benefits of these approaches and adapt them to for use in their own jurisdictions back home.

Perhaps most important, each time the American Judges Association meets, whether at an annual educational conference or at a mid-year conference, judges from across our countries are able to share information on an individual basis. By attending these conferences and participating in group discussions, both formal and informal, judges learn about the successes of individual judges in the areas of docket management, community outreach, and a myriad of other issues that face judges on a daily basis.

The American Judges Association is devoted to providing assistance in the endeavor of justice through education and information. By maintaining your membership and encouraging your colleagues to join, you help promote justice, not just in your courthouse, but in courthouses across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Thank you for your membership, and thank you for your commitment to justice.

