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Court Advocacy Program to Demonstrate to Judges Community Cares

A new program to teach citizens how to follow specific cases through the court system and let judges know their rulings are of particular importance to the community is about to begin in Oak Park.

The Court Advocacy Program is a joint effort by the State's Attorney Community Prosecutions Unit, the Oak Park Police Department and the Village's Legal, Building & Property Standards and Community Services departments. The first training session is scheduled for 10 a.m., Wed., June 19 in Village Hall Council Chambers, 123 Madison St.

"Judges pay attention to advocates in their court rooms and know their rulings are of particular importance to the community represented," said Village Trustee Diana Carpenter, who played a key role in initiating a program in Oak Park.

"Experiences in other communities, including Chicago, have show that the presence of advocacy volunteers in the courtroom sends a strong message to the defendant, the judge and everyone else involved in the criminal justice system ? the community cares about the outcome and is willing to devote the time and energy necessary to monitor the workings of the court system."

Oak Park's Court Advocacy Program will allow a group of trained citizens to follow particular cases that are important to the community at large, in one area or even a block. Cases will be determined by the States' Attorney Community Prosecutions Unit, the Police Department and departments within Village government that often are involved in incidents that lead to court enforcement actions.

Program participants will attend court hearings for specific cases with the intent of letting the judge know that the ruling is more than routine to those affected. While officially only observers of the proceedings, participants will wear buttons that identify them to the judge as court advocates.

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“Judges typically hear so many cases that there may be a tendency to make rulings quickly and routinely without truly grasping the importance of the case to the citizens most directly affected,” Carpenter said. “Our hope is that when the judge sees that a number of citizens are willing to take the time to follow proceedings, the case will rise above the routine.”

Carpenter said citizens should participate in the training to learn about setting objectives and to understand that the court process can drag out over a period of months.

“Basically, the purpose of the training is to teach we legal laymen about the process,” she said.

The goal is to start with a few cases in July, keeping the caseload small at first to allow time to gain a better understanding of court procedures. Cases will be followed from beginning to end, which in may take months.

“A citation or arrest is jut the beginning of the process,” Carpenter said. “When criminal activity or cases involving quality of life issues are heard, it is especially important for the community to lend its support from beginning to the end. Our hope is that the Court Advocacy Program will provide a tool for citizens to do just that.”

Oak Park is not alone in setting up a court advocacy program. An advocacy program is considered an integral part of Chicago’s community policing effort. Chicago’s advocates follow cases ranging from violent crimes, such as murder and rape, to quality of life cases such as drug dealing and public drinking, abandoned buildings and negligent landlords, and problem liquor establishments. Cases in Oak Park are most likely to be related to nuisance and housing code violations.

Anyone interested in participating in Oak Park’s Court Advocacy Program should contact the Village’s Community Relations Department at 708.358.5400 or email comsvcs@oak-park.us.

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