

Courtroom media access needs revision

Volunteers needed in many counties as court media coordinators

Eighteen years have passed since the Missouri Supreme Court approved its operating rule 16, which allows the media to bring cameras into its courtrooms. Since that time, we've moved into digital cameras with silent mechanisms, to cell phones, to tablets, to blogging and Tweeting and all other kinds of electronic news-gathering processes that were not previously even imagined.

I've mentioned before that several lawyers are looking at this rule in terms of possibly making changes in it. That process has taken longer than anticipated and it is still not done. However, as I've worked on part of the process, I have become aware it's time for some local updating in regard to this rule.

Several months ago, as I looked at the list of court media coordinators who have been appointed and were serving, I realized the list was severely out of date. A number of newspapers no longer exist, such as the *Belton Star Herald*. Many papers have been sold, such as the *Caldwell County News*. Some of our members have retired, such as Gay Hagan Donaldson in Audrain County. Others have passed on, such as Bud Jones who kept folks in Lafayette and other counties in order.

It's time for us to get these folks replaced. Listed below you will find the counties where we need a new coordinator. If I've made a mistake, please call me and we'll get this list updated. If your county or a county your paper covers is listed, I want you to seriously consider whether you or someone else in your operation could take this role. Your paper can cover more than one county!

What does it involve? Basically, you are appointed by the Supreme Court. Then you should go have a long talk with your local judges and clerks about their expectations about cameras in their courtrooms. A few counties in Missouri regularly have cameras



in their courtrooms and they have special locations for such equipment in order to protect jurors and ensure the courtroom operates with a minimum of disruption. As the coordinator, you need to be familiar with the courtroom and these expectations. The clerks should know how to reach you, as you will coordinate with all media entities, both local or out-of-town, when a situation arises where coverage is sought.

When that person makes the request, the court clerk or judge will call you to interact with the requester so that all details can be worked out as simply as possible. You are the one who must talk to the requester, advise them what is and is not permitted, and make sure their equipment meets the demands of your local judge. You choose who is the pool camera-person, if the situation arises. You coordinate so all who need access to video or still camera shots get them.

It's not a job where you are representing your newspaper. You are really representing the court in this role in some ways, because you are the person who ensures that all the media get what they need as best they can within the framework in which they are permitted to operate.

This is an important role because you ensure the judge is comfortable with the news-gathering process. Without good coordinators, this entire process would break down and cameras might not even be permitted into the courtroom. There may be times when you must control other members of the media who are creating problems for the entire indus-

try with their actions. It is a job that needs a firm hand. There'll be far more times when you do nothing in this role, so it's not a lot of work.

Here's the counties I think need a coordinator, based on my last review of the list: Audrain, Bates, Caldwell, Camden, Carroll, Cass, Chariton, Clinton, Crawford, DeKalb, Dent, Dunklin, Henry, Iron, Laclede, Lafayette, Lincoln, Linn, Livingston, Miller, Mississippi, Moniteau, Montgomery, Morgan, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Pike, Reynolds, St. Clair, Saline, Scott, Stoddard, Sullivan, Warren, and Wayne.

If you are willing to serve or want to name someone from your paper, email me back and we'll get you on a list we'll submit to the Supreme Court for approval.

In addition, there are several counties where a public official is serving in this position.

I know in some counties that is due to the preference of the local judges, such as in Jackson County. On the other hand, I see there are cases where there are "deputy" coordinators; so, if you are in Clay, Cooper, McDonald or Ripley counties, or in the Western District Court of Appeals area and would like to serve as the backup, let me know.

I want to move quickly on this, so please get back to me as quickly as you can if you are interested! We need to do our part to make this system work!

"...you are the person who endures that all the media gets what they need as best they can within the framework in which they are permitted to operate."