

Judicial Profile: Judge Sullivan Wants to Help Courts Get Past Their Performance Measurement Anxieties

By Stacy Sellek
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Judge Paul Sullivan was not always gung-ho about measuring the performance of trial courts. Coming from the longtime Chair of the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) Trial Court Performance Measures Committee (TCPMC), this may seem surprising.

“To be honest, I was a little reluctant to get into it at first. My concern was that colleagues would fail to see the value of performance measurement,” admitted the current 17th Circuit Court Judge, “and they would see this as simply one more mandate from above.”

So what changed his mind?

“The county commission asked us as a court to develop performance measures,” he explained, “and as chief judge at the time, I wanted to be as cooperative with our funding unit as possible.”

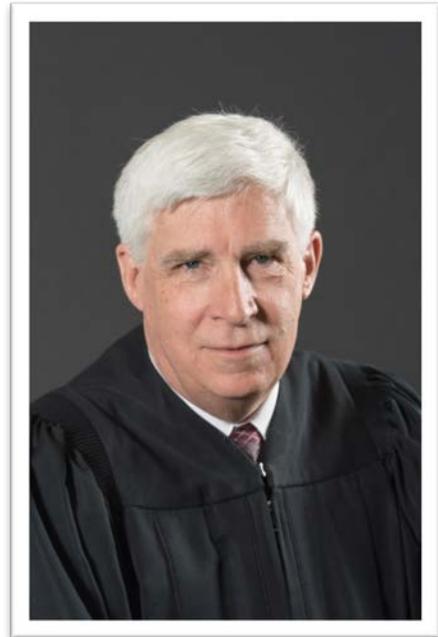
Eventually, he recalls that SCAO found out about the court’s use of performance measures and, apparently, several of the justices, including former Justice Michael Cavanagh and current Chief Justice Robert P. Young, Jr. were very interested in trial court performance measurement.

“Our state court administrator at the time was Carl Gromek. He and regional administrator Jim Hughes came to Grand Rapids and asked me to chair the committee in an effort to get other courts to adopt performance measures,” he said.

Judge Sullivan earned his law degree from The Catholic University of America in 1972, was elected as a district judge in 1988, and was appointed to the circuit bench in 1995. He has chaired the TCPMC since its inception in June 2009.

The Committee consists of judges and administrators from circuit, probate and district courts throughout the state. Committee members come from large courts, small courts, urban courts, rural courts, and “everything in between,” according to Judge Sullivan.

“I am proud of our committee. We take seriously the considerable input communicated to us by trial court judges and administrators across the state,” said Judge Sullivan. “Frankly and



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fortunately, they have not been reluctant to share with us issues they have with proposed and adopted performance measures. And our committee values this input.”

Sullivan especially appreciates the willingness of Chief Justice Young and the other justices to listen to TCPMC’s recommendations and, except in very rare cases, to adopt them.

One of the few times when the TCPMC and the Court disagreed was on the matter of Public Satisfaction Surveys, and how often to conduct them.

“Now we, as a committee, were not opposed to public satisfaction surveys. We thought they were a good idea,” he explained. “But we recognized, especially due to input we had from judges and administrators throughout the state, that conducting these surveys posed certain challenges.”

In hindsight, Judge Sullivan believes these annual surveys have been extremely positive for the courts.

“The people of this state who took the time to fill these out demonstrated quite clearly that they are very much satisfied with the work that the judges and our courts are doing here in Michigan, particularly at the trial court level,” he said proudly. “And that’s something that we can all feel good about.”



Judge Sullivan keeping order in his courtroom.

Citing the overwhelmingly positive media coverage of the survey results, Judge Sullivan believes the surveys have better allowed Chief Justice Young to address concerns of the legislature and the governor.

“I think these surveys, as well as other performance measures, have really helped us to secure a willing ear that, in the past, we have not necessarily had,” he said.

Much like the issues and people he works with on the TCPMC, Judge Sullivan greatly enjoys his work as a trial judge. “Judges deal with a great variety of issues and personalities. It is both interesting and important work that we do.”

When he isn't navigating through the latest performance measures facing courts, the former licensed pilot now enjoys traveling with his wife, Mary Ellen, of 44 years, a retired registered nurse whom he met during their undergraduate years at Georgetown University. They have two grown children and recently were blessed with a wonderful new grandson, their first.