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IMPROVING THE SECURITY OF MISSOURI TRIAL COURTS

What is preventing a shooting or other violent incident from occurring in a Missouri courtroom? Are the security measures currently in place serving as a sufficient deterrence to potential violence? Are we comfortable enough with our efforts that we no longer have concerns for security in the courthouse? After all, with the lone exception of the 1992 incident, where, unfortunately, a civil litigant was shot to death in a St. Louis County courtroom, there have been no major security incidents reported in the news media. Recognizing that the government of Missouri has a basic obligation of providing for the reasonable judicial resolution of conflict among its citizens, this study will ascertain the current status of security programs within the state's trial courts. Inherent in the state's obligation is providing reasonably safe courthouses, safekeeping of court records, and assuring the court system's ability to survive and function after community crises.

In assessing the conditions of security programs throughout the state, the following questions were considered:

- ?? Are the leaders of Missouri's trial courts concerned about security and emergency planning situations in their courts?
- ?? Are Missouri's courts the scenes of situations requiring security?
- ?? Are Missouri's trial courts adequately prepared to deal with security incidents and emergency responses to disasters?
- ?? Is there a need to improve the security posture of Missouri's trial courts?

Using a survey instrument adapted from an earlier Michigan Judicial Institute survey, 233 appointing authorities in Missouri's trial courts were asked to provide information on: Recent security incidents.

?? Security concerns.

?? Current security measures.

The responses received were rather startling.

An evaluation of the responses concluded that, yes, there is a very real need for security but that few courts had security policies or procedures in place. Only 12 respondents (eight percent) indicated they had a court security committee; only 16 (11 percent) stated they had written security plans and policies.

In their responses, 74 percent of the respondents indicated that a security incident had occurred in their court, with 57 percent stating that the incident was disorderly conduct requiring intervention. Court officials have very real concerns about citizens bringing weapons into the courtroom; only 26 percent of the respondents indicated their courthouse has a walk-through magnetometer to detect metal weapons. Even fewer, 11 percent, indicated that x-ray machines were available to search packages, briefcases, etc. for weapons.

Likewise, few courts had prepared plans to deal with emergency situations, such as fire, bomb threats, tornadoes, etc. Only 28 respondents (19 percent) confirmed their court had a fire plan, even fewer had plans to cope with bomb threats or hostage situations.

Specific recommendations as a result of this research are:

?? The Missouri Supreme Court should establish a Court Operating Rule outlining security responsibilities and minimum-security requirements.

- ?? The Office of State Courts Administrator should continue to aggressively advertise to the courts and counties the services of the Court Security Coordinator.
- ?? The Office of State Courts Administrator should incorporate and integrate security and emergency planning in its training and Judicial Department Education Programs.
- ?? The Office of State Courts Administrator should work with the Department of Public Safety, the Missouri Sheriffs' Association, and the Missouri Deputy Sheriffs' Association to ensure persons assigned to bailiff duties receive necessary specialized training.
- ?? Each county and the City of St. Louis should establish a courthouse security committee.
- ?? Each courthouse security committee should conduct a courthouse security assessment.

Working together, the Missouri Supreme Court, the Office of State Courts Administrator, local trial courts, county governments, and the City of St. Louis can and will improve the security within the state's courts. This cooperative effort will ensure that the state's citizens are provided reasonably safe courthouses, confident that court records are kept safe, and assured of the court system's ability to survive and function after community crises.

This [research paper](#) is available in its entirety in portable document format. To access, you must first obtain and install the Adobe Acrobat Reader.



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