

# Skagit County Superior Court



2014

**ANNUAL REPORT**

## MISSION STATEMENT

*The mission of Skagit County Superior Court is to deliver fair, prompt, and understandable resolutions of legal disputes. We will provide equal access to justice and treat participants professionally, impartially, and respectfully.*

## GOALS OF THE COURT

- ◆ To justly and fairly adjudicate all criminal cases within the constitutional, statutory, and judicially mandated timelines;
- ◆ To adjudicate all cases with fair, prompt, and understandable resolutions within the applicable standard timelines;
- ◆ To provide an open and accessible forum for court business;
- ◆ To reduce the overall caseload of civil litigation through administration of the mandatory arbitration program.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Pg 3 Message from Presiding	Pg 15 National Adoption Day
Pg 4 Judicial Officers	Pg 16 Office of Juvenile Court
Pg 6 Welcome to Superior Court	Pg 17 Law Library
Pg 8 Access & Fairness	Pg 18 Superior Court Staff
Pg 10 Cases Filed	Pg 20 Law Clerks & Interns
Pg 12 Historic Pictorial Project	Pg 21 Law Day & Sound System
Pg 14 Trials & Jurors	Pg 22 Taking Care of Ourselves
Pg 15 Court Facilitators	Pg 23 Organizational Chart

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDING JUDGE



I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to your Superior Court. Skagit County is a most unique place to live and we residents of your courthouse in downtown Mount Vernon desire to create an atmosphere of cordiality and helpfulness that mirrors our local business community and Valley. Skagit County has long prided itself on its friendly nature and outgoing manner. It's our desire to create a courthouse that reflects that pride.

Most citizens probably dread a trip to the courthouse. It's the place where you pay your taxes, or serve on a jury, or litigate a nasty divorce case. True, those things do occur. But the courthouse is also a place where a citizen's worst problem in life can be solved and resolved. It's a place where parents can adopt a child, and a place where a frightened young person can receive a restraining order to protect them from an abuser. It is a place where justice can be located and secured.

The thousands of courthouses across this county have been serving citizens for hundred of years. Without courthouses such as yours here today, justice, fairness and equality would be a hollow dream. There aren't too many local courthouses in Iraq and there were none in Nazi Germany.

It is easy to criticize the legal process as sometimes ponderous and sometimes unfair. There are many moments of frustration for us on this side also. But the system does work and it works well at the local level. It is our primary goal to make your experiences within the walls of this courthouse as personal and as friendly as possible.

Don't be afraid to ask questions of any courthouse employee. They will be glad to answer them for you. This is your courthouse. It belongs to you the citizens of Skagit County. We are proud to work here and I hope you are proud to visit.

**MICHAEL E. RICKERT**

Presiding Judge

2014-2015

# **SUPERIOR COURT JUDICIAL OFFICERS**



**JUDGE JOHN M.  
MEYER**

**Department 1**

**JUDGE MICHAEL  
E. RICKERT**

**Department 2**



**JUDGE SUSAN K.  
COOK**

**Department 3**

**JUDGE DAVE  
NEEDY**

**Department 4**





**COMMISSIONER  
G. BRIAN  
PAXTON**

**COMMISSIONER  
KAREN LERNER**



**HISTORY OF  
SKAGIT COUNTY JUDICIARY  
1891—2014**

**DEPARTMENT ONE**

1891-1896	Henry McBride
1987-1900	Jesse Houser
1901-1913	George Joiner
1913-1914	Jesse Houser
1914-1923	August Brawley
1923-1936	George Joiner
1937-1952	Williard Brickey
1953-1967	Charles Stafford
1967-1989	Walter Deierlein
1989-1996	Stan Bruhn
1997-present	John Meyer

**DEPARTMENT TWO**

1955-1969	Arthur Ward
1969-1989	Harry Follman
1989-1993	Gilbert Mullen
1993-present	Michael Rickert



**DEPARTMENT THREE**

1991-1996	George McIntosh
1997-present	Susan Cook

**DEPARTMENT FOUR**

2006-present	Dave Needy
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## WELCOME TO SUPERIOR COURT



Looking around the United States, you will find that most counties conduct their business in a centrally located courthouse. These courthouses are usually in the county seat and the center of the city. Early Courthouses were built in a rectangular block and were often the grandest and most ornate building. People gathered there for many special occasions.

In Skagit County, our beautiful Courthouse building was constructed in 1923 and housed all of the elected officials and their offices including the County Jail. Most County offices have since been moved and are located in adjoining buildings or in a different part of Mount Vernon.

Today, however, most people do not want to come to the Courthouse unless there is an adoption to celebrate or a wedding. So the Courthouse is crowded and regularly filled with people who have personal legal issues or in support of their friends or family who do. And, weekly, we have dozens of people who are required to take time away from work or family to serve, for \$10 per day, as a juror.

It has been the goal of this Court to ensure that everyone coming to Skagit County Superior Court has an **equal access to justice**. We do this in many ways. First, and foremost, by the Judges, elected by the residents of Skagit County, who lead by example. This bench is highly regarded throughout the County and the State of Washington. They deliver justice fairly, timely, and respectfully and hire staff that adhere to these same principals.

**Superior Court is the highest level trial court in the state government and the only trial court of general jurisdiction. The court presides over all hearings, proceedings, and trials for the following matters:**

- ◆ **Felony criminal cases:** homicide, sex crimes, robbery, assault, theft, burglary, motor vehicle theft, controlled substance, gross misdemeanors;
- ◆ **Civil cases:** tort, commercial, quasi-marital relationships, property rights, civil harassment, domestic violence, administrative law review, appeals from lower courts;
- ◆ **Domestic cases:** dissolutions with and without children, annulments, modifications, custody, legal separation, wage assignments, foreign judgments;
- ◆ **Probate/Guardianship cases;**
- ◆ **Mental Illness and Alcohol petitions;**
- ◆ **Juvenile Offender cases:** homicide, sex crimes, robbery, assault, theft, burglary, motor vehicle theft, controlled substance, gross/misdemeanors;
- ◆ **Juvenile Dependency-CHINS, dependency,** developmental disability, termination, At-Risk, truancy;
- ◆ **Adult Drug Court, Family Treatment Court, Mental Health Court.**



## ACCESS & FAIRNESS

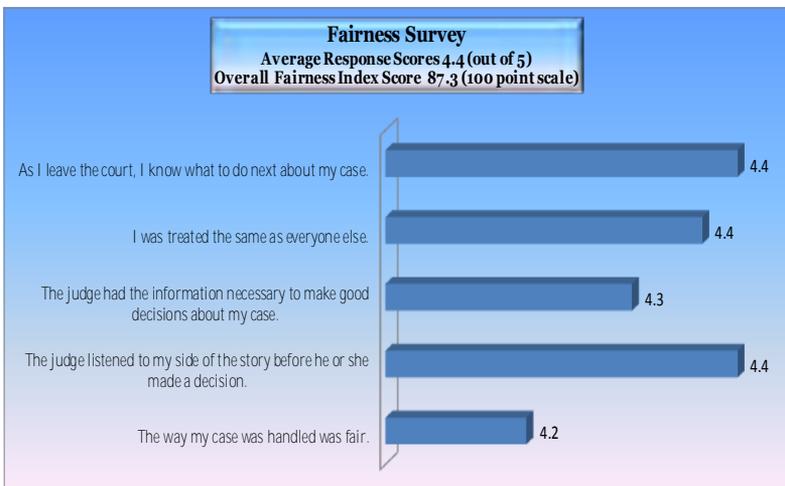
Many assume that “winning” or losing” is what matters most to citizens when dealing with the courts. However, research **consistently shows that positive perceptions of court experience are shaped more by the court user’s perceptions of how they are treated in court, and whether the court’s process of making decisions seem fair.**

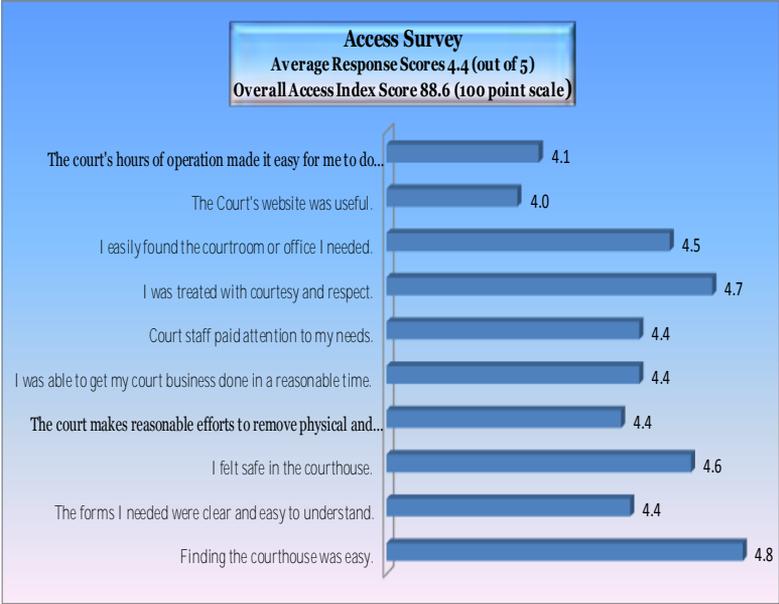
To evaluate how Skagit County Superior Court is doing, a survey was conducted in the Courthouse on September 19, 2014. This was a “typical” Friday with domestic, civil, and criminal calendars in progress. Responses were received from 59 people using the Court between 9:30 A.M.—11:00 A.M. The survey only took five minutes or less to complete. The questions were concise and produced actionable data, things that we have control over to make better!

The survey tool included ten questions that capture respondent’s opinions about access to court services (see next page) and five questions related to procedural fairness, completed by parties to legal proceedings.

- ◆ Rating of 5 = strongly agree
- ◆ Rating of 4 = agree
- ◆ Rating of 3 = neither agree nor disagree
- ◆ Rating of 2 = disagree
- ◆ Rating of 1 strongly disagree.

**95% reported that they agree or strongly agree that they were treated with courtesy and respect.**





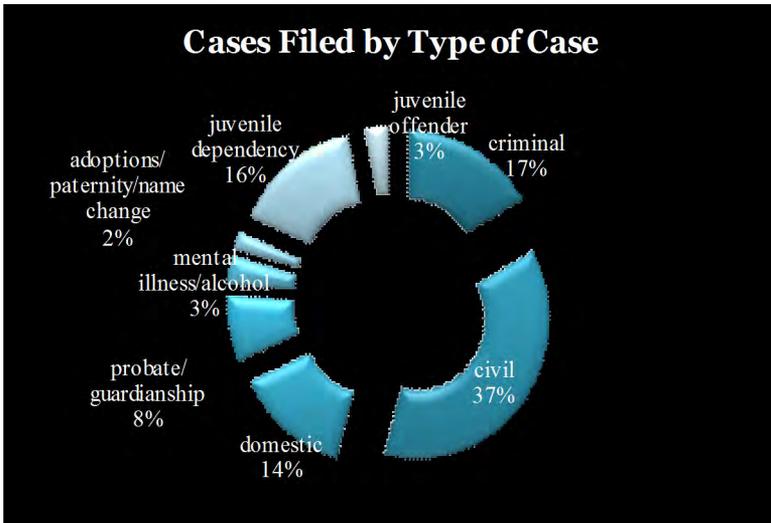
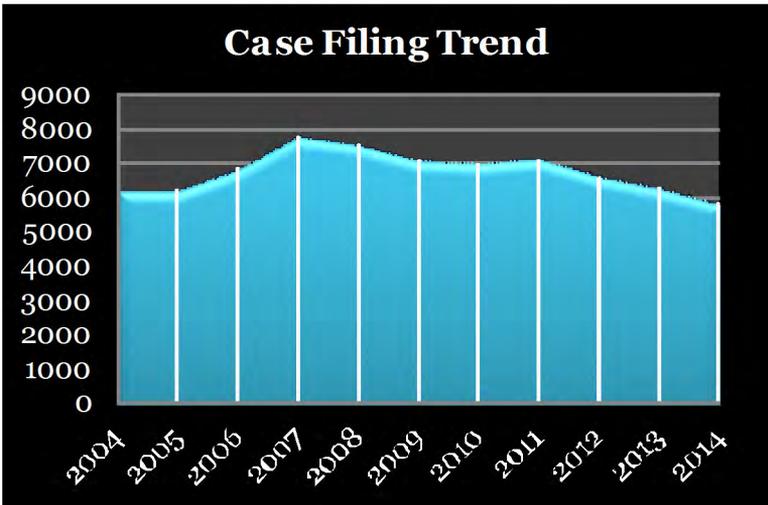
In reviewing the results, court users were especially positive about finding the Courthouse, having the feeling of safety while in the Courthouse, and being treated with courtesy and respect. (Access) They also were very positive regarding feeling that they were listened to before the judge made a decision about their case and also leaving the Courthouse with knowledge about what happens next in their case (Fairness).

The survey quantifies what we, who work for the court system in Skagit County, already knew. We really are doing a good job. We continue to strive to make this Courthouse and its services accessible to all. We have employees who care and offer excellent customer service, and we have a bench that is fair and respectful to all of the people that come before them.

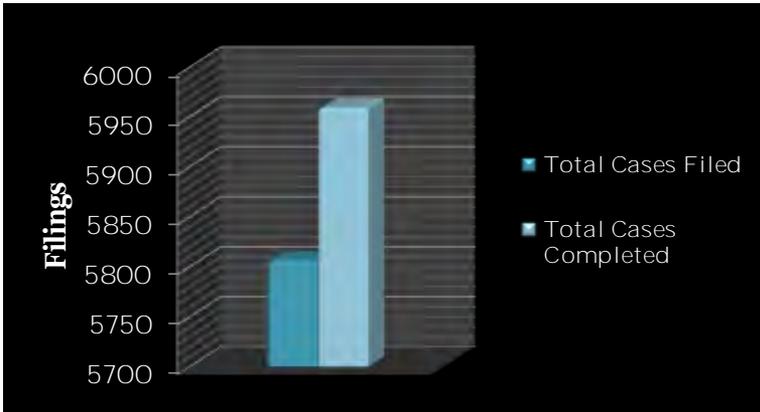
This survey was also an opportunity to learn about what we can do better and to make the appropriate changes. We learned that 49% left the question about the Court's website blank. Most didn't even know of its existence. Immediately, we looked at our website again and looked for better ways to let Court users know of its existence.

## CASES FILED IN SUPERIOR COURT

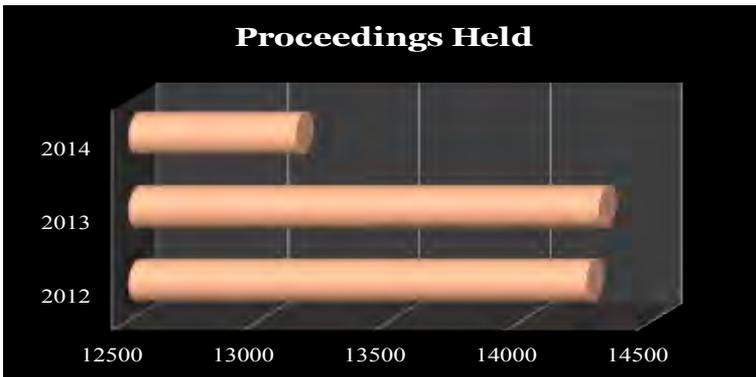
Superior Courts are the trial courts or the courts of **general jurisdiction**. Superior Courts hears all civil and criminal cases occurring within the county's boundaries and have exclusive jurisdiction over civil matters more than \$75,000. Skagit County Superior Court has mandatory arbitration if the relief sought is less than \$50,000. As reflected below, the filing trend since 2007 continues to go down.



**Cases filed compared to cases completed.** It is important that cases are disposed of in a timely manner. If that does not happen, a backlog of cases waiting disposition will continue to grow. **In 2014, there were 5,806 cases filed and 5,959 cases completed.**



**Total Proceedings:** A proceeding is a matter held in open court with at least one of the parties present in a case or non-charge matter. In 2014, there were 13,149 proceedings held.



**In 2014, 921 cases were filed by people without an attorney. Of those cases, 326 were civil, 513 were domestic, 28 were probate and 54 were adoptions.**

## HISTORIC PICTORIAL PROJECT

In 1983 two local attorneys by the names of **Thomas Moser** and **David Yamashita** went around the county and took photos of each member of the Skagit County Bar Association. Thirty years later this same effort was duplicated. The photo collages are hung side by side on the second floor of the Courthouse. As part of this project a half dozen other group photographs were matted, framed, and hung also. Additionally, the Superior Court Judges and Commissioners were professionally photographed. Their photos are displayed in courtrooms.



SKAGIT COUNTY BAR  
ASSOCIATION  
1983



SKAGIT COUNTY  
BAR MEMBERS &  
LAWYERS  
2013



## TRIALS & JURORS

Skagit County Superior Court sends out 24,000 jury summons each year and summons jurors for both Superior Court and District Court. The jury term for Skagit County is two weeks. Of those summonses sent out:

- ◆ **20%, or 5,305** were returned undeliverable;
- ◆ **24%**, or **6,217**, were not responded to;
- ◆ **13%**, or **3,342**, of those who did respond were disqualified for one or more automatic disqualification. Those disqualify iers are 1) not a U.S. citizen; 2) unable to communicate in English; 3) less than 18 years of age; 4) no longer live in Skagit County; 5) are a convicted felon and his or her rights were not restored; or 6) deceased.
- ◆ **22%, or 5,670**, people were able and willing to serve as a juror.

**In 2014 there were 86 trials.** This includes jury trials, non-jury trials, trials by affidavit, and stipulated trials.

In a non-jury trial the judicial officer of the court listens to the issues of fact and determines the law.

In jury trials the jurors listen to all the evidence presented at trial, then decide the facts as to what really happened. The judge's job is to decide the law and make decisions on legal issues that come up during the trial.

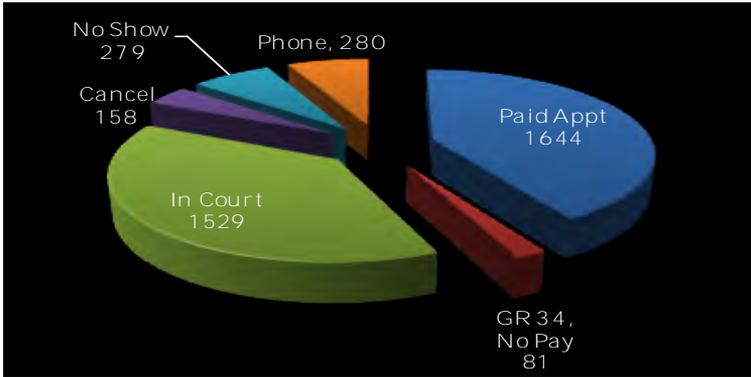
**There were 21 criminal jury trials and 3 civil jury trials.** Jurors spent 53 days at the courthouse and the cost was approximately \$57,677.

Jurors are asked to complete an exit questionnaire after serving as a juror. 128 out of 129 jurors rated “treatment by court personnel” as good and 12 provided direct compliments about the bailiff assigned to their trial. Some people commented about the \$10 per day as being “silly” the need to be appropriately compensated. 18% stated that they lost income due to their jury service, and 82% said that they didn’t. The sound system was also identified as poor. (All four courtrooms now have a new sound system).

65% of the jurors were women; 35% of the jurors were men.

## COURT FACILITATORS

Family Law Facilitators met with 3,656 pro se litigants in 2013 and 3,971 in 2014. This is an increase of 9%. Pro se litigants represent themselves and do not have an attorney.



## NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY CELEBRATION

In 2014, there were 53 new adoption cases filed and 51 completed. Seven were finalized at the National Adoption Day Celebration November 14 before a courtroom filled with excitement and joy. Judge Michael Rickert and Commissioner G. Brian Paxton were presiding



over this special event. Shown in the bottom right-hand corner is the 2014 Planning Committee.

## OFFICE OF JUVENILE COURT



Office of Juvenile Court with **DIRECTOR LISA TREMBLAY**. (Bottom right side in gray suit). Under her leadership in 2014 this office processed and managed 1354 referrals.



### **Administration:**

Back: Bridget Candler, Jessica Johnson

Middle: Stacy Souriall, Beth Piotto

Front: Tess Lahrmann, Julie Johnston, Teresa Schwabe



### **Detention:**

Back: Elaine Peterson, Deena Wilhonen, Zach Coggins, Garren Greenleaf, Eric Erdahl

Middle: Mark Zill, Katreana Bowen, Chrissie Childers, Donna Carbon

Front: Isela Martinez, Diana Quintana, Oscar Morales, Lane Daly, Shawn Thompson



### **Probation:**

Back: Dave Yount, Kevin McCrea, Ken Van Liew, Alex Esparza

Front: Michael Johnson, Joelene Meckstroth, Isabel Rodriguez, Ericka Christensen, Peter Sanderson

# LAW LIBRARY

*The Law Library is required by RCW 27.24 to provide an Annual Report prior to September 1<sup>st</sup> of each year. Information provided below is from January 1, 2014, through December 31, 2014.*

**JOANNE  
GIESBRECHT**  
Law Librarian



## Who the Library Serves

The general public was the largest user group in the Law Library. During 2014, 80% of the reference questions answered in the Library came from members of the public.

## Collection Development

At the close of 2014 the Skagit County Law Library held 195 separate titles consisting of approximately 5,059 individual volumes. The Library maintained the core collection of United States Supreme Court opinions, United States Code Annotated, Washington State statutes, Washington Reports and Appellate Reports, Revised Code of Washington, Washington Digest, American Jurisprudence 2, as well as useful practice aids and desk books. Washington State, Federal, and to some degree, other state materials are easily available on Westlaw, WestlawNext and other websites.

## Database and Computer Resources

The Law Library maintained two public use computers with printing capabilities. Westlaw and WestlawNext, online legal databases, are installed on both computers. Internet access, word processing and common legal forms were also available.

## Number of People Through the Door

In 2014 there were 1,739 attorney visits and 3,062 non-attorney visits to the Law Library. When factoring in other visitors such as tours and field trips the **total number rose to 4,778**. In addition, 905 jurors accessed the Library on their way to the Jury Room.

## Reference Questions

The Librarian and staff responded to approximately 3,000 reference questions in 2014, by way of visitors, phone calls, and emails.

# SUPERIOR COURT



## ADMINISTRATION

The administration staff manages the Court's schedule to coordinate judicial officers and calendars including all trials and special sets. They are also responsible for all jury functions, arbitration, court registries, and the interpreter program.



**Delilah M. George**  
Administrator  
& Director of  
Arbitration



**Melissa Beaton**  
Administrative Co-  
ordinator

**Karen Robinson**  
Court Services II/  
Bailiff

## **FACILITATORS**

The facilitators help pro se litigants, those without an attorney, through the complex legal system. They cannot give legal advice, but they do ensure that people have the appropriate information to get into court.



**Michelle Cook**  
Family Law Facilitator

**Jean Miller**  
Family Law Facilitator & Guardianship Facilitator

## **OFFICIAL COURT REPORTERS**

The reporters are required to be in the courtroom for certain hearings and trials and report verbatim. These transcribed reports are used for appeals.



**Jen Pollino**

**Eileen Sterns**

Official Court Reporters

## **BAILIFFS**

The bailiffs' primary responsibility is for jurors during jury trials. They are also present during most court sessions including all specialty courts.



**Meg Corpolongo**

**David Moreno**

**Kelli Fraizer**

Bailiffs

## LAW CLERKS & INTERNS

Skagit County Superior Court knows the importance of helping new attorneys who have just passed the Bar and are interested in a one year position as a law clerk. During this time, they work closely with the bench, prepare legal summaries of issues coming before the court and learn about good & poor lawyering. They also serve as bailiff.



**ARTHUR CHIAM**  
Law Clerk/Bailiff



**CASSIDY STEVENSON.** Cassidy joined the Court as a summer intern from May through August.. Cassidy attends Seattle University School of Law and received her Bachelor's Degree from the University of Oregon.

### ~VERY HAPPY CELEBRATIONS~

Our Judges & Commissioner officiated for the wedding ceremonies for Arthur on September 5th and for Cassidy the very next week on September 12th. Weddings are held after regular Courthouse hours.



## LAW DAY 2014

A successful Law Day Clinic providing free legal advice was again put on by Community Action, the Washington State Paralegal Association and the Skagit County Law Library. This annual event was held at Skagit Station. 134 consultations were provided by volunteer attorneys and the Family Law Facilitator offered a dissolution of marriage workshop. Of the residents served, 85.9% were from Skagit County while 14.1% came from other neighboring counties.



Superior Court employees Karen Robinson, Michelle Cook and Jean Miller helped with this event.



### NEW SOUND SYSTEM FOR THE COURTROOMS

For those practicing in Skagit County Superior Court, many have experienced the many problems that occurred due to a very antiquated sound system in all four of our courtrooms. Besides the high squeeking or no amplification whatsoever, hearing the local radio station or the news reporters in front of their vans outside, also occurred. This was even more frustrating for people hard of hearing trying to use the old assisted listening devices which would only work in certain areas of the courtroom.

Starting in November and finishing in December, Dimensional Communications installed a new state of the art sound system in all four Superior Court courtrooms. Each courtroom is now equipped with touch screens for volume control of all of the microphones, ADA listening devices that can be utilized anywhere in the courtroom, lapels & wireless microphones and the ability to telephonic conference calls without another piece of equipment sitting on the attorney bench.

## TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES

### MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS RETREAT

Recognizing that our employees are our greatest assets, a 3 hour Meditation and Mindfulness retreat was held on November 21, 2014. First was a representative from the Employee Assistance Program that explained the many benefits available to County employees. Next, Kelley Gradwohl, Administrator from Lake Forest Park Municipal Court, showed several different yoga-type stretching exercises that can be done at a desk or standing behind a chair. Then, Judge Linda Portnoy, also from Lake Forest Park Municipal Court, who is certified as a Primordial Sound Meditation instructor, taught staff how to meditate and lower their stress level. Three different techniques were taught



**November 21, 2014  
1:00-4:00 P.M.**

*The focus was how to use different techniques for dealing with stress in the workplace.*

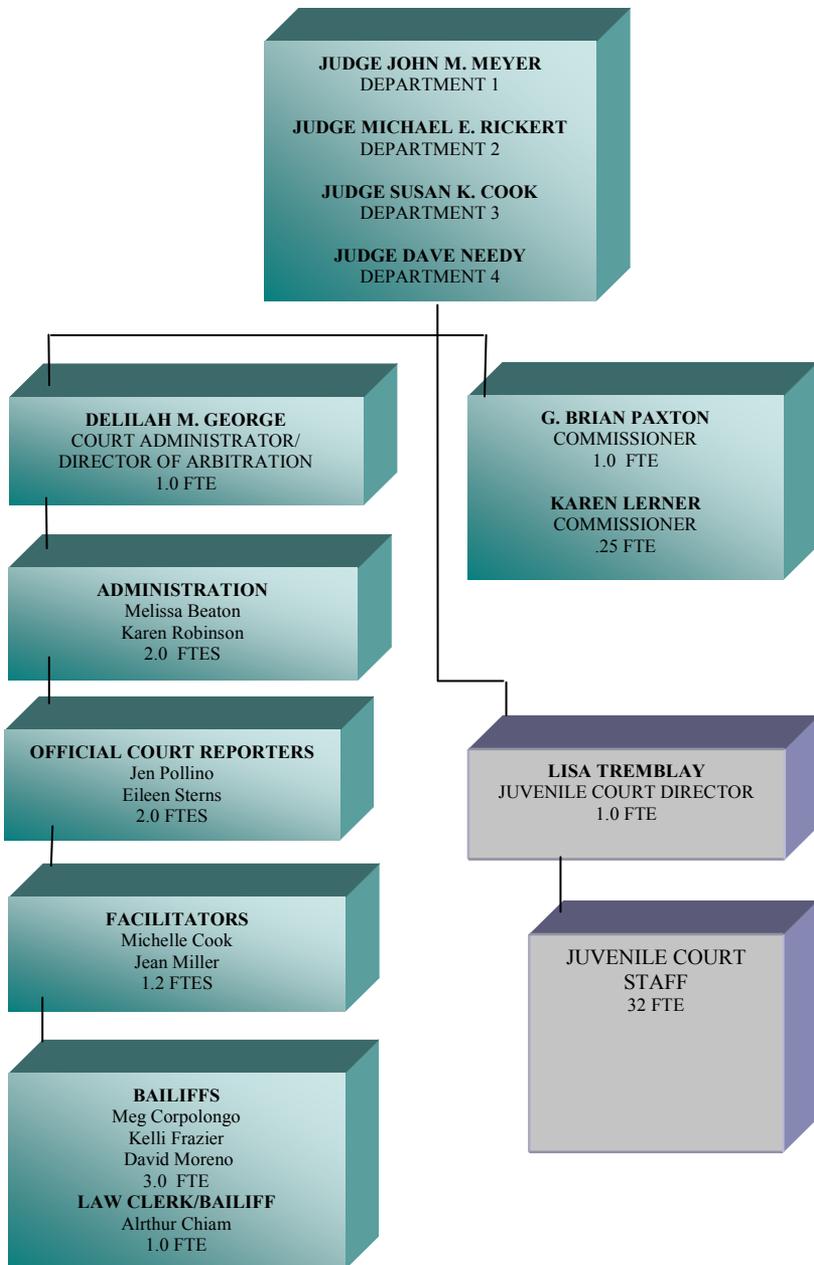
## CHANGES TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2015

Reorganization of Court ~ **Lisa Tremblay** will be the new Superior & Juvenile Court Administrator; **Melissa Beaton** will be the new Superior Court Manager.



We look forward to working closely with newly elected **County Clerk Mavis Betz**. Ms. Betz was previously the Chief Deputy Clerk for 12 years and prior to that the Prosecutor's Administrator.

# ORGANIZATIONAL CHART





In 1924, the Daughters of the American Revolution ordered a case and had it installed in the Courthouse lobby to hold the 24' X 36' U.S. flag with stripes 18' wide.



**Skagit County Superior Court**  
205 West Kincaid Street, Room 202  
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Superior Court Administrator

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