

President's Column

Chris Williams

In September 2000, at the American Judges Association annual convention, I accepted the responsibility of president and the formidable tasks of leading this organization and its executive committee throughout the coming year. I am extremely honored to serve as your president, and I look forward to the challenges and prospects that the coming year holds.

One of the steps in preparation for serving as president of this great organization was to streamline our committee responsibilities. It is also a priority that we emphasize the importance of our membership and endeavor to increase it, thus strengthening the association.

I do want to stress an area that I believe we have yet to fully develop. As you are aware, we have studied and examined the concepts that created us a public entity. Courts are created by the people of our respective states and providences through elections or through appointment. These structures ensure our existence.

We have stressed concepts of the Trial Court Performance Standards and of public trust and confidence, but we have yet to empower ourselves by providing to our membership additional, substantive help in carrying out the ultimate goals of judicial independence and accountability. Judges must be more involved locally, in our jurisdictions, to redevelop the confidence and trust of the people who have placed us in office.

My goal this year is to ensure that we formulate "best practices" through our respective committees, and that we disseminate the proper information to our members, allowing them to better improve the administration of justice in their own courts. Best practices is the one approach that I feel will best serve the needs of our membership. Instituting best practices and allowing our judges the opportunity to improve methods of adjudication in different substantive fields will greatly enhance our judges' abilities in resolving issues and making final decisions in cases that affect the lives of their citizens.

We have seen a major change in the way we as judges deal with problems. We have come up with practical solutions, including, merely by way of example, drug courts. They may eventually achieve the goal of rehabilitating a criminal instead of just jailing him or her to meet the interests of the public. Yet, in reaching for practical solutions, we also must always be mindful of judicial ethics to avoid any appearance of impropriety on the part of the court and how it is perceived by the public.

To achieve these goals, we must set forth our best practices in each of the respective substantive areas of law. Judges can implement the Trial Court Performance Standards, and improve public trust and confidence, through best practices. This can only be achieved by proper judicial education and involvement with the public. We must achieve these goals while also maintaining our judicial independence and staying out of positions that might violate our own codes of judicial conduct.

As we left our conference in September, the respective AJA

committees promised that they would report to me three best practices for each of their respective substantive committees. I will be eagerly awaiting these best practices prototypes. Ultimately, we will publish this information for the use of our membership.

As most members are aware, the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators have been working toward developing a best practices program. The AJA must immediately work toward putting together our own best practices that we use each and every day to move this effort along as rapidly as possible. Our most useful purpose as judges in this association is to educate our membership and, at the same time, to give productive and useful guidelines to them.

What does all this mean to us as members of the American Judges Association? In my mind, it means at least five things:

- We must aggressively approach the issue of best practices and come up with our own best practices through the substantive committees of our association.
- We must bolster our ability to ensure that this information is disseminated to our membership so that they can put these practices to use in their courts.
- We must protect our judicial integrity and independence, and yet fulfil our obligations to promote public trust and confidence. We should do this by incorporating the Trial Court Performance

Standards in our best practices implementation.

- We must strengthen our organization internally by increasing our membership and by offering more relevant and technologically updated services for our members.
- We must bring our committees and executive committees together in this technological age. Through the efforts of our previous president, our executive committee is set up to communicate immediately on a moment's notice. We must have similar interaction among our committees, and especially our membership committee, in order that they may achieve the goal of increasing our membership.

It is obvious that all the goals set out here are within our reach. It is important that we stay the course, complete these projects, and transfer the information to our membership, so that they may put the substantive portion of our program this year to work in their own courts.

The bottom-line result of all this is that we will all be better judges and the public will know us in a more favorable light, so that we can continue to maintain their respect and dignity as one of the three, separate branches of government in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

I want to close by thanking our Canadian members who came to the annual conference this past year in Kansas City. I am appreciative of their eagerness to be involved in this association. This can only help all of us as judges, wherever we live and work. My thanks to the Canadian judges for their efforts in improving the American Judges Association.

