

Court Watch Project Report

January to June 2026

22nd Judicial Circuit Court – St. Louis City

Division 16

Prepared by

National Council of Jewish Women St. Louis (NCJWSTL)

Court Watch Project

*Strengthening transparency, safety, and support for litigants in
adult Order of Protection proceedings.*



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National Council of Jewish Women St. Louis

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Executive Summary

From January through June 2026, the Court Watch Project conducted structured observations of adult Order of Protection (OP) dockets in Division 16 of the 22nd Judicial Circuit Court, City of St. Louis. Eleven trained monitors attended 18 in-person dockets, documenting courtroom procedures, judicial demeanor, safety and security practices, and the overall experience of petitioners and respondents, most of whom appeared without legal representation.

This report summarizes findings in three core areas by the Advisory Team, made up of volunteer program chairs and NCJWSTL staff: transparency, safety and security, and litigant support. It provides historical context, methodology, and recommendations to strengthen the court's response to domestic violence survivors.

About the Court Watch Project

The Court Watch Project's mission is to:

- Ensure petitioners and respondents in domestic violence cases are treated in a supportive, responsive, and just manner;
- Support judges and courthouse staff by providing data and best-practice research;
- Create a more informed and engaged public.

For more than 20 years, trained volunteers have observed adult OP hearings in the St. Louis Circuit Courts. Since 2016, the Project has produced 17 reports based on more than 300 observed dockets, informing improvements in courtroom safety, accessibility, language access, and transparency.

The Project is part of the systems-advocacy work of the St. Louis Ending Domestic and Sexual Violence Network (SLED SVN). In 2026, the National Council of Jewish Women St. Louis (NCJWSTL) became the lead coordinating agency after taking over the program from St. Martha's.

"Generally, the Judge's demeanor was calm, even and respectful. He gave detailed instructions throughout the proceedings. He consistently directed Petitioners to work with Victim Services Staff who were available in the jury box. He gave instructions to the parties regarding protection of their rights."

History of the Project in St. Louis City Family Court

The Project has periodically observed multiple divisions for over two decades. After receiving the Office of Violence Against Women's Justice for Families Grant in 2015, consistent monitoring began in Division 14. Between 2016 and 2020, six judges rotated through the division, and five reports were produced.

Recommendations emphasized:

- Strengthening courtroom safety;
- Improving accessibility;
- Enhancing language access;
- Increasing transparency for pro se litigants;
- Providing ongoing domestic violence training for court staff and judicial officers.

The Project paused in March 2020 due to COVID-19. During this time, community organizations expanded collaboration and supported grant applications that strengthened advocacy services within the adult abuse office.

Recently, the Court implemented a separate compliance docket in St. Louis County for respondents ordered to attend batterers intervention programs—an initiative first recommended by the Project in 2017. This docket now includes criminal domestic violence cases in coordination with the Circuit Attorney's Office.

Methodology

The Court Watch Project uses a transparent, collaborative monitoring process. Judges and court administrators receive examples of all monitoring tools (the Courtroom Protocol and Case Observation Forms – see end of report) and are

advised of focus areas in advance, and victim service providers may offer input before each observation cycle.

Monitors complete a Courtroom Protocol Form for each docket, assessing:

- Judicial demeanor, communication and temperament;
- Efficiency of proceedings;
- Safety and security;
- Transparency of the legal process;
- Availability of victim advocates and interpreters.

Narrative comments provide additional context. All forms are reviewed for accuracy and objectivity (see observation forms at end of report).

“Judge was responsive and respectful to the petitioner.”

Scope of Observations

The presiding judge in Division 16 conducts first appearances and contested hearings in person. Monitors observed the 9:30 AM in-person dockets.

The Advisory Team focused on:

- Transparency;
- Safety & Security;
- Judicial demeanor, communication and temperament.
- Efficiency of proceedings.
- Litigant Support.

Sample Size

- 11 monitors (some monitors observed more than one docket);
- 18 dockets observed;
- Most dockets were observed by one monitor accompanied by the Project Coordinator or an experienced monitor.

“Judge included instructions to friends and family about disruptions, not talking, etc. – first time I have seen that (a good thing).”

Key Findings

Strengths

- Judge demeanor: Respectful, calm, and attentive;
- Transparency: Clear explanations during docket;
- Empathy: Demonstrated patience and compassion toward petitioners.

Areas Needing Improvement

- Privacy: Consider ways to limit sensitive testimony that can be overheard due to courtroom layout;
- Docket structure: Consider scheduling call dockets in the morning and hearings in the afternoon. Evaluate whether an additional docket day is needed to manage the high average caseload;
- Continuances: Consider staggering continuances to reduce congestion and wait times;
- Safety: Consider placing a bailiff in the hallway to diffuse tense situations.

Transparency Findings

Most litigants appear without attorneys and often struggle to understand court procedures and what’s expected of them. When litigants clearly understand the

process, they are more likely to follow instructions and orders, return to court, and feel respected. Of particular concern is the need for petitioners to be well prepared to provide recent evidence to support their statements.

Safety and Security Findings

Monitors noted that courtroom layout and docket flow can affect the sense of safety for petitioners, respondents, and observers. Sensitive testimony may be overheard when parties wait in close proximity or when hearings proceed in an open courtroom setting.

The Project recommends reviewing courtroom seating, waiting areas, and docket timing to reduce unnecessary contact between parties and to better protect privacy during contested matters.

Litigant Support Findings

Because most litigants appear without legal representation, accessible explanations, visible resources, and consistent advocate (both from the City Court and domestic violence agencies) availability are essential to helping parties understand expectations and options.

The Project recommends ensuring that printed or digital resources are available at the bailiff's desk, that available advocacy services are clearly identified, and that procedural information is reinforced throughout the docket.

The Court Watch Project recognizes that petitioners in domestic violence matters are often at heightened risk of intimidation, retaliation, or renewed trauma, and that unstructured contact with a respondent, even in passing, can compromise both their safety and their willingness to participate in the process. Bailiffs serve a critical role in preventing such contact and in maintaining a courtroom atmosphere that is secure, neutral, and free from intimidation.

"Judge instructed Court personnel to make sure an interpreter was present for the continuance."

Recommendations

- Bailiffs shall maintain a visible and attentive presence throughout domestic violence proceedings, positioning themselves to monitor interactions among the parties and to respond promptly to any sign of distress, intimidation, or escalation both in and out of the courtroom;
- Review docket scheduling and continuance practices to reduce congestion, wait times, and unnecessary contact between parties;
- Increase the visibility and accessibility of resources for pro se litigants, including advocate information, procedural guidance, and available language-access supports;
- City should invest in private process servers to deliver the summons to the Respondent to cut down on no-service cases;
- Court changes its process to reschedule the hearing if the Respondent hasn't been served as of 48 hours prior to the scheduled hearing;
- Judge should continue to provide a brief judicial introduction at the start of each docket explaining the order of proceedings, available options, and what litigants should expect.

Acknowledgments

NCJWSTL extends sincere gratitude to the seven Court Watch Project volunteers and their agencies for their dedication. Appreciation is also extended to SLEDSVN, Saint Martha's, and all community partners who support survivors and their families.

Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Resources

This page compiles crisis hotlines, local Missouri resources, and supportive services for individuals experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, or related crises.

24/7 Crisis Hotlines

Safe Connections Crisis Line

Phone: 314-531-2003

Website: <https://safeconnections.org/>

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Phone: 888-799-SAFE (7233)

Website: <https://www.thehotline.org/>

National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN)

Phone: 800-656-4673

Deaf Crisis Line

Videophone: 321-800-3323

Text: HAND to 839863

Safety Planning

Personal Safety Plan Tool

Link: <https://tinyurl.com/2p9ud3v8>

This resource helps individuals create a customized safety plan for leaving or navigating an unsafe situation.

Missouri-Based Resources

Missouri Council Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (MOCADSV)

Website: <https://www.mocadsv.org/>

Provides statewide advocacy, training, and connections to shelters and service providers.

St. Martha's Hall

Website: <https://saintmarthas.org/>

Offers confidential shelter and support services for women and children experiencing domestic violence.

NCJWSTL Resources

NCJWSTL Family Resource Guide

Website: <https://ncjwstl.org/family-resource-guide/>

A comprehensive guide to local services including housing, food access, legal support, and crisis assistance.

NCJWSTL Healing Hearts Bank

Website: <https://ncjwstl.org/what-we-do/community-service/healing-hearts-bank/>

Provides women and families in need with micro-loans of up to \$500 to help further their financial independence.

COURT WATCH PROJECT
ST. LOUIS CITY CIVIL COURTS

CASE OBSERVATION (REV. 2024)

Monitor #: _____ Date: _____ [] Full Hearing [] Default (Respondent did not appear)

1. Use one form for each case. Please leave no blanks.
2. Please check YES or NO, I/A for Inaudible, N/A for not applicable, UNK for unknown.
3. If explanation is needed, please make note in the lines below item number. Write direct quotes as often as possible and indicate with quotation marks. Write down positive assessments as well.

CONFIRM THIS IS AN IPV CASE – we do NOT complete forms for any hearing that is not intimate partners or former intimate partners.

Item	YES	NO	I/A	N/A	UNK
LITIGANT SUPPORT					
1. Was the Petitioner represented by an attorney?					
2. Was the Respondent represented by an attorney?					
3. Did the judge explain how testimony would be given and/or was there a small conversation about the hearing process before the hearing?					
JUDICIAL MANNER					
4. Did the judge use plain language that was easily understandable for parties to understand?					
5. Were all parties present given a chance to speak and offer testimony?					
6. Was a Full Order of Protection granted?					
<i>How long was order granted for?</i>					
7. Did the judge explain the ruling and elements of the order in plain language to the Petitioner and/or Respondent?					
8. Was the case referred to compliance docket for any reason (BIP, parenting class, property retrieval, etc.)?					
9. Were consequences of breaking the order explained to the Respondent? (full hearing only; mark N/A for defaults)					
COURTROOM SAFETY (full hearings only)					
10. Was there separation of Petitioner and Respondent immediately after testimony as they waited for paperwork? (either returning to their seat or asked to sit in another location?)					

Additional Notes (quotes from testimony or observations are helpful):

Complete One Form Per Case (Full & Default Hearings Only) – You May Complete Multiple Case Observation Forms

COURT WATCH PROJECT
ST. LOUIS CITY CIVIL COURTS

Monitor #: _____
Date: _____

COURTROOM PROTOCOL (REV 2024)				
	YES	No	N/A	UNK
1. Were parties separated to different sides of the courtroom as they entered? (either by deputy instructing them, during check in, sign posted, etc.?)				
2. Was there a deputy in the courtroom at all times?				
# of deputies you observed during docket?	#			
3. Did the judge explain any parts of the court process to the parties before the docket, or what to expect?				
4. Did you see advocates approach or speak to Petitioners prior to court, during <u>or</u> after their cases being heard?				
5. Were any cases continued because an interpreter was not present/available?				
6. Were respondents held 15 minutes to allow time for petitioners to leave?				
7. If you were a petitioner or respondent in this courtroom, would you understand how the proceedings work?				
8. Would you know what was expected of you as a participant in this docket?				
9. In your opinion, did the proceedings seem controlled and efficient? (Circle one)	1	2	3	4
1) – not at all 2) – somewhat 3) – mostly 4)– very				

ANY NOTES: