



State of Illinois
Circuit Court of Cook County

Timothy C. Evans
Chief Judge

50 West Washington Street
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Richard J. Daley Center
Chicago, Illinois 60602
(312) 603-6000

August 2, 2021

To: Honorable Toni Preckwinkle, President, Cook County Board

Re: Cook County Commission on Women's Issues- Recommendations: Protections for Survivors of Gender Based Violence

Dear President Preckwinkle:

Along with the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues and the Cook County Board of Commissioners, I recognize and deplore the harm to individuals, families, and society inflicted by domestic violence. I am committed to providing protection and security to all of my employees to the fullest extent of the law and good public policy. I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Commission's Recommendations on Protection for Survivors of Gender Based Violence and to share the court's policies on victims' safety and sexual harassment.

My thoughts on the Commission's recommendations are as follows:

1. The benefits of remote access to court proceedings, first implemented by the Circuit Court of Cook County, during the COVID-19 pandemic, have particular resonance in domestic violence matters for all of the reasons the Commission cites in its recommendation. Remote access will continue to be provided and encouraged, pursuant to General Administrative Order 2020-07, as amended. A copy of the draft amended order is attached.
2. Though it is without authority to appropriate funds itself, the Circuit Court of Cook County supports the Commission's request that the Cook County Board of Commissioners increase funding to provide additional supervised visitation and safe exchange sites, free of charge, to parents and children involved in domestic violence matters.

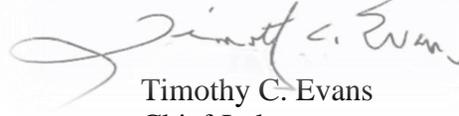
3. The important protections afforded to employees by the Victims' Economic Safety and Security Act ("VESSA") are publicized to employees of the Circuit Court of Cook County and its administrative departments through the display of posters at all worksites and by distribution of the applicable Cook County Bureau of Human Resources policy, which the Court adopted as its policy in 2006. The Office of the Chief Judge Human Resources Department recently reviewed and revised its existing policy, a copy of which is attached, and will distribute it as the Office of the Chief Judge Victims' Economic Security and Safety Act ("VESSA") Policy. In addition, several of the court's collective bargaining agreements describe the rights afforded to domestic violence victims pursuant to VESSA. The court's Victims' Economic Security and Safety Leave Policy will be reviewed annually for compliance with applicable legal authority and best practices.

The Circuit Court of Cook County, along with the state's other circuits, pursuant to guidance issued by the Illinois Supreme Court, has in place a comprehensive Non-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy, a copy of which is attached. Each department operating under the administrative authority of the Chief Judge has a substantially similar policy. Following a major revision and re-titling of the then-existing sexual harassment policy in 2017, the Human Resources Department of the Office of the Chief Judge reviews the policy annually for compliance with applicable legal authority and best practices. The revisions implemented last year expanded the policy to focus on all illegal harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

4. The Circuit Court of Cook County recognizes the tragic plight of families separated due to the incarceration of parents. The court supports the Commission's recommendation that the Cook County Sheriff and the Cook County Board of Commissioners continue to provide family visitation protocols that are consistent with the protection of public health and safety and prioritize the best interests of the children of incarcerated parents.
5. Raising awareness of gender-based violence and supporting the victims of such violence is an admirable and necessary societal goal. I am confident that the Board of Commissioners will give serious consideration to the Commission's recommendation that it establish "Start by Believing Day" to be observed annually on the first Wednesday of April. The Circuit Court of Cook County, as impartial arbiter of the cases before it, must be mindful of its responsibilities to administer justice. The presumption of innocence afforded defendants in criminal matters is a bedrock principle our American justice system, as is conviction of a crime only upon proof of a defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The judges of the Circuit Court of Cook County are required by their oaths of office and the Code of Judicial Conduct to determine the credibility of parties or witnesses in the cases before the court based on the evidence presented. It is my sincere hope that continued remote access for victims (described in #1) will permit all victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, and gender violence to have their day in court. I wish the Board of Commissioners and the Commission on Women's Issues success as they work toward their goal of raising awareness of sexual assault and gender-based violence.

I look forward to working with you, the Board of Commissioners, and the Commission on Women's Issues in the coming months as we continue to work to improve access to justice for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy C. Evans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "E".

Timothy C. Evans
Chief Judge
Circuit Court of Cook County

cc: Honorable Members, County Board of Commissioners

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