



STEPHANIE BUNTEN
JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATOR

SUPREME COURT OF KANSAS

KANSAS JUDICIAL CENTER
301 S.W. 10 TH AVENUE
TOPEKA, KANSAS 66612-1507

(785) 296-4873
FAX: (785) 296-7076

June 10, 2022

Nikiesha Cosby
National Center for State Courts
300 Newport Ave
Williamsburg, VA 23185

via email:
ncosby@ncsc.org

Re: Nomination for the Mary McQueen Award

Dear Ms. Cosby:

It is with great pleasure and honor that we nominate Kansas District Judge [Keven M.P. O'Grady](#) for the Mary McQueen Award. Judge O'Grady has served our state as a judge since August 2012, following more than two decades in private practice.

A mere two years after taking the bench, Judge O'Grady led the transformation of an unused corner of the Johnson County District Court building into a destination zone for pro se litigants, a place that clerks would later describe as having "the highest number of hugs per square foot" in the courthouse. Prompted by the startling numbers of unprepared pro se litigants appearing on his family court docket, Judge O'Grady worked with a team of judges, clerks, and community stakeholders to establish the Johnson County Help Center. This project grew exponentially by providing guidance, assurance, and options for tens of thousands of court patrons who were navigating the legal system on their own.

When the help center opened, Judge O'Grady noted it was "designed to meet the constitutional right of all citizens for access to our courts but who are unable to afford legal representation." He and the Johnson County team envisioned a space where self-represented litigants could quickly obtain basic and necessary information about the laws, rules, and procedures used in the court system.



JoCoCourtHelpCenter @JoCoCourtHelp · Nov 17, 2014

Johnson County Court offers free assistance for family law cases
kansaslegalservices.org/node/1887/john... via @sharethis

The Johnson County Help Center project prestaged a model that would come into frequent use throughout Kansas and across the country in the years that followed its implementation. It is a concept that has become so thoroughly integrated with everyday court processes that it seems almost commonplace now. Yet the impact Judge O'Grady's work has had on Johnson County, the state of Kansas, and the court community at large is nothing short of remarkable. What began

as a way to guide litigants in family law cases has grown to cover expungement, eviction, name changes, small claims, and a variety of other legal matters that often affect the lives of individuals who cannot afford legal representation.

Judge O’Grady has been generous with his time in helping others develop similar projects. He shared insights about help center development in a 2015 Court Review article entitled “[Starting a Help Center in Twelve Easy Steps: One Court’s Experience with Trial, Error, and Lots of Help.](#)” That article continues to provide a reference for courts who are in the early stages of help center development. He also became a (somewhat reluctant) judicial star in a series of videos for self-represented litigants produced by Kansas Legal Services – including “[Going to Court](#)” and “[Getting Ready for Court.](#)”

In his 2015 Court Review article, Judge O’Grady noted “Forms are the bedrock of the help center.” The Johnson County Help Center focused on the development of easily understandable forms early on. The Kansas Supreme Court’s Access to Justice Committee later used those forms as a model to develop statewide forms for pro se litigants. This, ongoing project expanding the reach of standardized, plain language forms throughout the state.

With Judge O’Grady’s support, the help center also spurred the establishment of the first court resource navigator position in Kansas. The navigator connects court patrons with needed community resources, provides dispute resolution services, and assists with overflow work. A list of comprehensive [resources](#), the navigator developed is available to everyone on the help center’s website. This role was established in recognition of the fact that legal needs are necessarily intertwined with many other basic life needs. While the court can’t answer all those needs, the help center serves as a conduit for information.



Johnson County, Kan. @jocogov · Aug 2, 2017

Hon Keven O'Grady, who spearheaded creation of the Help Center 3 years ago, thanks staff, @JOCO_BAR & other community partners for support



In March 2016, Judge O’Grady shepherded the help center through development of a Night Court option for litigants who struggled to make it to the courthouse during the day. Volunteer attorneys first met with litigants to triage their cases, and judges were present to help self-represented parties settle cases after normal business hours. A NCSC Tiny Chat video later featured the Night Court project, bringing it to a nationwide audience. This project was another example of Judge O’Grady efforts to meet litigants where they are – and of making an adversarial process more accessible for the good of families on his docket.



Tiny Chat 50: Night Court NOT YET RATED

More from State Courts
 Autoplay next video

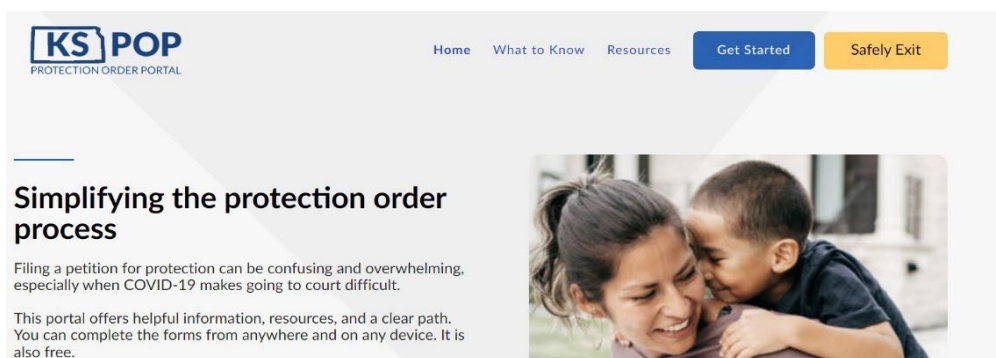
By the end of 2019, the Johnson County Help Center had served more than 30,000 people who’d crossed its threshold in person – together with innumerable calls and emails. The creation of a new courthouse building allowed for dedication of a bright, welcoming space for the help center. This state-of-the-art facility includes several computer terminals for completing forms, private rooms for volunteer attorneys to meet with litigants, and “Zoom rooms” that allow litigants to appear remotely from within the courthouse when needed.



As the pandemic set in, Judge O’Grady worked with help center staff to ensure services would continue safely remotely. The clerks shifted their focus to developing remote options for answering questions, delivering forms, and connecting litigants to the court system.



When the pandemic forced a quick shift to remote processes, Judge O’Grady was instrumental in the Kansas Judicial Branch’s effort to establish an electronic portal that would allow people to file for protection orders without visiting a courthouse. He connected the Kansas Office of Judicial Administration with staff at University of Missouri, Kansas City School of Law who’d previously established a similar system for a Missouri court. Judge O’Grady was an early part of the planning team that built the Kansas Protection Order Portal (<http://www.kspop.org>), which now receives about half of all protection order filings in the state, even as the pandemic wanes.



Judge O’Grady’s interest in improving the court experience for litigants has extended to other, less visible, elements of the case process as well. In recent years he has been actively involved in developing new avenues for automating case triage procedures in family law cases and helps litigants navigate rocky waters through apps like Ourfamilywizard and CoParenter. He is also active in judicial training activities across multiple areas: family law, dispute resolution, unbundling of court services, and help center logistics. He currently chairs the Kansas Supreme Court Advisory Council on Dispute Resolution and is a member of the Kansas Child Support Guidelines Committee.

It’s evident that Judge O’Grady’s work on behalf of litigants has had a tremendous impact for court patrons. We’d be remiss if we didn’t also mention how Judge O’Grady’s initiatives have affected the staff that work with him daily. The establishment of the help center provided an avenue for many long-term judicial branch employees to find new meaning in their work, and an acceptable way to say “yes” to people who had long needed help. A court clerk expressed her thoughts on this in a 2017 news article about the help center:

"It's kind of hard to put into words how much this job means to me," said Teresa Young, supervisor for the help center.
"It can be frustrating and sad, because

you're dealing with people at one of the hardest times in their life, but at the end of the day, I feel like I've helped somebody and accomplished something. It's one of the most rewarding positions I've ever been in."

The litigants who have benefited from Judge O'Grady's leadership may not know or remember his name, but the clerks and other court staff who leave work each day feeling as though they've been able to contribute positively and meaningfully to the lives of others in their communities surely will. Judge O'Grady continues to meet with the help center staff regularly to discuss issues they've encountered, refine processes, and improve services to the public.



JoCoCourtHelpCenter @JoCoCourtHelp · Aug 2, 2017
15000 clients served @JoCoKSDistCourt Help Center. Thx to partners @KLS_KC @KansasBar @JOCO_BAR @jocogov These ladies make it all happen!



8 9

The Kansas Judicial Branch celebrates the accomplishments of Judge O'Grady and all who have worked with him to improve access to the courts and advance procedural fairness for all litigants. We are so proud to share his work with the selection committee, and sincerely thank you for your consideration of him for this award.

Sincerely,

Marla Luckert

Marla Luckert
Chief Justice

Stephanie Bunten

Stephanie Bunten
Judicial Administrator