

# SUMMIT COUNTY PROBATE COURT JUDGE ELINORE MARSH STORMER STATE OF THE COURT 2017



## As your Probate Court Judge, I offer this 2017 State of the Court report.

Probate Court plays a fundamental role in the lives of many of our citizens; we have jurisdiction over more than 200 types of cases. We work to be good stewards in estate administration, to protect those in need of a guardian due to illness, developmental disability or the inability to make decisions for themselves, to perform civil commitments and provide a path to success for the severely mentally ill, to finalize adoptions, issue marriage licenses and deliver fair results through mediation and trial.

2016 continued our push to strengthen relationships with professionals, families and stakeholders of the Probate Court, and to build on our community outreach efforts.

You will see here our efforts to make this Court work for you. We have included some wonderful photos of our staff and those with whom we work and serve. Here are a few of the highlights:

The Probate Court website, re-launched in mid-2015, is “the place to go” for information, forms and resources. It is easy to use with accurate, up-to-date content. I invite you to check out some new things we’ve added, such as the recently updated Guardians Handbook, additional Court training videos and our new Caregiver’s Resources page. You’ll find us at [www.summitohioprobate.com](http://www.summitohioprobate.com).

In June, our Court served as a host for the Ohio Association of Probate, Juvenile and Domestic Relations Judges 2016 Annual Summer Conference. Judges and other court officials from all over the state were impressed with the conference location and social opportunities. Feedback from the attendees said it was the best ever!



We continue to create innovative programs to serve those who depend on us. Our New Day Court began in January and is a specialized program, developed to assist the severely mentally ill on outpatient commitment with tools to take an active role in their recovery and avoid repeat hospitalizations. There is a great need for a workable solution to assist the mentally ill in our state. Judges and court officials from Franklin, Medina, Richland and Cuyahoga counties have come to our Court to learn more about this leading-edge program.

Probate Court Guardian training classes and Volunteer Guardian and Senior Visitor volunteer programs still give us a way to increase the oversight and protections for the most vulnerable citizens in our community.



The redesign of the Clerk’s office was completed! It is comfortable and welcoming. Each visitor has a personal and private conversation with staff instead of standing at a counter; and it is accessible to all. The modernized workspace increased efficiency for staff and the professionals working with the Court on a day-to-day basis. The best news is that this remodeling was completely paid for at no additional cost to taxpayers or the County’s General Fund! Costs were covered by the Probate Court Special Projects fund, generated by fees collected from case filings.

If you are in downtown Akron, I invite you to stop in and see this beautiful courthouse space.

Photos: Judge Elinore Marsh Stormer in the newly renovated Probate Court Clerk’s Offices. Photo *Courtesy Phil Masturzo/Akron Beacon Journal*; Chief Deputy Clerk Michael Radic assisting visitor.

**I am proud of the work we are doing and pledge to continue serving you with Service.Compassion.Integrity.**

## Managing the Court



Photo: A happy day at Probate Court as Magistrate Nicole Walker finalizes an adoption.

The Probate Court Clerk's Office helps thousands of people visiting every year. The Court had 7,161 new case filings in 2016, and processed the settlements of over 1,700 wrongful death cases associated with asbestos litigation. In addition, our Help Desk attorneys provided a free service for assistance with forms, procedures and simple, uncontested probate matters. Citizens come to our Court better prepared for us to serve them. The Court's Mediation Program's trained mediators allowed parties to reach their own solutions, freeing up our busy Court docket.

The Probate Court statistics include:

- 381 Guardianships
- 2,386 Estates and Estate Releases
- 3,158 Marriage Licenses
- 179 Adoptions
- 1,057 Miscellaneous Cases
- 705 Help Desk Appointments
- 79% Mediation Cases Settled

The Court returns substantial monies to the Summit County General Fund through the collection of court costs and filing fees. We covered the entire cost of the much-needed renovation through our Special Projects fund at no additional cost to taxpayers; other funds let us provide state-mandated indigent services including guardianships and guardian training.

Staffing levels remained the same as in 2015 as we increased work-load efficiencies and cross-training.

Our Clerk's Office uses Generally Accepted Accounting Principles to assure that public funds are used both efficiently and appropriately. The County internal auditing team re-audited the Court in 2016 and approved all procedures without citation.

## Service Through Innovation

### New Day Court

New Day Court began in January, 2016 to help those committed by the Court avoid a return to the hospital. Summit County has long used the outpatient commitment process to provide treatment in the community to citizens suffering from severe mental illness. We were one of the first in the State to do so, and the New Day court is the first of its kind as well. The Court worked closely with stakeholders, the ADM board, CSS, NAMI and PES to develop and tweak the program. People coming out of the hospital come to Court on a regular basis to report how they are doing and to let us know if they need help. The goal is to aid them in recovery and to keep them out of scarce hospital beds.

Over 100 clients have received or are receiving help through the New Day Court since its inception. In the words of one of our graduates...**"Judge Stormer places great effort in counseling each individual on a case-by-case basis to encourage us to do our very best to deal with our illnesses. I felt a sense of solace in her presence and for the first time in my life, I felt at peace with the fact that I do, indeed, have a mental illness. My experience gave me the strength and courage to cope."** - Signed C.M.

### Your Family Matters

The *Your Family Matters: Options to Protect Your Heirs and Assets* program, launched in late fall, 2015, was developed as collaboration between Probate Court, the Fiscal Office and the Clerk's Office. This program answers questions about the probate process and things you can do to protect your property and heirs. Over 1,300 people attended our free *Your Family Matters* presentations at libraries, senior centers and other public venues throughout Summit County in 2016. If you missed a live program, you can see our video *Straight Talk About Probate*, the probate section of this presentation, on our website at [www.summitohioprobate.com](http://www.summitohioprobate.com).



Photos: Your Family Matters - Macedonia Senior Center

# Probate Court Volunteer Programs

Since we started our Probate Court volunteer programs, the Senior Visitor Program (established in 2013) and the Volunteer Guardian Program (established in 2014), citizens from all over Summit County have contributed thousands of volunteer hours to serve people under guardianship of our Court.

Guardianships assist people, known as wards, who are unable to manage their own affairs due to mental and/or physical impairment or developmental disability. Our Court is responsible as “superior guardian” to protect the personal and financial interest of over 2,200 wards.

The Senior Visitor Program recruits and trains volunteers to visit these wards and assess their condition and the care they are receiving in long-term care facilities. The volunteers’ reports help ensure that our wards’ needs are met. Last year, our Senior Visitors went to see people approximately 500 times.

In many cases, a ward has no children or other family member to serve as Guardian. When that happens, the Probate Court can appoint a volunteer from the Volunteer Guardian Program to serve as legal guardian. This program is operated through contract by Jewish Family Service of Akron. Stakeholders include the ADM board, the DD board, Summit County Public Health and DJFS. Currently, 100 volunteers and one professional act as guardians for 135 individuals.

As our population ages, the demand for Senior Visitors and Volunteer Guardians increases. If you like helping seniors and are looking for a way give back that fits into your schedule, we invite you to become a part of the Probate Court Senior Visitor and Volunteer Guardian programs. We provide training at your convenience.



Photos from left: Senior Visitor Susan Milne; Diane Petrella with Margaret; Delores Hall with Louise; Ella Johnson; Char Brumbaugh with Florence.

## Our volunteers love our seniors.

### Here are some comments in their own words...

**Susan Milne** joined the Senior Visitor Program after moving back to the Akron area from out-of-state. “As a Senior Visitor, I give a voice to a vulnerable population by visiting them, learning how they are doing and what, if any, concerns or needs they have. I find that the Court is very responsive to our reports,” said Susan.

**Diane Petrella** learned about the Probate Court volunteer programs at a community event. “I love seniors, but wondered if I would have the time and the skills to serve. The Court offered me training and I have found that being a volunteer easily fits into my work schedule and lifestyle.” says Diane.

**Delores Hall** “I think the greatest gift you can give is your time to someone who does not have family or whose family is not able to visit,” said Delores. “It is so enjoyable to be able to just sit and listen to their stories. I have met some amazing individuals through this program.”

**Ella Johnson**, a full-time marketing professional, says, “I joined the Probate Court’s Senior Visitor Program in October, 2013. A year later, I also became a Volunteer Guardian. As a Senior Visitor volunteer, I advocate for those in need of compassion. I took care of both of my parents as they aged and am doing what I would want done for myself. It’s easy to work the visits into my schedule because I decide when to accept a case and the number of visits I have the time to handle. I’m paying it forward and loving it.”

**Char Brumbaugh** is retired and an amateur photographer. “I have been a Senior Visitor since the program began. I saw how important a good advocate is to someone who cannot speak for themselves,” said Char. “When the Volunteer Guardian Program started, I was thrilled to become a part of it. As a retiree, it has given me a whole new outlook on being able to be the voice for those in their later years. I love being part of Judge Stormer’s volunteer programs!”

**For more information**, go to the Probate Court website at [www.summitohioprobate.com](http://www.summitohioprobate.com). Be sure to check out the Court Videos section for videos about the Senior Visitor and the Volunteer Guardian programs. You can also call us at **330-643-8771**.

# Reaching Out to Our Community

We want our citizens to have information so that their Probate Court experience is understandable and not intimidating. Last year, we made direct contact with thousands of citizens through over 100 speaking engagements, senior, family and business expos and community education covering our **Your Family Matters/Straight Talk About Probate** series and other Court topics. Our outreach efforts continue on social media (check us out on Facebook) and staff community involvement.

Collaboration allows the Court to share knowledge and maintain open communication with our stakeholders. Staff members gave speeches, workshops and participated in other events with outside agencies, including the Akron Bar Association, Summit County Children Services, the ADM Board, Summit DD and Summit County Public Health.



Photos: Hudson Senior Health Fair; Judge Stormer; Summit DD Advocacy Day Keynote Speaker, receives an original oil painting by DD Client and Artist, Carl Loftin

Several in-house Probate Court projects this year benefited those in need in our community. Because of their generous donations of time, money, cards, clothing, and luggage, our staff made a difference this holiday.....

- 1,000 pieces of clothing were donated and delivered to indigent seniors living in long-term care facilities.
- 500 indigent seniors living in long-term care facilities got a note of holiday cheer delivered by Probate Court Senior Visitor Program volunteers.
- 400 veterans got a signed holiday card reminding them that someone from Summit County values their service, especially those wounded or far away from home.
- 100 Akron Public Schools kids on the subsidized lunch/ breakfast program got holiday food bags to help tide them over during the holiday break through United Way.
- 30 Summit County foster kids will have nice totes or luggage to use to carry their belongings when moved.



Photos: Court Staff Celebrates American Red Cross Veterans' Holiday Mail for Heroes; Barberton Elementary East 2nd and 3rd graders helped make our Holiday Mail for Heroes even more special this year; United Way Food Drive for Akron Public Schools; Probate Court Staff Delivers Warm Clothes to Seniors in Long-term Care Facilities.

**A Probate Court Guardian sent this note.....**“I saw firsthand today how much the Christmas card program is appreciated. I was at Wyant Woods visiting my ward when a volunteer from the Senior Visitor Program came in with Christmas cards. The residents were very excited. My ward received one and was very happy. It really does make a difference.” Signed VS

**Julie Barnes, Executive Director of Summit County Children Services, sent this note to Judge Stormer.....**“Ofentimes, children enter custody carrying their clothing, favorite toys and other personal belongings in a trash bag. Now, with your donation, children can be given a piece of luggage or duffle bag to use to carry their clothes. It's this simple gesture with this basic item that can help make them feel better during a difficult situation. We are most grateful to you and your staff for hosting this collection drive and for your continued support of our agency.”