

Justice Courts in Ulster County

Fact Sheet prepared by the League of Women Voters of the Mid-Hudson Region

Justice courts in New York State fall under the guidance of several governmental bodies, without being entirely under the control of any one of them. The State legislature has the authority to determine court procedures, jurisdiction and responsibilities. The municipality in which the court is located is responsible for funding and supervising its justice court. Three state entities also have responsibilities – the Office of Court Administration plays an advisory role, the State Comptroller's office has oversight over financial operations and the Commission on Judicial Conduct reviews complaints of judicial impropriety and makes recommendations for action.

In 2010 the Intergovernmental Studies Program at Rockefeller College, SUNY Albany issued a report on Justice Courts, which identified issues, operations and restructuring opportunities in Ulster County.¹ The study identified the following issues and recommendations:

Issues:

- The caseloads of many justice courts have increased in number and complexity in recent years
- New technology and information management systems facilitate court operations but require an initial investment in time and energy to learn and to keep up with changes in mandates, policy and statutes
Courts are increasingly viewed as revenue sources (from fine collections) for state and local governments
- Most courts in Ulster County are operating at a deficit

Recommendations:

- Consider merging justice courts in some adjacent towns into a regional court or have some of the smallest courts share a single justice or court facilities²
- Improve the level of oversight by municipal governing boards over the courts
- Seek other efficiencies such as the use of mediators in civil cases, reexamining arraignment activity, plea bargaining by mail, and other ideas
- Examine what other counties have done in restructuring justice courts or sharing services (Genesee, Lewis, Franklin, Livingston, Madison, Orleans, Saratoga and Warren)³

¹ Sydney Cresswell, Shared Municipal Services Study Report on Justice Courts, Pattern for Progress, New York. 2010

² Office of State Comptroller, Justice Court Consolidation in Villages and Towns, brochure

³ Cresswell, Appendix C, pp 52-57