https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/courts/court-watch-nola-tracks-bond-with-real-time-dashboard/article_fc1d4fd4-b94a-11ee-92d4-3364390b6a48.html

Court watchers hope Baton Rouge program can educate public about issues in legal system

BY MATT BRUCE | Staff writer
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Volunteer Coordinator Trezell Ragas of Court Watch NOLA, wears the identification badge that members of the organization wear in court during the annual presentation of their findings from their work as courtroom observers in front of Orleans Parish Criminal District Court in New Orleans, La., Tuesday, May 22, 2018.

Advocate staff photo by MAX BECHERER

A group of courtroom watchdogs that is bolstering its tracking of legal proceedings in Baton Rouge courts is giving legal purveyors daily snapshots of a critical metric in the criminal justice system: bond.

Court Watch NOLA added a dashboard to its website in December that tallies and averages bail settings in Orleans Parish criminal cases. The nonpartisan nonprofit has been a presence in New Orleans district and municipal courtrooms since 2007 and is working to branch out.

Leaders of the New Orleans group said they have been training a new crop of volunteers that could soon begin monitoring criminal proceedings inside the 19th Judicial District Courthouse. It is not a new phenomenon for district courtrooms in the capital city.

For the past five years, the Rev. Alexis Anderson has led a court watch team in East Baton Rouge that monitors first appearances in the 19th JDC. While closely aligned with Court Watch NOLA, it stands as an independent operation.

Court Watch NOLA Deputy Director Jesse Manley said his organization has partnered with Anderson and student volunteers at the Southern University Law Center to set up a pilot program. The hope is to establish an official chapter of the New Orleans-based court watch program in Baton Rouge.

“We’ve trained a couple court watchers to test it out and see if it works and it does," Manley said. "So we’re hoping that very soon it will be expanding and we’ll be getting more Southern law school students in there to do the same thing that we’re doing here.

“There’s definitely a long history of people court watching in Baton Rouge, and we’ve been happy to work with Rev. Anderson for a good part of that," he added. "She’s an amazing partner and collaborator, and we like highlighting the work that she does.”

Court Watch NOLA's bond dashboard debuted last month as the fruit of a three-year partnership with Tulane University’s Center for Community-Engaged Artificial Intelligence, a multidisciplinary team examining how AI can be used most effectively in fair, transparent and inclusive ways.

“Bond is really important because it tells you a lot, but there are a lot of misconceptions about what the bond instrument actually does,” Manley said. “The bond is there for the court to ensure that the person keeps coming back to court dates when they’re required. The bond’s not the beginning of punishment for someone who is arrested.”

Creating a bond dashboard wasn’t originally the goal when Court Watch NOLA began working with a team of computer science students in Tulane’s Capstone Project. The initial objective was to develop easier ways to identify and dissect trends in the courts. That yielded a slate of rudimentary data collection tools that Court Watch NOLA began using behind the scenes to analyze and crunch numbers. Midway through last year, organizers became confident the internal dashboard was reaching the point that they could unveil it on the organization’s website.

Tulane professor Aron Culotta, who oversees the Capstone Project, said students custom-built the online dashboard using data sets and web technology that aggregate information from Court Watch NOLA's database.

"They want to be able to use the things that they're learning to make an impact in some way, and I think this is an example of that," he said of the students. "It was really like a data science project of assembling the data to make it queryable and searchable in an easy way … and trying to make it in such a way that the folks at Court Watch can ask the questions that are important to them, so they can raise issues and make observations about the court system."

The dashboard went live on the home page in early December, displaying bail amounts set during first appearances in all felony cases that course through Orleans Parish Magistrate Court. It is updated each day to calculate the average bail amounts set in the past 24 hours, compared against bond averages for the past 30 days and the past year.

Now the target line has moved again. Court Watch NOLA continues to work with the Tulane undergrads to enhance the dashboard by incorporating more information like a breakdown of bonds by race, age, gender and other classifications. Manley said he hopes to offer click-down options that can report the median bail amounts or educate users on shifts in the bond averages.

Ultimately, the aim is to expand the dashboard to collect real-time data on other trends in the court like sentencing ranges, most common charges and length of time suspects spend in jail following their arrest.

"Building out the functionality and adding more information, we think, is going to be really important for educating the public more," Manley said. "Right now, this is just the baby version. We've got this up there so it's sort of a proof of concept, but we plan on making it bigger and better ... like more than just reporting the bond totals. That's a really important metric, but it's just one metric. It doesn't really tell you the whole story."

In addition to the first appearances where bails are set, observers trained in the rules of court procedure sit in on arraignments, pretrial motions, trials and sentencing hearings. They document quantitative metrics like bond amounts, the number of cases they observe and anyone held in contempt of court. Observers also collect qualitative data on their experience, including if court started on time, how respectful and professional the judicial officials were in the courthouse, and whether they felt any litigants were discriminated against for any reason.

Those recordings are compiled in a database that Court Watch NOLA analyzes to write annual reports to showcase things the courts are doing well, while also highlighting areas of concern.

Manley envisioned the dashboard as a tool to help contextualize public discourse on issues in the local courts, conversations that he said often end up dictating policy decisions.

"I think it's incredibly important, because a with lot of the public conversation about these numbers and these proceedings, it's hard to capture the nuance of what's actually happening. So much of the conversation has to happen on Twitter or other forms of social media, that you just don't have the space to break things down like that," he said. "And so many of the places that have historically had this data — like the court system — they just haven't had the time or the capacity to do this sort of analysis and share it with the public. And that's where an organization like Court Watch, we see that as something we can bring to the table."

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