

The court shall apply the law fairly to protect individual freedom and to promote the welfare of the people.

San Mateo County Superior Court Mission Statement

When most people consider going to court, the reasons are seldom seen as positive: A lawsuit; jury duty; divorce; a death; a friend or relative on trial.

Courtrooms are often acclaimed as the bastions of high drama with a judge flanked by Lady Justice or mocked as pompous institutions flooded with too many lawyers. Then there's Judge Judy and her ilk, where you better show a receipt or go home empty handed.

The reality is that courts play a vital and necessary role in society. We in the Superior Court of San Mateo County have an obligation to help the public understand how the judicial system really works and demystify the black robes, legal codes and Latin.

We also want to help. That is why we invite members of the public to Community Law Night this Wednesday (May 9) starting at 5:30 p.m. in Redwood City.

Residents can obtain free – yes, free – legal advice in 15-minute sessions with attorneys. Anyone is also free to have an informal discussion with top attorneys on a wide array of topics and to talk with judges about the judicial system.

Also, free workshops led by legal experts will be held on family law and on how to represent yourself in court. Sessions will be in both English and Spanish.

The San Mateo County Bar Association plays a key role in Community Law Night by providing volunteer attorneys.

Also on hand will be representatives from the San Mateo County District Attorney's Victim's Services Unit, which assists crime victims seek everything from reimbursement to counseling, and the Consumer Division, which enforces laws against consumer fraud.

The San Mateo County Legal Aid Society, an independent non-profit group, will be there to answer questions and offer information about services. The Society provides free civil legal assistance to low-income children, families and seniors.

The group Community Overcoming Relationship Abuse will answer questions and offer services. CORA provides free and confidential aid to victims and survivors of domestic and dating violence and abuse.

Even free childcare will be provided.

Community law night is among a number of novel steps the Superior Court has launched as part of the court's strategic planning. Our latest long-range plan, released in April, contains a number of challenges we set for ourselves.

Increasingly, the courts are expected to do more than resolve legal matters and dispose of cases.

Courts are now expected to offer programs and services that will help resolve the troubles that led people to the courtroom in the first place. That is why the courts have worked closely with other agencies to develop innovative programs for drug offenders and domestic abusers, for instance.

Through our strategic planning, led by Presiding Judge Robert Foiles, our courts are also developing alternatives to sentencing some non-violent lawbreakers to our already crowded jails. This is not a blank check. Alternatives come with expectations and consequences.

When incarceration is required, the time should be used productively in drug and alcohol treatment, counseling and literacy and other educational classes.

We are also working with the Bar Association to encourage lawyers with diverse backgrounds to become active members. Our goal is to create a court system that understands and reflects the diversity of the county's residents.

A chief goal contained in our latest strategic plan is to deliver the highest quality justice and service to the public. That, of course, is always the goal of a fair, efficient and effective judicial system.

But we need to expand our public outreach to raise awareness of court services and programs. Community Law Night helps us fulfill some of our goals and provide the public with a unique opportunity.

Please come join us.

Written by San Mateo County Superior Court Judge Mark Forcum.

Community Law Night starts at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday at the San Mateo County Hall of Justice, 400 County Center, Redwood City. For more information, call (650) 363-4516 or go to www.sanmateocourt.org.

To view the court's strategic plan, please to go www.sanmateocourt.org/strategicplan