

ARISE Podcast 094 “Making Courtrooms More Inclusive”

Host: Tania Anderson, CEO of ARISE

Guest: Hillary Warner, Justice Coordinator for the Fifth Judicial District, Onondaga County.

Tania Anderson 0:05

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO at ARISE. It's my pleasure to have with me today. Hillary Warner, who is the justice coordinator for the Fifth Judicial District here in Onondaga County. Welcome Hillary.

Hillary Warner 0:17

Hi. Thank you, Tania,

Tania Anderson 0:18

So, you have a title which is very impressive and somewhat vague to me, so tell me what you're doing in the courthouse in Syracuse.

Hillary Warner 0:29

Well, I think it might be vague for a reason, because we're still building everything out. We're trying to figure out what is needed in the courts to make the courts more inclusive and make it a safe space for the community and reflect the community. And so, I'm coordinating our access to justice committee that has a number of subcommittees, because we have all these different identities when we go out into the world, and so we want to help folks be able to be comfortable in the court and have access to justice. And that might look like having court officers who are leading you into the courthouse who look like you. So, we're going out to career fairs. We're also trying to kind of bridge the gap between different community organizations and the courts.

Tania Anderson 1:37

Wow. So, there is a lot there to unpack. Just to take a step back. I mean, the court system is a vital component of our community in so many ways. People think about the courts on TV, they think about a criminal court, which, of course, criminal courts are a huge feature of the court system. But there's the civil court proceedings, everything from a lawsuit to divorces, family court issues, things that really impact everyone's lives every day. And so, when I think about access to justice, which

sounds like a lofty term, it's really nuts and bolts about people not being intimidated to use that system as it's intended, and when they're in it, trying to navigate it in a way that is meaningful. So, I love the example you gave about a court officer looking like the person in this in the building. What are some of the specific things you're looking at in terms of access? And I, before we started to record this we talked a little bit about accessibility. So maybe we'll start there with a concrete example of how people with disabilities can be better supported in the courtroom.

Hillary Warner 3:21

Alright, and this, this is probably applicable to anybody, right? Because there's many reasons why someone might not want to come to the courthouse. You know, it could be transportation, childcare, all these other things could be, you know, they're just not accessible, right? And so, we have different virtual court appearance sites throughout the county and some of our other surrounding counties, and a person would be able to sit before the judge, really if they wanted to from Peace Inc. or from Central Library or one of the other libraries locally. So, we've got these partner sites, and people can use, you know, the virtual appearance to deal with the judge.

Tania Anderson 4:16

So, what I'm hearing then is that, you know, in the traditional sense of someone having to go to court, whether as a litigant or whatever the role might be. They don't have to go physically to the courthouse. They can go to a designated site,

Hillary Warner 4:32

Yeah. And so maybe they don't feel comfortable with, you know, technology, right? And I personally don't always feel comfortable, and our website's not, you know, the easiest thing to navigate. And so, we train these partner locations on how to get folks set up. And they can come in and they have, say, a librarian or say, staff person at a community center, walk them through it really and support them.

Tania Anderson 5:11

Is that, generally, people who are representing themselves that would be using that kind of service,

Hillary Warner 5:16

Yeah, but I would say also, if somebody has an attorney that is not able to make it into court, or if their attorneys at court and they still want to participate, both of them could be on the virtual appearance, or one person can be in the courtroom, but one is virtual. It really all depends. Very flexible. In fact, I was observing in the courtroom, and this was in Judge Pitts Davis' courtroom, and

we had a mandarin translator sitting in the courtroom and a person who spoke Mandarin was appearing virtually, so their translator was in the court with us, and they were virtual.

Tania Anderson 6:10

Wow, that's interesting. And on the issue of translation, there are instances where someone who is DEAF or hard of hearing and they need sign language interpretation. How does that normally work for accessibility

Hillary Warner 6:24

And so that's a great question. There are a few different ways people can ask for this accommodation. I usually recommend that as soon as you've got information about your court date. You want to connect with us directly. You can do that by calling us. You can do that by email. If you're someone who kind of gets the willies like doing these things, like giving giving a call to a courthouse and you don't know who you're going to talk to, you could also ask your attorney to do that, but you really want to make sure that you're advocating for yourself and you're coordinating with your attorney. So I would say the easiest ways would be as soon as you know so you have time. Either you yourself, whichever method is easiest for you, um, reach out. You could even come into the courthouse and set this up, or you have your attorney do that for you, right?

Tania Anderson 7:33

But there are interpreters available that the court will tap to be in the proceeding.

Hillary Warner

Exactly.

Tania Anderson

Right and in terms of physical access, I would imagine that a lot of the barriers we see in some places in terms of steps and the lack of a ramp and elevators, that's not really an issue in this public building. Are you doing additional things in terms of the aisles and the furniture in the courtroom and in the clerk's offices to accommodate people who might have a physical disability.

Hillary Warner 8:04

That's a great question. You know, I want to say this was back in 2022 we put together a group, and we were calling it our access to justice think tank, and they went through each one of the courthouses and did an assessment on accessibility of seating, you know, accessibility as far as like technology and doorways, similar to what you're saying, ramps, elevators, and we've really been trying to address it little by little. We been doing a pretty good job, but there's always room for

improvement. So, I would say if someone with a disability is having an issue with access, it would be wonderful for them to reach out to us. We have a statewide coordinator for our ADA, which is the Americans with Disability Act, who the ADA Coordinator does a lot of troubleshooting, you know, and sometimes you need money to make some adjustments, or you need a little bit of like, political push, right? So, yeah, it takes a lot of coordination,

Tania Anderson 9:37

I think that even just having the assessment stuff is huge, because you can't start to fix the problem until you have identified the problem, in my opinion.

Hillary Warner 9:49

Exactly. And so, you know, I think as long as someone is, you know, letting us know what's going on, we'll do what we can to address it as soon as possible.

Tania Anderson 10:04

And I know the court has been really great in terms of having materials available for people who represent themselves, thinking about matrimonial part, some of the other do it yourself, forms that are available online. What have you been doing in terms of making those sorts of materials available in other formats for people who maybe can't see or need a translation that sort of thing?

Hillary Warner 10:35

We have a department that is... We call it the plain language department. But they do more than just that. They have toolkits for us on how to update materials to not only have them in plain language, but also if something is needed in Braille or if

Tania Anderson 11:01

Really any alternative form?

Hillary Warner 11:02

Yeah, exactly. We can work with somebody on that. I would say that the biggest thing that we're really trying to push is folks coming into our Help Center, so on the fifth floor of our Onondaga County Courthouse. We have a help center that's connected to our law library. And people can come in, and a lot of folks come in and do printing because, you know, maybe you don't have a printer at your house, or you don't want to print 50 pages at home, you can come to us and print

things out. We can also help as far as if you figure out what do it yourself form you need to use, we can get that up for you so you can fill it out. There are other supports in the Help Center, such as volunteer lawyers project. We personally can't give legal advice at the courts, but their volunteer attorneys can help folks. And so, if somebody was like, I've got this, do it yourself form, but I'm still not really sure how to do it, someone can be there to help you out.

Tania Anderson 12:19

That's so important, that's so great. And we've been talking a lot about litigants and people participating in the court system that way. I'd like to talk a little bit about jurors, because it's people see that summons, and they usually, they all know, but it is really such a critical part of our system, that the jury system and that exists and that the jury reflects the community. What sort of work are you doing to make sure that our jurors reflect the community

Hillary Warner 12:56

We were actually just at the fair, you know, morning to night, trying to promote jury duty and just educate the community about, you know, civic engagement, what it means to be a juror. And, yeah, I think that the biggest piece is making sure people get registered, you can volunteer to be a juror. And there are actually quite a few people who are interested in being on a jury.

Tania Anderson 13:29

It's really an interesting process.

Hillary Warner 13:31

Absolutely, absolutely. And so, you know, making sure that we're going out and meeting with high schoolers too, you know, meeting with students and talking to them about, again, civic engagement and why it's important to you know, have your peer there to judge you. Right? I think that if I were appearing in court and, you know, something was on the line, I would want people who might be able to understand my experience, you know, or empathize where I'm coming from, you know, to make an informed decision.

Tania Anderson 14:20

Absolutely. We've been talking a lot about people with disabilities. I think you at the beginning of this conversation, we talked about how really your work is much broader than that. Are there particular groups or marginalized populations that you think warrant an extra focus at this time for whatever reason. I mean, obviously all populations are important, all groups are important. But is there a particular segment that you think is really not represented or just needs extra attention?

Hillary Warner 14:59

You know, this might just be kind of, I don't know if this happened as much intentionally as it did, just because it was something that, like, I worked closely with the new American community and some organizations that support the new American community, I think that we have a lot of people who are coming to, say Syracuse or surrounding counties that have incredible experience but may not have the connection to an opportunity. For instance, you know, if somebody, it was a judge in Sudan or an attorney in Sudan, and they come to Syracuse, you know, they relocate with their family. How do we get them to work in the courts, you know? And so really trying to figure that out, I think, you know, like I said, there's a lot of talented people who have wonderful experiences, who can really connect with communities that we're serving. We have, you know, a huge new American population in Syracuse. It would be really important to see our courts reflect those communities that we're serving.

Tania Anderson 16:31

Absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more, and it's really an, could be an overwhelming project that you're undertaking, but I'm really encouraged by the way you're approaching it in terms of looking at pieces and what we can do now and being creative and with the problem solving that you're doing, and you mentioned the Help Center. Are there other if someone hears this podcast, I've got to reach out because I wanted, either I want to find a job in the court system or I want to access some of these materials, where should they turn what? What address should they look up? Where should they go?

Hillary Warner 17:15

That's a great question. So, we do have a site that's for our Help Center, specifically, you know, people can also go to the New York State court's website. It might take a little bit of, you know, navigating, but you can get right to our Fifth Judicial District site through the overarching New York State site. So, you know, New York State courts.gov, people can reach out to me. So, you know, I'm happy to share my contact information. Would I do that now? Send me an email. Should I?

Tania Anderson 18:01

Sure, send you an email!

Hillary Warner 18:02

Yeah, so my email is HAWarner@nycourts.gov, and you know, email me. I would love to hear from folks, and hopefully you see me out in the community.

Tania Anderson 18:23

Absolutely, because the courts should look like us, and we should be using the courts. Wonderful. So, thank you for all the work you're doing. Hillary, I really enjoyed this conversation, and I hope you get a flood of emails.

Hillary Warner 18:38

Me too. Thank you.

Tania Anderson 18:39

Thanks.

5th Judicial NY Courts website: <https://ww2.nycourts.gov/courts/5jd/onondaga/index.shtml>

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