

Courtroom observations by the Fund for Modern Courts, a nonpartisan, nonprofit statewide court reform organization that strives to improve the administration and quality of justice in our courts.

10/96 – Justice Morris was observed eight times by seven monitors on four different days. The monitors characterized her as “very professional,” “articulate,” “compassionate” and an “excellent judge”.

Many observers commented on Justice Morris’ thoroughness in explaining decisions and court procedures. Said one monitor, “I gave her high marks for explanation of rules and charges.” Another observer noted that she “explains the proceedings in detail.”

The monitors felt that Justice Morris brought a sense of fairness to the courtroom. One remarked, “She treated everyone the same.” “Her respect for all of the defendants” was apparent to another observer.

Justice Morris exhibited the proper degree of firmness, according to the monitors. One observer remembered an incident where Justice Morris “instructed” defendants that “DWI is unacceptable.” A monitor thought that she has “a mind of her own.” Her management style was summarized in this way: “This is a lady very much in charge but at the same time able to ask questions if she needs to in order to clarify an issue.”

Although the majority of monitors praised her firmness, one monitor felt she was not firm enough with participants in her courtroom. The observer claimed that she “didn’t” raise questions about attorneys talking in the courtroom,” and that the resulting noise interfered with the proceedings.

The impressions of the monitors were overwhelmingly positive. One observer commented, “She conducted the proceedings in a pleasant, appealing manner showing dignity and maintained order and control.”

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Courtroom observation reports about Brighton Town Justice Karen Morris issued by the task force on courts, a project of Church Women United

7/14/03 - [2 Reports] - Judge Karen Morris was low-keyed and very understanding with defendants. She combines judging with teaching and allows them to ask questions. She explained what charges meant and defendants' options. When a defendant was going to appear at trial as his own attorney, she invited any who were going on trial in October to attend the September trials to get a feel of how they might proceed with their own cases.

A microphone was provided for the judge, but she did not turn it on at first. After it was on, she could be heard very well by one observer, but the trainee still had difficulty.

08/18/03 - The judge gave explicit directions to follow in her court. She is caring and explains in detail. After sentencing, she questions the defendants on what they have learned from all this and encourages them not to do it again.

09/29/03 - The judge had a microphone and could always be heard. She explained all aspects of the laws and appears very informed. She asked several defendants what might be the consequences of their actions..

1/21/03 – Judge Karen Morris was very articulate, showed tremendous patience, was clear in her instructions and in explaining all rulings. She could be heard at all times and ran a quiet court.

8/5/02 - One hour observation – 25 of the 151 cases on the docket [were heard]. At the beginning of the court session Judge Morris introduced the assistant district attorney and the court clerks.

She was thoroughly familiar with details of the cases. In sentencing, she usually gave multiple requirements, especially with traffic offenses [driving while intoxicated cases], e.g.: fine, surcharge, Defensive Driving School, written victim impact essay and reading of news clippings of fatal auto accidents.

7/29/02 – Judge Morris always speaks in an audible clear voice. She does an excellent job of processing cases, gives detailed rulings and emphasizes the consequences of not following the instructions of the court. She is informed about the cases before her and her decisions seem well thought out. She is patient and compassionate with defendants and attorneys who appear before her.

7/15/02 – In approximately one hour of observation, 35 of the 142 cases on the docket were called. Most involved arraignments and Judge Morris was audible at all times. She allowed adequate time for all parties and explained rulings clearly. The staff of the court was efficient, helpful and polite.

7/8/02 – The court session began at 3:30 pm; by 7:00 pm Judge Morris had processed $\frac{3}{4}$ of the 152 cases on the docket. The judge always speaks clearly and audibly; she asked the attorneys to use the microphones.

10/29/01 – Judge Morris spoke clearly and precisely and used her microphone throughout. Judge Morris ran an exceptionally well-organized court. She introduced herself, her clerks and the assistant district attorney and explained the order of business. The appearance time of defendants was staggered so that despite the high number of cases, the court was never crowded. She reviewed each case before making a decision. This made what had gone before very clear to the audience. She expressed enthusiasm when defendants were going to rehab, paying off fines, etc.

10/30/00 This judge had complete control of her court; she was clear and concise, showed patience and concern for each defendant. The judge and all attorneys used the public address system and audibility was not an issue.

8/7/00 Judge Morris had a unique voice; she is straightforward, clear and always audible but her tone conveys a sincere interest in the welfare of the defendant. She is firm yet eminently friendly.

October, 2002 - She was thoroughly familiar with details of the cases. In sentencing, she usually gave multiple requirements, especially with traffic offenses, e.g., fine, surcharge, Defensive Driving School, written victim impact essay and reading of news clippings of fatal auto accidents.

December, 2003 - Judge Morris is very precise in her explanations and courteous to the defendants. She ordered an interpreter for one defendant since neither he nor his friend, who tried to interpret, could understand the legal terms.

April, 2005 - Judge Morris could be heard at all times. Judge Morris greeted everyone and explained the order of the proceedings. She was always fair, knowledgeable and patient. Her interaction with each defendant is remarkable as she would often ask the defendant, "Now what did you learn from this?" She asked a defendant who was arrested for criminal mischief, "Do you have any right to damage someone's property?" Several of them were assigned to write a "Reflective Essay" which she would discuss with them in three weeks. She took time with everyone and was incredibly polite at all times.

April, 2006 - Judge Morris began court by introducing the staff and explaining the procedures. She could always be heard, was polite, respectful, positive - a firm yet pleasant manner. One defendant was told to write a "Reflective Essay" regarding his driving, in order to get his attention and understand the consequences of his actions. After the private attorney cases were finished,

Judge Morris used time efficiently to call defendants alphabetically-two at a time - so one was always ready. Judge Morris could always be heard. She is consistently respectful of everyone and interacts in a meaningful way with defendants. Judge Morris was calm, knowledgeable, firm and always polite. She reminded a DWI defendant that the "results of mixing alcohol and driving will be brought home to you by the Victim Impact Panel . . .It's lucky you are here without an accident . . . if you are again, you're in jail." Again and again, she had to remind defendants to separate drinking and driving.

December, 2006 - Judge Morris pronounces her words very distinctly and could always be heard. She was very pleasant but stern when she had to be. She listens well, gives lectures and often her punishment is to write an essay. A DWI offense (2nd time) brought a fine of \$600, probation for three years, six month loss of license, 30 days community service and an interlocking device put on the defendant's car. This is a well run court with four bailiffs.