



Equipment in Courts

*By Dick Record, Family Radio,
La Crosse & Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (FOIC) Member*

Wisconsin has long had an excellent policy on radio and TV equipment in the courtrooms of the state. It was 20 years ago that Wisconsin instituted the rules. Federal courts have yet to catch up. In some counties the rules have been relaxed. For example, the original rules said newspeople must have permission previous to the court date to bring their equipment and use it. In some places that policy has fallen by the wayside. There are counties that regularly allow coverage of the courts with equipment with no planning unless the judge decides there should be no recording in the court. The judge simply tells reporters that is the case and reporters agree. Simple as that. Brad Williams-WIZM, media coordinator for several western Wisconsin counties tells me it works well and it saves time and trouble. As long as the court and the reporter continue the respect of each other, all should go well. We did hear of an instance in Wausau where a reporter was told he needed permission before the court action and objected saying he had a right to use his equipment. He actually was taking pictures for a website. Apparently in that county, permission is still needed ahead of the court date. That can work well and fits into the procedure some judges demand.

Some in the legal system think cameras and recorders are distracting. I can tell you that in the late sixties, a group of us appeared before the Wisconsin Supreme Court to argue for equipment in the courts. After our arguments we advised the court that we had filmed and recorded the whole event. They didn't notice and some time after that they changed the rules. Today, some counties have separate rooms for reporters where they can record without being noticed by the people involved in the court proceeding.

Tom Bier-WISC (in 1979) called Wisconsin's – the best rules of all states. And he still believes that. He only wishes the federal courts would follow suit. We would encourage all reporters to review the rules, and follow them as allowed by local judges. The rules are found at www.wisfoic.org. There is found the rules, easy to follow and reasonable.