

Russians study jury trials to implement at home

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Judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys from Russia sat and watched as a jury heard evidence against a man accused of sexual assault at a trial this week in Superior Court in New Haven.

It is a scenario that will soon be repeated often in that country.

Starting in January, courts throughout Russia will begin mirroring the American jury trial system.

"Right now, only nine regions of Russia have experimented with having jury trials," said Masha Leonova, who acted as a translator for the Russian delegation. "Now, all 89 regions will have a jury trials."

Currently, a judge alone typically decides cases, she said, and accused people often represent themselves.

The delegation, which is here as part of the Connecticut-Pskov Rule of Law Project, includes three judges, three prosecutors, three defense lawyers and two facilitators from Pskov, which is near St. Petersburg.

They arrived Oct. 12 and are spending an entire week learning about the American judicial process, from plea bargaining to jury selection. The visit is part of the Library of Congress Open World Russian Leadership Program.

On Thursday, Henry Lee of the state Department of Public Safety's Forensic Science Laboratory spoke to the group about how forensic science has helped crack many famous crimes.

The lab, according to Lee, handles up to 400 homicide cases each year, including many from other states.

The Russian visitors learned about how the lab helps with arson investigations, determines the distance between a gun and gunshot victim and uses a DNA database to catch repeat offenders.

Lee gave the delegation mugs, teddy bears and personal alarms, kidding them that, "The United States is pretty dangerous."

Vasili Maniasev, a prosecutor, said he'd like to take the whole Meriden-based crime lab back to Russia with him. He called the visit a learning process.

"Here, only a small percentage of cases go as far as a jury trial," said Maniasev, who was speaking through an interpreter. "Our hope is to be as good as you are in jury trials and have similar statistics."

Judge Valeri Kondratiev said the main goal of the visit is to study jury trials and have them throughout Russia.

The plea bargain process, which is very common here, is not in Russia, he said.

"Now, we have it, but it isn't very well applied," Kondratiev said, through an interpreter. "We were very interested in the preliminary hearings, pretrial proceedings and the system of getting warrants for arrest."

The delegation also saw what often happens at the end of the process, as they toured the Connecticut Correctional Center on Whalley Avenue this week.

Judge Jonathan Silbert, administrative judge for the New Haven Judicial District, acted as a host for the group, along with Judge Barry Schaller of the state Appellate Court.

Silbert went to Russia beforehand to prepare for the visit.

"We're working together with them to assist with a series of transitions they are making," said Silbert. "They recognize that it is a lot of hard work and will be difficult to implement.

Until they try it for themselves, they won't have a sense of how productive it can be."

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