

State and Federal Court Systems in Minnesota
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Did you know that there are two separate court systems in Minnesota? There is the Minnesota state court system and a separate Federal court system. Each system has their own courthouses, laws, and judges. Why are there two systems and what do they do?

First, the federal courts are part of a nation-wide system of courts that were established by Article III of the United States Constitution. The federal court system has three tiers. The first tier is the District Court - sometimes known as a trial court. This is where most cases are first heard. There are 12 federal district court judges hearing cases in three federal courthouses in Minnesota. Those courthouses are in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth.

The second federal tier is the Circuit Court of Appeals. There are 13 circuit courts of appeals in the country. Minnesota is part of the 8th Circuit which has its' headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri. Other states in the 8th Circuit include: North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, and Missouri.

The final tier in the federal system is the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C..

Minnesota's judicial system largely mirrors the structure of the federal system. Our first tier is also a District Court; ours has 293 judges across Minnesota's 87 counties. Minnesota's Court of Appeals, with 19 judges, sitting in 3 judge panels, located in St. Paul, is the second tier in Minnesota's system. The final tier is the Minnesota Supreme Court with its' 7 judges. The state supreme court is the final stop for all cases involving state law or the state constitution.

Federal judges are appointed by the President and confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Most state court judges are initially appointed by a Governor and then later elected by the people.

The two court systems hear different cases. Federal courts hear cases involving federal law and state courts hear cases involving state law. For example, civil cases dealing with family law, real estate, name changes, child protection, and most contracts are heard in State court. Also, criminal cases under state laws, such as DWI, theft, domestic assault, traffic offenses, and disorderly conduct, are heard in state court.

Federal courts hear criminal cases based on federal laws including those with international or interstate connections, U.S. mail fraud, and crimes committed on federal land. Civil cases include those where the United States is a party, cases involving patents, copyrights, bankruptcies, and disputes between different states, or the citizens of different states - if the amount in controversy exceeds a certain amount.

More cases are heard in state courts than in federal courts. Nationwide, about 1 million cases are filed each year in the Federal courts. Compare that with over 30 million state court cases.

Even though there are differences, both court systems are the same in the most important way: Each is bound by the U.S. Constitution and all judges in both systems are committed to delivering justice, and the due process of law, to all of the people that they serve.

Judge Galler is chambered in Washington County. If you have a general question about the law or courts for Judge Galler, send your question to the editor of this newspaper. Learn more about Judge Galler, or listen to a podcast of his columns at www.judgegreggaller.com.