



Portage County Judge Michael Zell named Judge of the Year for court rule reforms

MADISON, Wis. (May 6, 2026) — For Judge Michael Zell of the Portage County Circuit Court, improving the justice system starts with making sure people know when they are being sued. His recent overhaul of local court rules strengthens notice requirements in debt collection cases.

In recognition of his leadership, the State Bar of Wisconsin Bench and Bar Committee has named him Judge of the Year.

Under Judge Zell's leadership, Portage County strengthened notice requirements in debt collection cases, requiring that individuals receive actual notice before a judgment is entered.

Zell also oversaw a comprehensive rewrite of local court rules, described by observers as an "extraordinary undertaking," including provisions addressing the use of artificial intelligence in court proceedings.



Judge Michael Zell

"Judge Zell is a natural leader who knows the law and strives to do the right thing, no matter the personal cost," the State Bar's Bench and Bar Committee said.

The Judge of the Year Award honors a circuit court judge who improves the judicial system through leadership in advancing the quality of justice, judicial education, or innovative programming. The State Bar's Bench and Bar Committee established the award to recognize judges who drive real, lasting improvements within the justice system.

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ABOUT THE BENCH AND BAR COMMITTEE

The Bench and Bar Committee of the State Bar of Wisconsin fosters collaboration between lawyers and judges on issues and trends affecting the administration of justice. By promoting communication and collegial interaction, the committee strengthens cooperation and understanding between the bench and the bar.

ABOUT THE STATE BAR OF WISCONSIN

The State Bar of Wisconsin is the integrated professional association, created by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, for attorneys who hold a Wisconsin law license. With more than 25,000 members, the State Bar aids the courts in improving the administration of justice, provides continuing legal education for its members to help them maintain their expertise, and assists Wisconsin lawyers in carrying out community service initiatives to educate the public about the legal system and the value of lawyers. For more information, visit wisbar.org.

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