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Threats against judges increase

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Death threats against the region's judges and judicial officers recently jumped dramatically, prompting Washoe District Court and sheriff's officials to work on a new protocol to respond to any potential attacks, Chief Judge Connie Steinheimer said Tuesday.

"We're seeing an increase in threats against all judges," Steinheimer said. "Since the first of the year, there have been six threats against six separate judicial officers -- some were multiple contacts or attempted contacts."

Steinheimer would not reveal which judges had received the threats.

Judge Janet Berry said the threats are unnerving.

"We're just doing our job," Berry said. "We have no clue that somebody's psychotic with rage and wants us dead."

Some threats were written, others came over the telephone, through third parties or during conversations with law enforcement agencies, Steinheimer said.

"There were many different sources, a mixed group of threats," she said.

The increase is happening all across the country, not just in Washoe County, she added.

Steinheimer and Sheriff Mike Haley are developing a "global response" plan that all people and agencies will use when a threat comes in, she said.

"That way, if a threat comes in to the Sparks Police Department at 10 o'clock on a Saturday night, everyone will know how to deal with it," Steinheimer said.

The June 2006 sniper-style shooting of Family Court Judge Chuck Weller by Darren Mack, drew national attention to the vulnerability of judicial officers and courthouses across the country. In response, local courthouses implemented a number of safety measures to ensure a safe environment.

During Mack's sentencing hearing last week, Weller said he had received a number of threats, including one just after Christmas, and five other judges have had similar experiences.

Steinheimer said the threats included judges, court masters and the probate commissioner.

"Sometimes, people think that because of what happened to Judge Weller, and because the family court can be so volatile, that it's a family court problem," Steinheimer said. "It isn't. It's in all courts. They come after anyone they see as a part of the institution of the rule of law."

And it's not just in Washoe County, Berry said.

At the end of January, law enforcement in Las Vegas thwarted a plan by a Clark County inmate who offered to pay a fellow inmate \$30,000 to kill District Judge Michelle Leavitt, Deputy District Attorney Sandra DiGiacomo and the detective on his case.

An informant at the Clark County jail helped disclose

42-year-old Daimon Hoyt's alleged plan. Hoyt was being held on burglary charges.