

By Michael K. Jeanes, Clerk of the Superior Court

Good Government Plans Ahead

The 2010-2012 three-year strategic plan for the Clerk's Office is underway. Having goals and a plan to achieve them makes sense for any service-based employer. Many government agencies have no competition and risk a complacent approach to office operations and customer service. Regardless of the economy and other factors, the Clerks' Office routinely evaluates its performance, market trends, resources and forecasts to stay on track with following the office's vision: to anticipate, meet and exceed the expectations of our customers.

The Clerk's current strategic plan focuses on three priority areas: Employee Development, the Electronic Court Record and Financial Management. For the legal community, employee development may seem like the least important of these areas. However, there are important reasons for including Clerk's Office employees in the strategic plan.

Employee Development

From a business perspective, it is expensive to hire and train employees who leave soon after in search of greener pastures. Clerk employees are engaged in a career as legal professionals, rather than people just doing a job. Courtroom clerks, for instance, face a steep learning curve of legal terminology, process and procedure and appropriate handling of documents and exhibits. Many courtroom clerks end up specializing in one case type because of the volume of cases in Maricopa County, but several commit to decades of learning and relearning to function in all or several case types. Similar training and knowledge is required of employees who can efficiently process documents at the paper and electronic file counters, of accountants, of those who handle exhibits, confidential or sealed documents and those who coordinate search warrants and grand jury proceedings.

From a customer perspective, there is a great advantage to interacting with a Clerk employee who has been on the job long enough to handle routine events in addition to complex, sensitive or time-critical matters. Employee development is particularly important now, as superior court filings have increased over the last two years, at a time when nearly 100 positions have been eliminated in the Clerk's Office to survive budget reductions. Clerk employees have risen to the challenge of meeting customer service expectations through the difficult combination of handling a higher volume with fewer staff. For these reasons and others, employee development is a key aspect of the Clerk's strategic plan.

Electronic Court Record

An electronic court record is required to keep pace with the volume and variety of filings in Maricopa County. There simply isn't the time, staff or storage space to continue handling and maintaining paper. The majority of filings are still done in paper, which represents a significant cost to the judiciary in staff time and equipment. Each paper filing must be sorted, prepared for scanning, scanned, docketed and destroyed, with multiple audits to ensure accuracy between the paper filing and the digitized image of the filing. As a result, fewer than 35 percent of paper filings are available to view within 24 business hours, compared to nearly 100 percent of eFiled documents that are available to view within 24 business hours.

The paper process requires filers to create, print and deliver documents to the Clerk's Office, generating costs for paper, ink, delivery services and gas, among other overhead expenses. In most instances, the Clerk's Office then images the paper documents to create the official electronic court record, only to destroy the paper, an unfortunate ending, considering the cost and effort that goes into printing documents on paper.

The Clerk's strategic plan for the electronic court record calls for significant advancement in electronic filing services to drive continued and aggressive growth in this area, the establishment of the electronic court record as the official record in juvenile cases and the conversion of paper documents to electronic images for inactive cases.

Financial management

As the statutory fiduciary of the Superior Court, the Clerk's Office seeks to provide the timely and accurate collection, disbursement and reporting of court-ordered payments. Over the next several years, the Clerk's Office will update its financial systems to more modern platforms that conform to county and state technology standards. This has been an ongoing priority, as the Clerk's Office has updated systems that were nearly twenty years old. With continued improvements, the Office will provide a more unified system to allow our customers secure access to electronic court financial records and services.

For more detailed coverage of the Clerk's strategic plan for 2010-2012, visit the Clerk's website at <http://www.clerkofcourt.maricopa.gov/news/StratPlanFY10-12FINAL.pdf> .