



35th District Court Communique

www.35thdistrictcourt.org

35th DISTRICT COURT UPDATE SEPTEMBER, 2009

Our Mission: Render justice as efficiently as possible.

Our Focus:

- A. Be good stewards of the public's resources.
- B. Adjudicate cases in a more timely manner with fewer court appearances, when possible.
- C. Continually look for ways to improve our service.

Recent Steps:

A. Reorganization:

1. Adopted more vertical organizational chart.
2. Adopted judicial team concept. Each judge has their own court reporter/secretary, court officer, civil and criminal clerks and probation officer.
3. Judges have assumed a more active management role. The Chief Judge oversees all court operations, while one judge oversees Probation and IT and the other judge oversees Security and Maintenance. By the judges assuming these new managerial duties, it has allowed us to reduce our administrative staff by 1/3 (i.e. 3.75 managers down to 2.5 managers).
4. Transition (primarily through attrition) to fewer full-time employees with full benefits by utilizing more part-time employees and contractual services.

Benefits: More staff accountability, increased case flexibility, reduced operational costs

B. New Docket:

Implementation of a new docketing system permits the Court to process cases more efficiently and expeditiously, thereby reducing the time between opening and closing cases. Under the old system, the docket operated around a 3 week alternating schedule in which arraignments, pre-trials and trials were handled separately during each applicable week in the schedule. The system created unnecessary delays in processing of cases and created difficulties in meeting the standards set by the Supreme Court Administrator's Office (SCAO). Thus, the Court adopted a new one week schedule where the docket was broken into 10 blocks of time, i.e. 5 morning and 5 afternoon sessions, utilizing the same prosecutorial and court appointed attorney time as the previous docket, to efficiently process each case depending upon the specific needs of that case. The new docket allows each judge to schedule trials every week if necessary and allows the Court to conduct simultaneous trials using a common jury pool. The flexibility of the new docket together with the judicial teams organization, should sharply reduce our need for and the expense of hiring visiting judges to cover for judges' vacations.



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B. New Docket continued:

Benefits: Prompt adjudication of cases, great reduction in backlog of cases, fewer court appearances required in many cases, reduced costs for court participants in many instances, greater flexibility, which should also result in reduced juror and visiting judge expenses.

C. Procedural Efficiencies

- IT wrote simple software to calculate SCAO timelines which are now written into the court files and Register of Actions so that all affected parties are aware of deadlines.
- Adopted new civil scheduling orders, to streamline our process.
- Successfully lobbied SCAO for permission to simplify burdensome and costly administrative cost of handling civil files (garnishment disclosures)
- We are developing a system for collecting data to measure job performance court-wide, to review and improve our internal processes and to better allocate resources.

Benefits: We now adjudicate cases in a more timely manner, with fewer court appearances, which improves efficiency and reduces costs for the Court and the parties that we serve. Affected parties are now aware of the timelines set by SCAO for each file which has resulted in fewer requests for adjournments outside their standards.

D. Jail Alternatives

The Court actively seeks cost effective alternatives to jail for appropriate defendants and appropriate crimes, in an effort to reduce each community's jail expenditures. The cost to jail each Defendant on ordinance charges is \$46 per day.

- **Work Detail** is one jail alternative we utilize. It requires 8 hours of physical labor supervised by retired sheriffs or retired police officers and includes 3 crews of 12 which are out every weekend to clean up roadways, public property and after school and community events. Defendants pay the Court \$30 per day for work detail which results in a \$76 per day (expense to revenue) differential.
- **Community Service** is another jail alternative wherein defendants are ordered to perform community service for non-profit agencies of their choice to give something back to our communities whose laws have been violated. 35th District Court defendants provided roughly \$1 million dollars of free labor to non-profits (calculated at minimum wage) last year.



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D. Jail Alternatives continued

- **Technology** allows us to use electronic tethers as another jail alternative. Tethers allow defendants to remain employed and be productive members of society but technology allows us to indirectly supervise and restrict defendants, at their own cost, to their house during non-working hours and allows us to verify that defendants are not consuming alcohol.

Benefits: Jail alternatives have allowed us over recent years to reduce our jail expenses from nearly \$250G annually (8 years ago) to approximately \$125G currently, meanwhile our revenues have been increased as a result of the \$30 per day work detail fee charged to defendants.

E. Electronic Tickets

Three of our five communities now issue electronic tickets and a 4th will be on board soon. Electronic tickets have resulted in substantial savings to the community's police departments, some savings to the Court in processing time by greatly reducing our data entry error rate and the costs affiliated with correcting errors.

F. Payment Plans, Indigent Community Service, Flu Prevention Detail

In this tough economy more people are unable to pay their fines, costs, probation fees, etc. when ordered, so we have hired a payment plan/collections clerk to devise payment plans for appropriate defendants. Our collections revenues have increased and we currently have about 600 cases in our collection system that are on scheduled payments and another 400 who have issued promissory notes that we are monitoring.

For defendants who are simply unable to pay fines, costs or probation fees we offer indigent community service whereby defendants can work off all or part of their non-waiveable fees. As part of our indigent community service we have implemented a flu prevention detail at our court to hopefully reduce the spread of flu during the flu season as we serve roughly 700 people per day on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesdays. Indigent work detail defendants are assigned the duty of cleaning and disinfecting counters, door handles, windows, elevators and other surfaces exposed to germs, which will hopefully help keep our employees healthy and reduce absenteeism.

Benefits: Increased collection revenue, reduced jail expenses caused by non-payment, we provide a valuable yet intangible labor benefit to good community causes, as well as a visible sign to the community that crime does not pay. Further it allows us to close out files that otherwise were uncollectable.