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E-Filing in Texas Courts Innovation in Harris County

Peter Vogel

Technology surrounds us. In the courts, technology has been a part of document filing for decades. The key forms used have been copy machines, used by firms to make paper copies of filings, and cars, used to deliver case documents to the courthouse.

What if there was another way to get court documents to the courthouse? This question drove one of the significant charges for the Texas Supreme Court's Judicial Committee on Information Technology (JCIT) when it was founded in 1997. The Texas Government Code requires the JCIT "to develop minimum standards... to provide for the flow of information within the judicial system in electronic form and recommend rules relating to the electronic filing of documents with courts."

In 2004, JCIT launched the first statewide e-filing program in Texas in conjunction with TexasOnline, the official statewide eGovernment services portal. Since that time, e-filing in Texas has grown exponentially and the supporting technology has advanced. Today, 60 clerks and 345 courts in 45 counties participate in TexasOnline eFiling for Courts, covering approximately 73 percent of the Texas population. More than 30,000 documents are e-filed each month. Between April and September 2009, the number of statewide e-filings processed increased by more than 40 percent.

Innovation has been a driving force in achieving such success. As a prime example, Harris County District Clerk Loren Jackson's office is using technology to revolutionize court document automation and is realizing tremendous efficiencies and cost savings as a result.

Twelve months ago, court case information maintained by the Harris County District Clerk's

office was scattered across various delivery websites. Every e- filed original civil petition was printed out, stamped, and scanned back into the computer system - a time-consuming and inefficient process. Lawyers could get information about their case orders and docket settings only by calling or visiting the courthouse.

These antiquated processes proved impractical and costly for HCDC staff and attorneys. After an initial evaluation, Jackson, who took office in 2008, worked to create a vision of a virtual clerk's office.

The case management system used in the Harris County civil, family, and criminal courts was a compilation of systems that were more than 20 years old. These systems were built long before the Internet was a widely used, public tool and before the proliferation of personal computers and servers. The capacity and functionality required for the electronic exchange of information between the Harris County court system and outside agencies was not yet built, nor could it have been easily incorporated into these older computer systems.

The Benefit: Improved Services, Taxpayer Savings

The Harris County District's Clerk's office conducted an internal study to determine the savings that would result from an e-filing mandate in all HCDC civil courts. The findings include:

- Savings for the HCDC office would equal more than \$710,000 a year, and continue to grow by more than \$80,000 each year.
- On average, documents reached the court three times faster when electronically filed.
- It took half as much time to post electronic documents online that it did to post paper filings.



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To overcome these challenges, the HCDC's office set three goals for 2009: 1) to streamline the flow of e-filings to the clerk's office and the courts through the statewide electronic filing system, Texas Online eFiling for Courts; 2) to promote the advantages of e-filing to members of the State Bar and work with judges to create electronic courtrooms; and 3) to increase access to information to achieve the benefits of a fully electronic court system.

In January 2009, the HCDC's office began electronically stamping original petitions with cause numbers and court assignments through TexasOnline. This improved the previous process that involved the Civil Intake Division printing hundreds of pages of filings it had received electronically every day. Civil Intake staff was trained to accept e-filings, and a Central Document Processing unit was established to manage the division's incoming paper documents and convert them to electronic form. Over five months, all civil courts were converted to electronic courts that can now view documents on computers, virtually eliminating paper in the courtroom.

The HCDC's office began promoting e-filing among members of the Harris County Bar and coordinating efforts with judges to move toward paperless courtrooms. These efforts paid off. On Sept. 11, 2009, the HCDC's office processed 679 e-filings, setting the record for the largest number of e-filings in one day. Monthly e-filings have more than quadrupled since filing automation began. Before November 2008, the HCDC's office processed slightly more than 3,000 e-filings each month; this has increased to more than 12,000. As a result, judges are beginning to see the benefit of electronic courts, and several civil courts have issued e-filing mandates.

Major upgrades have also been made to www.hcdistrictclerk.com, providing the ability to search docket settings on cases and making public

criminal case data and documents available online.

A new notification system allows attorneys to subscribe and receive emails with updates to dockets, filings, and orders on civil and family cases for which they are the attorney of record. Attorneys can sign up for notifications on any civil cases they are interested in tracking, regardless of the attorney of record. A client notification service can distribute emails to attorneys when a party that matches their notification criteria is added to a civil case. More than 2,000 attorneys currently subscribe to this service.

The recent achievements in the Harris District Clerk's office demonstrate that, through technology and innovation, we can make rapid progress in improving document processing in the legal community. I look forward to the future of legal technology so that we can make a bigger difference in the lives of the people we represent. One needs to look no further than the Harris County District Clerk's office to see that future.

TexasOnline (www.texasonline.com) is the State of Texas' official e-government website. TexasOnline's electronic filing application, TexasOnline eFiling for Courts, is designated by rules of the Supreme Court of Texas as the State's electronic filing application for district, county, and justice of the peace courts. TexasOnline has been used by Texas trial courts since 2003. For more information, visit www.texasonline.com/efiling.

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