The 2016 Annual Report of the Harris County District Clerk's Office

District Clerk Chris Daniel

FROM THE DISTRICT CLERK

District Clerk Chris Daniel

Hello!

As we close our sixth year together at the District Clerk's Office, I'm proud to say that the Harris County DCO sets the statewide standard for operating an efficient, modern, cost-effective district clerk's office, regardless of county, size or geography. Our innovations carry over to other jurisdictions, leading to better judicial governance throughout the Lone Star State.

The DCO is in the vanguard in converting paper-based courts into electronic courts and in moving from a hard copy court filing system to electronic document retention. Why? Clearly, e-courts and electronic retention are the way of the future. The county's civil and family courts already have gone electronic, and civil and family documents already are filed and stored electronically.

This year, the DCO has been industriously preparing to convert the 38 state district and county criminal courts into e-courts. My IT staff and others also are busy preparing to switch to an electronic criminal court record retention system. These major changes will happen in 2017, and when that effort is completed, most court filings at the DCO will be stored electronically.

Who will see improvements from these advances? Lawyers, paralegals, law firm administrative assistants, judges, clerks, probation officers, law enforcement officers and others. The DCO will prepare these groups and others for e-conversion at seminars and other training sessions. We held comparable training sessions when the civil/ family mandate requiring electronic filings went into effect.

Not all our efforts will be focused on criminal e-courts, as we still are working to make other areas of the DCO operation more efficient and easier for the public to navigate. Our aim is to expand information available on our website.

A last note: I am proud that the District Clerk's Office expanded its much-admired quick, efficient passport service to the suburbs this year. We now operate three days a month in county libraries in Clear Lake, Cypress, Humble and the Katy area. Suburbanites – some of whom had the longest waits for passport service at post offices – now can have their passport applications processed smoothly and quickly right in their own neighborhoods! More to come, as this program continues to expand.

Sincerely,

Chris Daniel

Chris Daniel

DCO MISSION

To provide the judicial system and the public with information and support in the most technologically advanced methods as possible by:

- **Fulfilling our statutory duties as record custodian and fee officer to the best of our abilities;**
- **Fostering an environment for our employees that encourages the development of new ideas and the willingness to improve productivity;**
- **Implementing our goals and objectives with the team approach and decision-making at all levels of the organization;**
- **Striving to be a leader and example to other county and state agencies.**

THE DISTRICT CLERK'S EXECUTIVE BOARD

Seated: Civil Bureau Director Debbie Bucko, left, Human Resources Director Darlene Johnson, Information Technology Director Tracy Hopper and Criminal Bureau Director Anna Worthy. Standing: Assistant Director of Communications Bill Murphy, left, Executive Counsel/Accounting and Finance Bureau Director Paul Coselli, Financial Services Director Jack Downing, Chief Deputy Kevin Mauzy, District Clerk Chris Daniel, Assistant Director of Information Technology Mark Combs and Quality and Compliance Director Robert Nolen.

DCO leads effort to convert criminal courts to e-courts

Two years ago, District Clerk Chris Daniel and the District Clerk's Office ushered in a new way of keeping records in the civil and family courts, switching from paper court files to cutting-edge electronic document retention.

This year, Daniel and the DCO drew up plans to complete the job and transform the county's remaining courts – 38 criminal courts – into fully electronic operations.

Once the work is done on the criminal side, the county's courts will be fully modernized, relying on the latest forward-looking technology to take in and store court records in a secure fashion.

District Clerk Chris Daniel and DCO Information Technology Director Tracy Hopper at one of many DCO meetings about converting criminal courts to e-courts.

Daniel said, "Electronic storage is the way to go. Such storage makes it easier for clerks, judges, lawyers, prosecutors and the public to find and retrieve court documents. The DCO has set up and maintained a much-admired all-electronic system in the civil and family courts. In 2017, we will set up an equally good system in the criminal courts."

On June 30, 2016, the Texas Criminal Court of Appeals - the state's highest criminal court - mandated that the DCO accept only electronic filings from lawyers in criminal cases as of July 1, 2017. The state's other most populous counties also are subject to the mandate.

Some counties may choose to meet only the letter of the mandate, not the spirit. They will set up systems that allow them to receive e-filings. But after the e-filings come in, they will be printed and hard copies will be placed in paper files. This approach doesn't make sense to the DCO. An office that follows this method doesn't realize efficiencies that result from a truly paper-less system.

Commissioners Court, the county Justice Executive Board and the DCO decided to exceed the mandate and set up a more streamlined, efficient operation. In this system, nearly all criminal documents will be stored electronically.

A hybrid system maintaining both paper and electronic records would lead to chaos when clerks and others would look for a document, not knowing if it were stored in a hard copy or electronic form.

The DCO informed the Court of Criminal Appeals in writing that Harris County needs about 18 months – until the end of December 2017 – to set up fully electronic criminal courts. The court has not responded to the DCO's request for an extension.

The District Clerk's IT department developed the county's $2.9 million plan for converting the criminal courts. The plan lays out the steps that the DCO and other county offices, including the Sheriff's Office, the county probation department, pretrial services, the District Courts Administration and the county courts at law, must take for the conversion to be effective.

As part of that plan, hundreds of thousands of paper criminal records will be turned into electronic documents.

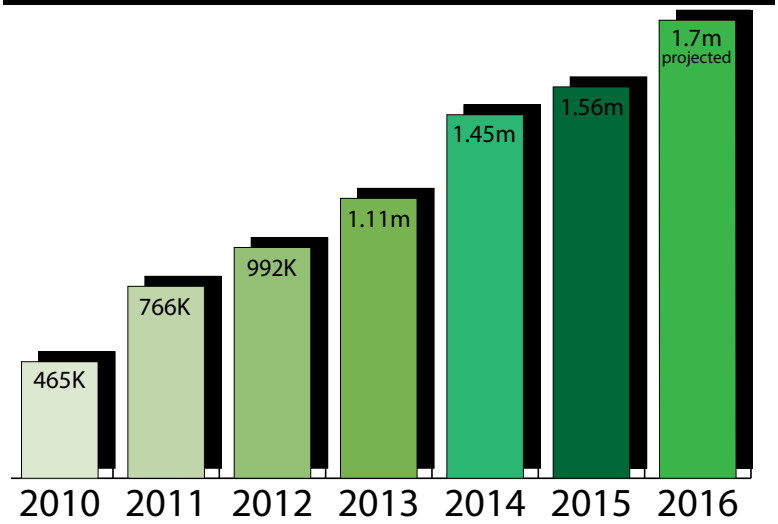
Criminal courts will become more high-tech as the DCO adds more computers and digital signature pads to criminal courtrooms and other areas of the Criminal Justice Center. More servers and electronic equipment will be installed to store criminal documents that have been turned into images and to handle the increase in traffic on the DCO's site as judges, clerks, lawyers and others access criminal e-records.

By giving the county only a year to prepare for the mandate, the Court of Criminal Appeals, in effect, is asking the DCO to set up a fully electronic court system on the fly. The DCO and other county departments are focused on carrying out this arduous assignment.

As with the implementation of any complex, high-tech system, Harris County will hone and improve its criminal electronic court system for an extended period after the mandate goes into effect.

In 2017, the DCO will be holding seminars to teach lawyers, paralegals, clerks and others how to file criminal documents electronically.

E-filed civil and family documents at DCO



Passport service expands to suburbs

In 2013, District Clerk Chris Daniel created a passport service at the District Clerk's Office after seeing customers waiting for hours in long lines for passports at post offices.

Since then, the DCO's passport operation has become known for its quick, efficient service and has attracted increasing numbers of customers annually.

Daniel this year brought the same outstanding service outside the Beltway when the District Clerk's Office opened passport offices in four suburbs: Clear Lake, Humble, Spring and the Katy area.

"Some of the longest lines at post offices are in the suburbs," Daniel said. "Residents in the outlying areas found it hard to travel downtown to take advantage of the DCO's passport service. So the DCO has brought that service to them."

In May, District Clerk Chris Daniel held a news conference to announce the opening of DCO passport offices in four suburbs.

The DCO's satellite passport offices operate out of county libraries. Here are the locations and hours:

Humble: The satellite office is open the first Tuesday and Thursday each month from 1 p.m.-6:30 p.m. It also is open the first Wednesday each month from 1 p.m.-5:30 p.m. Location: The Octavia Fields Branch Library, 1503 South Houston Ave., Humble 77338.

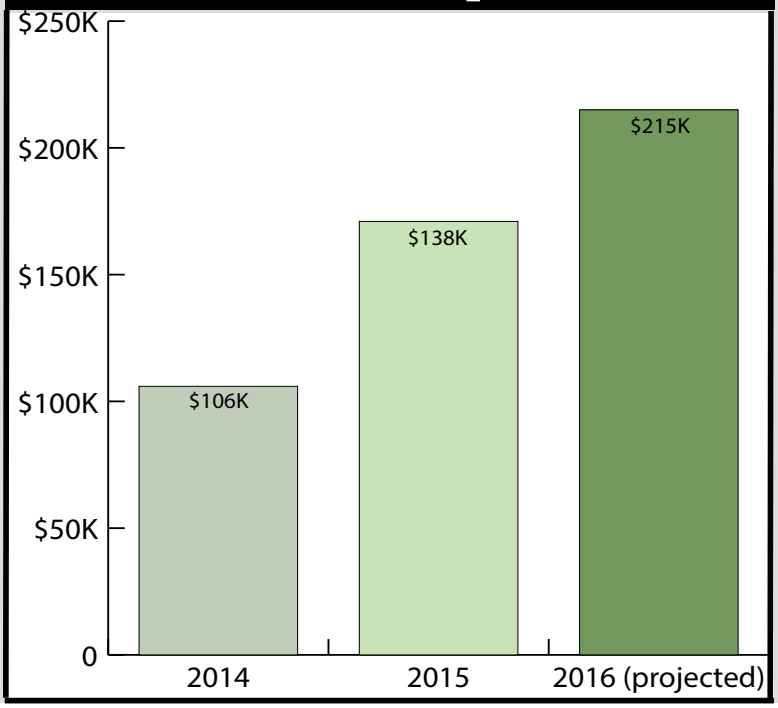
Clear Lake: The satellite office is open the second Tuesday each month from 12 p.m.-4:30 p.m. It also is open the second Wednesday and Thursday each month from 1 p.m.-6:30 p.m. Location: The Clear Lake City-County Freeman Branch Library, 16616 Diana Lane, Houston 77062.

Spring: The satellite office is open the third Tuesday and Thursday each month from 1 p.m.-6:30 p.m. It also is open the third Wednesday each month from 1 p.m.-4:30 p.m. Location: The Barbara Bush Branch Library, 6817 Cypresswood Drive, Spring 77379.

Katy area: The satellite office is open the fourth Tuesday each month from 12 p.m.-4:30 p.m., the fourth Wednesday each month from 1 p.m.-6:30 p.m. and the fourth Thursday each month from 1 p.m.-4:30 p.m. Location: The Katherine Tyra Branch Library, 16719 Clay Road, Houston 77084.

Daniel said he was grateful that the Harris County Library system and Harris County Public Library Director Edward Melton have been such helpful partners with the DCO in providing space to the DCO in the suburban libraries.

DCO Annual Passport Revenue



The suburban passport offices initially were open only one day a month.

"They proved so popular that we needed to increase the number of days they are open," Daniel said. "People like our passport service because it is quick and efficient."

In 2017, the DCO will consider opening a fifth satellite passport office. A site in the eastern part of Harris County is a possibility.

"Suburbanites no longer have to face long lines to get passports," Daniel said. "The District Clerk's Office believes in meeting people's needs."

The DCO receives a fee for processing passports and taking passport photos and has put more than $464,000 in the county coffers since it launched its service.

DCO warns public of jury scam

The letters started arriving earlier this year from local residents who had been scammed out of as much as $2,000-$3,000 for phony fines for missed jury service.

Later, judges in Harris County called the District Clerk's Office saying residents were complaining that con men were citing their names as the ones who had issued the fines.

The Precinct 1 Constable's Office then informed the DCO that one resident had paid a con man $7,000 for phony fines for missed jury service.

District Clerk Chris Daniel decided to take action. He tapped his communications team and a member of his legal counsel to run a public awareness campaign to warn the public about the proliferating jury scam.

In the second half of 2016, Daniel and the DCO alerted the public about the scam by producing two radio public service announcements, a PSA for television and 20 inch-by-25 inch posters displayed around the county.

District Clerk Daniel also relied on media interviews to get the word out to the public.

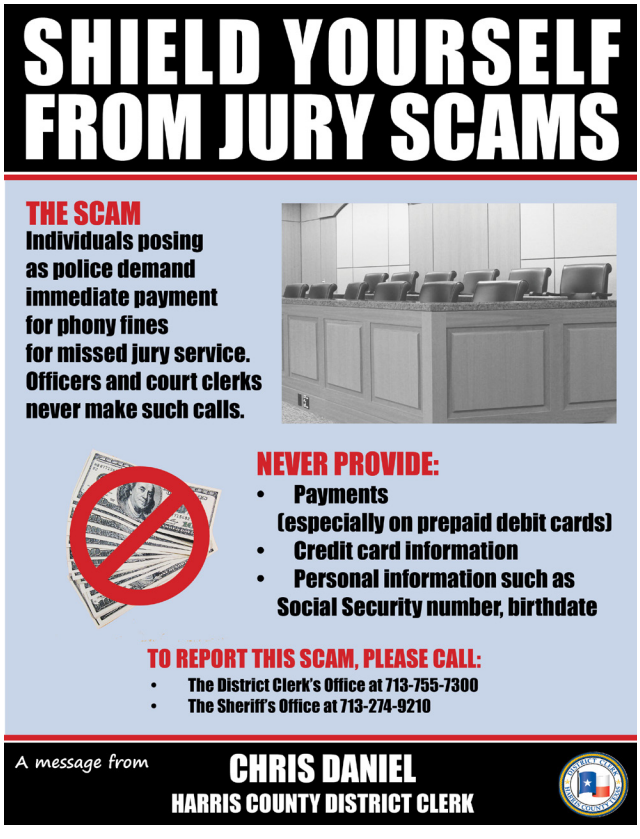
"These con men are sophisticated. They're smooth talkers who pose as police officers demanding immediate payment for phony fines," Daniel said. "But the public can avoid becoming victimized if they remember that police officers and court clerks never have and never will call demanding such payments. Please share this message with your friends and loved ones, especially the elderly."

Here's how the scam works: Con men posing as police officers demand immediate payment for phony fines for missed jury service. Callers are told that officers will be dispatched immediately if the fines are not paid. The con men typically demand that callers make payments with prepaid debit cards. Law enforcement representatives at the news conference said officers never make such calls.

District Clerk Chris Daniel warns the public about the jury scam at a news conference in September. Flanking him are Perrye K. Turner, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Houston office, left, and Precinct 1 Constable Alan Rosen.

Residents should never provide payments, credit card information or personal information such as birthdates and Social Security numbers.

Residents may report the scam to: the District Clerk's Office at 713-755-7300 or the Sheriff's Office at 713-274-9210.



The DCO had copies of this poster displayed in county buildings, especially where senior citizens gather.

District Clerk Daniel said the DCO has taken the lead in warning the public about the scam because he oversees jury service and is angered that criminals are using jury service to dupe victims. Daniel organized and hosted a well-attended news conference at which he and others warned the public.

Six television stations and two radio stations covered the news conference. The Houston Chronicle ran a story about the scam on the front page.

At the news conference, Perrye K. Turner, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Houston office, joined other law enforcement officers in saying that the best way to combat this scam is by educating the public on how not to fall victim to it.

"Variations of this scam are sweeping across the nation," Special Agent Turner said. "The criminals are threatening and sound official, and they often use the real names of local or federal law enforcement officials to make the scheme believable. Don't be fooled – each and every case is a fraud designed to trick you out of your hard-earned cash. No law enforcement official will ever call you by phone and demand money."

Sheriff Ron Hickman praised Daniel for taking the lead in educating the public about the scam.

DCO runs efficient jury operation

The DCO's Jury Service is a massive operation that typically brings in more than 120,000 prospective jurors annually for service in one of 74 courts, including state district courts, criminal and civil county at law courts, family courts, juvenile courts and probate courts.

The DCO's jury staff supplies courts with jury panels of the size requested by judges while also providing prospective jurors with comfortable, wi-fi-equipped rooms in the Jury Plaza to wait before learning if they will be sent to a court.

District Clerk Chris Daniel said, "The Sixth Amendment guarantees people the right to be tried by a fair, impartial jury. The DCO takes very seriously the role that it plays in providing courts with the jurors needed to fulfill this constitutional duty. I personally want to thank the tens of thousands of people who come to jury service and play such a key role in our justice system."

Through Oct. 31, 2016, notices to appear for jury service had been delivered to 359,133 county residents. The response rate for these notices was 59 percent. This figure includes residents who appear for jury service, residents who are excused for state-authorized reasons such as enrollment in college or the need to care for young children, and residents who are exempt from jury service, such as non-citizens and most convicted felons. Residents who are age 70 or above may choose not to serve, according to state law.

Daniel said, "My office would love it if people over 70 served. But we don't begrudge them if they choose not to. They've earned the right to make that choice. And we don't question a parent who can't serve because she - or he - is the caretaker of children. Parents need to do what's best for their kids."

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>
> ***District Clerk Chris Daniel***

Under District Clerk Daniel, the DCO has taken steps to increase turnout for jury service. During his six years in office, the District Clerk's Office has run several public awareness campaigns urging all residents, including minorities, to perform jury service.

In 2016, the DCO launched a variation of its ongoing Honor the Call to Jury Service campaign by airing a public service announcement called "Pull Your Own Weight" on radio stations.

The PSA stressed the message that in our state, we Texans pull our own weight, and we shouldn't look to people across town to come to jury service – we should so ourselves.

Late in the year, the DCO shot a Pull Your Own Weight PSA that will begin airing on television stations in 2017.

At scores of speaking engagements throughout the county each year, District Clerk Daniel urges residents to perform jury service.

"Jury panels that reflect the demographics of the county instill faith in the justice system," Daniel said.

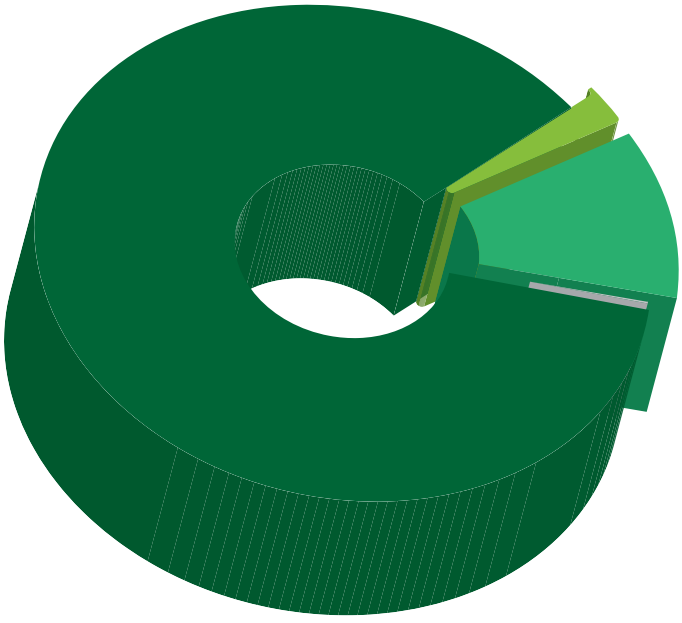
In May, the DCO held Jury Appreciation Week as a way of thanking people for the pivotal role they play in the legal system. Clutch the Bear, the Houston Rockets' mascot, was among those who appeared and entertained prospective jurors that week. State District Judge Mark Davidson also appeared, speaking about cases in the DCO's Historic Documents Room that provide insights into Houston's history. A case brought by Emeline, a freed slave who was re-enslaved in the 1840s, became the basis of chamber opera performed by the Houston Grand Opera in May.

During Jury Appreciation Week - the first week of May - Clutch the Bear, the Rockets mascot, entertained prospective jurors by taking selfies with them. He plopped down in a seat when he wanted to take a break.

DCO financial summary

	FY 2013-2014		FY 2014-2015		FY 2015-2016	
	ADJUSTED BUDGET	EXPENDI-TURES	ADJUSTED BUDGET	EXPENDI-TURES	ADJUSTED BUDGET	EXPENDI-TURES
SALARIES & BENEFITS	24,734,058	23,478,034	26,396,597	24,484,998	27,888,775	26,382,418
MATERIALS & SUPPLIES	684,646	533,482	892,766	716,688	1,325,193	783,149
BUILDING & EQUIPMENT	72.108	-	36,834	-	-	20,870
SERVICES & OTHER	3,657,568	2,825,593	4,361,510	3,229,831	3,533,104	3,278,641
UTILITIES	85,000	73,104	85,000	57,176	65,000	51,029
TRANSPORTATION & TRAVEL	25,000	18,477	26,010	17,912	28,000	19,899
FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS	20,000	36,504	40,000	16,820	1,621,751	17,417
TOTAL	29,278,380	26,965,194	31,838,718	28,523,405	34,461,823	30,553,693

Expenditures for Fiscal Year 2015-2016



Daniel, DCO to achieve goal of modern Closed Records unit

Records from tens of thousands of closed court cases are stored in the county's deteriorating old jail, where conditions are so cramped that rows of files can be found around a stainless steel toilet formerly used by inmates.

Elsewhere in the old jail, DCO clerks have the spooky experience of relying on their cell phone flashlights when they go to retrieve court cases in one room in which the lights no longer work.

Clerks also worry that court records may be damaged by flooding and leaks. In 2014, dirty water backed up from a drain on the fifth floor and damaged that floor and floors below.

In 2017, the District Clerk's Office is slated to put the problems caused by the aging old jail behind it. The DCO's Closed Records unit is expected to move from the old jail into a warehouse undergoing extensive renovations on Canal Street.

Part of this warehouse on Canal Street will become the new home of DCO Closed Records.

The warehouse, which the DCO will share with other county agencies, will provide better working conditions for Closed Records employees and better storage conditions for court files, including older files that need to be kept in climate-controlled rooms.

District Clerk Chris Daniel said, "I'm pleased that my employees no longer will have to work in a building that has not been well-maintained. The new building will be more suitable for storing paper court records. The DCO and I have pressed the county to find a new location for Closed Records for years. I'm glad that the move is imminent."

When Closed Records moved onto four floors of the old jail, renovations occurred, but only of a minimal sort. Space was not converted so that it looked like an office or a library where records would be stored. Instead, many trappings of incarceration remained after the renovation. Jail cell bars adorn many of the rooms used by Closed Records. In one windowless room, a flickering light barely illuminates the space, where files are kept in library-like stacks.

"That light really freaks me out," said Closed Records Supervisor Alenka Staggs. "It looks like a haunted house. It's just one of the things that we've had to contend with."

She is among the Closed Records employees looking forward to the move. "I'm so excited," she said.

Closed Records is expected to move to the Canal Street warehouse sometime during the first six months of 2017. The county is still searching for funding to carry out the move – which cannot occur without such funding.

In the old jail, files are stacked around a former inmate commode.

Clerks rely on flashlights to retrieve files in a room at the old jail.

Top employees honored

Management Member of Year

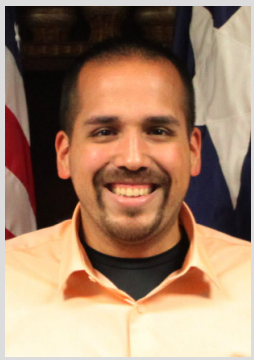
Civil Courts Supervisor Jessica Moir won the DCO's Management Member of the Year Award in 2015.

Employee of the Year

Accounting and Court Registry Team Lead Mary Moral won the Employee of the Year Award in 2015.

2016 Employees of the Month

Angela Dozier
Civil Bureau Trainer of Team Lead Clerks



Jerry Miranda
Ancillary Clerk

Bianca Pallares
Senior Criminal Imaging Clerk

Roy Broussard
IV-D Clerk

Elizabeth Gomez
Imaging Clerk

Anthony Leatherman
Human Resources Coordinator

Brandy Elhommoud
Human Resources Coordinator

Adan Figueroa
Senior Criminal Data Control Auditor

Rhonda Spinks
Sr. Exhibit/Appellate Records Clerk

Arsheilia Oliver
Assistant Criminal Court Clerk

LOOKING FORWARD

How-to videos to make DCO site easier to navigate

Hundreds of thousands of users visit the District Clerk's home page annually seeking information about court cases, jury service, passports and other matters. In 2017, the District Clerk's Office will make searching the DCO records for information easier by providing links to short videos that explain how to carry out specific types of information searches.

More than a dozen instructional videos will demonstrate such matters as how to search a court docket, how to be notified when the DCO receives new filings on a specific court case, how to conduct a complex court case history search, how to find electronic legal forms and how to perform a criminal background search of a specific individual (a search that includes only Harris County cases).

District Clerk Chris Daniel said, "The DCO's public site is filled with useful information. Sometimes lawyers, members of the media and other county residents don't know how to tap into that information. These videos will provide step-by-step instructions that will make it easy for people to find what they are looking for."

"The video will show these pro se litigants exactly where they can find legal forms on our site. The DCO wants its site to be user-friendly."
- District Clerk Chris Daniel

People representing themselves in court often do not where to find legal forms that must be filed for a case to move forward.

"The video will show these pro se litigants exactly where they can find these forms on our site," Daniel said. "The DCO wants its site to be user-friendly."

Jury service cancellations may be sent via emails, texts

In the coming years, the DCO intends to set up a system that will notify residents summoned to jury service if their service has been canceled.

If a hurricane or another major storm hit the Houston area and jury service was canceled, prospective jurors could notified by phone, text or email.

The system would require that the DCO have prospective jurors' email addresses or phone numbers where texts could be sent or calls received.

Daniel said, "The last thing people need to be doing is making the trip downtown for jury service if it has been canceled. So this notification system would be a step in the right direction."

DCO site will be enhanced for easier mobile phone use

As another long-term plan, the DCO's site will be enhanced and made more user-friendly for mobile phone users and users of other small screen devices. Programmers will develop the changes needed to make the site, which is designed to be used on larger screens, easy to view on smaller screens. District Clerk Chris Daniel said, "We want the site to be easy to view on the go."

DCO INTERNSHIP PROGRAM TRAINS FUTURE LAWYERS

DCO legal interns in 2016: Connie Brice, left, Shannise Sintim, Kaitlyn Belew, Jennifer George and Jessica Revils. District Clerk Chris Daniel launched the summer internship program in 2011 as a way of providing law students with practical knowledge of how lawsuits are filed and courtrooms are run. The program is meant to give students a real feel for the difference between criminal and civil work, for instance. Daniel said law students often "are missing basic skills like what to file, where to file, why do you file, what do you do after you file a lawsuit. And that seemed to be key, to be critical. Law school grads often don't know the ways that lawyers interact with the District Clerk's Office."

HARRIS COUNTY DISTRICT CLERK'S OFFICE

DISTRICT CLERK CHRIS DANIEL