



Harris County District Clerk

LOREN JACKSON

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The Impact Players of the Year 2009

TEXAS LAWYER

Brenda Sapino Jeffreys

Efficient E-filing

Harris County District Clerk Loren Jackson is a technology geek, but that's a good thing for the public and for civil, criminal and family lawyers litigating in Harris County. Under his leadership, the Harris County District Clerk's office has added a laundry list of new online features to its Web site this year that bring the clerk's office to homes and workplaces.

Jackson, a civil litigator who was elected to an unexpired term as district clerk in 2008 and is up for re-election in 2010, says no other county in the country provides as much online access to court records and other services as Harris County. In Texas, some district clerks' offices don't even list civil case names online.

At Jackson's urging, the Harris County District Clerk's Office has expanded its online access menu, so lawyers can look at most civil, criminal and family case files; view new civil suits on the day they are filed; receive notification of new filings and hearings in cases they care about; and generally do a lot of work from their home or office computers. Much of the access to civil and criminal cases also is available to the public at no cost.

"What we're trying to do, and what our goal is, is to provide the same service and care" online as at the clerk's office, he says.

Barrett Reasoner, president of the Harris County Bar Association, says he has had discussions with

a number of lawyers about the convenience of the new online services the clerk's office provides.

"Being able to get notices of orders coming out or hearings coming up right on your BlackBerry or at your desk at your computer immediately" makes things a lot more efficient, he says.

"Lawyers are enjoying those innovations," says Reasoner, a partner in Gibbs & Bruns in Houston who does civil trial work.

Joanne Musick, a partner in Musick & Musick in

“People who utilize any type of online [access] are loving it.”
Joanne Musick

Houston who is president of the Harris County Criminal Lawyers Association, says many criminal-defense lawyers use the new online services. Jackson's online initiative began in January, when the clerk's office began testing an automated docketing feature that sends an e-mail to lawyers each Friday with a listing of all of their civil court hearings for the next week.

In January, the clerk's office also opened customer service windows in the basement of the Family Law Center so litigants and lawyers would not have to walk a couple of blocks to the civil courthouse to get certified copies of documents after a hearing in the Family Law Center. Lawyers and the public already were able to look at most civil case filings online.

In July, the clerk's office began to provide free Wi-Fi service in the jury assembly room for the benefit of prospective jurors.

“August is when we went live with every criminal document that’s not confidential by law or sealed.”

Loren Jackson

In August, the clerk’s office revamped its Web site and added new features, including online access to most criminal documents.

Also in August, lawyers and the public could obtain background-check documents for Harris County misdemeanors and felonies for a flat fee online of \$1, compared to \$6 a page if purchased at the courthouse.

Right before the official launch of the new Web site in August, the clerk’s office also began to provide same-day access to new civil suits and to allow the public to print an unverified copy of the suit for free that day.

That access came after Courthouse News Service filed *Courthouse News Service v. Loren Jackson, et al.*, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, alleging Jackson and chief deputy clerk Wes McCoy were violating its constitutional rights by making it difficult for its Houston-based reporter to get immediate access to civil court filings.

However, after a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction on July 20 in the suit, which gave a CNS reporter same-day access to new civil suits, the clerk’s office began posting all civil suits online the same day they were filed. [See “Same Day Online Access,” *Texas Lawyer*, Aug. 17, 2009, page 3.]

Jackson says that was the plan all along, and the federal complaint filed by CNS simply moved up the launch of the same-day civil case function on the Web site.

Jackson has plans to add more online features next year, but it’s not entirely his call in one area. He would like lawyers to file all their documents electronically. He says it’s more efficient and less costly because clerks would not need to scan and process paper documents to put them online. On Sept. 18, the clerk’s office set a record by processing 679 e-filed cases in one day.

In February, Jackson says, he asked the Harris County civil judges for a local rule that would require e-filing, but the judges haven’t approved a rule to require it.

Al Bennett, the 61st district judge who takes office as administrative judge for the civil courts in Harris County on Jan. 1, 2010, says e-filing is under discussion. He says the civil judges want to make sure that an e-filing requirement doesn’t prevent pro se litigants from filing suits, and they are exploring how e-filing could be expanded to criminal and family court filings in Harris County. He notes that Harris County has 59 district courts, but only 24 are civil benches.

This year, Jackson says, the clerk’s office will spend at least \$710,000 scanning and digitizing civil suit documents filed in paper form. He notes that criminal court documents are not e-filed.

Jackson says he wants to make the clerk’s office more useful to the public. Because he practiced for five years as an associate with McLeod, Alexander, Powel & Apffel in Houston before he was elected district clerk, he says he understands how the clerk’s office can serve lawyers and the public.

“My goal: to prove the district clerk’s office has more of an impact on daily lives than any other county department,” he says. “I save you time. I can save you money.”