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Submitted on:

Primary Contact

Name: Mr. Roger Winters
Title: Program and Project Manager
Division: Department of Judicial Administration
Sub Division: Administration
Address #1: 516 Third Avenue, Suite E-609
MS:KCC-JA-0609
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone #1: 2062967838
EMail #1: roger.winters@metrokc.gov
Address #2: 516 Third Avenue, Suite E-609
MS:KCC-JA-0609
Seattle, WA 98104

Program Information

Program Name: Electronic Court Records
Program Start Date : 01/03/2000
Jurisdiction Type: County
Jurisdiction Name: King County, WA
Jurisdiction Unit: Superior Court
Jurisdiction Population: 1758300
Website: www.metrokc.gov/kcsc
Applied Previously: No
Eval Team: Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Essays:

1. Please provide a two sentence summary of the innovation. This description should accurately and succinctly convey the innovation and its importance. (maximum 45 words.)

Locally funded and controlled, Electronic Court Records (ECR) constitutes a fundamental change for users of court case files: the official record is the electronic, not the paper document. Results include faster processing, desktop access to case files, better security, electronic filing, and online file access.

2. Describe the program. What problem(s) does your program address? What is the innovation? Please emphasize the results your program has achieved. (maximum 500 words.)

In the 1990s, court filings steadily grew from 4,000 to over 8,000 documents daily. The time needed to get a document into its case file was unacceptable. Court, staff, and public users competed for the one-and-only official case file, which contained all of the filed paper originals.

The Electronic Court Records (ECR) program made the official record electronic for all case types initiated from 2000 on, both open and sealed. Cases closed since 1996 are scanned, not microfilmed. Paper documents, with some exceptions, are not retained. Today, ECR holds nearly 70 million pages. Well over 20,000 pages are scanned daily and over 50,000 documents (over 200,000 pages) are accessed daily by judges, court staff, the Clerk, prosecutors and defenders, the Sheriff's Department, adult and juvenile corrections, and the public using PCs in the Clerk's Office.

The Clerk and Superior Court leaders persuaded the eight county departments in law, safety, and justice to use a major share of available local technology funds to build ECR. Although implemented by a contractor, all records remain fully in the Clerk's control. For interoperability with other systems, the Clerk helped write and follows state and national technical and business standards.

ECR handles the document load of a large urban court. ECR could be modified for use in other courts of similar size and complexity. Other courts have similar innovations, but most are “pilots” covering a subset of case types or use proprietary systems from specialized vendors.

ECR has changed many business processes fundamentally:

- faster processing thanks to electronic workflow,
- desktop browser-based access for case file users,
- simultaneous access to any record by multiple users,
- enhanced security (backups and fail-over system),
- near total elimination of loss, misfiling, and tampering,
- improved confidentiality, user privilege management,
- reclaimed physical space,
- savings: costs avoided and position cuts,
- electronic filing, electronic case initiation,
- (future) electronic service for parties, and
- online access to case files.

Planning ECR took time. Basic assumptions had to be rethought. Broad support was prerequisite to moving forward. The Clerk’s 1998 Master Plan defined distinct stages for ECR, each expected to bring benefits even if later stages were delayed or remained undone. The Clerk shared the ECR vision at every opportunity, inviting stakeholders to share their concerns and needs.

Technology was obtained for the Court and other law, safety, and justice departments to ensure they could use ECR. The Clerks’ Association won a change in a key statute to allow electronic formats for court documents. ECR was designed to interact with systems centrally managed by the state’s Administrative Office of the Courts.

Initial wariness and resistance was addressed by in-house training in using the ECR viewer. Solutions were negotiated for a variety of situations. For example, the Clerk supplies printouts for high-volume calendars in Ex Parte and Family Law.

Today, ECR is popular, considered an essential system. Many savings and efficiencies have been realized for many departments. What is best for many is that they no longer have to wait for paper files at the Clerk’s Office. Newer users sometimes do not even know where the Clerk’s Office is!

3. Cite the best verifiable evidence of the most significant achievements of the program. (maximum 250 words.)

Our best evidence of ECR’s significance is that it has fully replaced paper documents as the official court record. ECR is not an electronic document system kept alongside paper files; it has replaced the paper files. The Superior Court’s judges in 2002 approved routine recycling of papers after scanning. Since scanning began in 1997, no documents have been lost once entered correctly in ECR. Successful migration of 10 million pages of archived cases to the new ECR system just before 2000 powerfully demonstrated its viability.

Local government funds demand local savings. Since ECR began, the Clerk’s Office reduced staffing by 18.5 positions. E-filing, yet to be marketed, should save an additional 7.5 positions, since scanning is unnecessary for e-filed documents. Other savings include about \$250,000 a year no longer needed for microfilming closed case files and purchasing special file folder jackets.

Uncounted savings went to departments who reassigned staff who no longer spent their time fetching files from the Clerk’s Office. Opening case files on the desktop brought efficiency gains to all of the 51 judges and hundreds of county staff.

The newest ECR service, “ECR Online,” lets users download documents for 10¢ a page. This service will help avoid needless trips simply to look up a document.

The Clerk has welcomed leaders and planners from other courts who came to hear our “lessons learned” first hand. Others see articles about ECR in publications like “edoc” magazine (the Association for Imaging and Information Management, AIIM), the Justice System Journal, The Court Manager, the National Center for State Courts’ “Trends,” and the internationally circulated “eFiling Report.” ECR presentations have been well received at court technology conferences, legal staff association meetings, and elsewhere.
