

A Twenty-First-Century Courthouse

By Lynn Patrick Ingram

Necessity is the mother of invention.

Just ask Franklin attorney Robert Curtis, who was hired as court administrator of the 37th District Court in Warren in November 2008, right at the peak of the state's biggest recession in decades.

With foreclosures at an all-time high and property-tax revenue plummeting, the court's operating budget was moving in the wrong direction. As a result, Curtis's first order of business was cutting the budget by more than \$1 million in his first three years. And he had to do it without sacrificing efficiency. In fact, he was responsible for improving it.

So how do you cut \$1 million from the budget and get better?

According to Curtis, the answer is simple: technology.

"Over my tenure as court administrator, we were able to implement a variety of improvements to make the court one of the most technologically advanced courts in the state," he said. "By doing so, we were able to do more with less."

Among the technology highlights, Curtis and his team introduced several new systems and services, including:

- e-Tickets—an interface that allows traffic ticket data to be electronically transferred into the court's case management system, eliminating the need to manually enter tickets and print and file them.
- Treasury Collection—an interface that connects the court with the Department of Treasury's collection service, allowing the court to garnish tax returns and collect overdue fines and fees and increase revenue with little burden on staff

(\$4 million collected since the interface was activated).

- Online Probation Reporting—a tool that allows the court's probation officers to review reports and communicate with probationers online, reducing the need for in-person meetings and lessening the burden on the officers.
- Electronic Document Management & Workflow System—a paperless system that makes files available to users at exactly the right time and place as a case proceeds through its cycle, simultaneously addressing the problem of lost files and increasing efficiency.
- CourtWorks—a system developed and now run by Curtis and his partner since September that provides online access to the entire probation oversight community. It allows third-party agencies such as drug-testing services, counselors, electronic monitoring companies, and others to receive and submit information and reports electronically. CourtWorks is also building an SMS notification module that will remind probationers of upcoming obligations, and there are plans to provide access to court-appointed attorneys.

The result of all of this innovation was that Curtis's court—one of the five largest district courts in the state with almost 75,000 cases in 2016—is a model for other courts in Michigan and the United States looking to do more with less.

But getting there was not easy, Curtis said, noting there were several growing pains along the way.

"The largest growing pain when introducing new technology in my experience has always been convincing the users that the pain of change is worth it," he said. "No one likes change. We like our routines.

"[I]n any new technological rollout there will be glitches and hiccups," Curtis added. "Keeping new users positive about the change when the glitches happen is very

difficult if the user is skeptical to begin. Any glitch becomes evidence that change is bad."

Curtis stressed the importance of "having a strong positive vision and reminding the user of the vision [while] at the same time, acknowledging that change sucks and that the glitches are frustrating. Communicating that you are also feeling the pain helps, too."

In the end, though, the positives outweighed the negatives, and the changes were necessary for the court to not only compete, but also thrive in a twenty-first-century legal world.

"Our legal community is in transition," Curtis said. "There is a new guard that uses the smartphone to manage their profession and there is an old guard that still uses Dictaphones. Those who are unwilling to adapt to the proliferation of technology, in my opinion, will find it more and more difficult to practice law."

As for courts willing to adapt, Curtis advises them not to accept "pain points" when easy, affordable technology is available.

He said there are many great technological innovations already available, with more in the works.

"There are plenty of vendors creating some really neat stuff to make the court's work easier and to give the public greater access to information," Curtis said. "Some technology is being forced upon us. The Michigan Supreme Court has made upgrading our statewide court system's technological sophistication a top priority. And e-filing is coming. Courts should learn as much as possible about it now in order to plan for implementation and to create and share the vision with users.

"[O]ur culture just expects it. Courts can do a lot to shed the image of being crusty old institutions with dusty unused law books on shelves no one reads." ■

"Future of Law" is a regular column of the *Michigan Bar Journal*. Articles relating to lawyers using technology in their practices are written by Lynn Patrick Ingram. To submit a story idea, please contact Lynn at lingram@michbar.org.

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