

The Silver Lining: How COVID-19 Has Shed Light on the Benefits of Technology in the Justice Arena

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I

The movement away from paper toward digital records started in Jefferson Parish in 1991, when we began the formidable task of imaging all our filed and recorded documents. To date, we have imaged upwards of 150 million pages. Our electronic database extends from 1825 (the inception of the Parish) to the present. If one stacked 150 million pages, the stack would measure 50,000 feet – 9.5 miles. That’s 20,000 feet higher than the cruising altitude of a passenger jetliner and almost twice as high as Mount Everest.

But, imaging was merely the first step in transforming the justice system from a slow, sometimes inefficient operation to a streamlined process that effectively serves the bench, the bar, the general public, and all the justice agencies.

Imaging laid the foundation for further technological innovation. It enabled remote access to public records, and, later, electronic filing and recording. Due largely to the pioneering efforts of Judge Scott Schlegel, the 24th JDC has embraced our digital paradigm. The Parish Courts and the Juvenile Court are not far behind. And, under the leadership and guidance of Judge Susan Chehardy, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal has partnered with us to computerize the appeal-lodging process.

We now see electronic presentation of evidence at hearings and trials. Judges can sign orders electronically, from wherever they might be.

The innovative procedures mentioned above go hand in hand with video conferencing, an effective and increasingly essential tool for lawyers and their clients, and for judges.

We now see the rapid, accurate transfer and sharing of critical data among all the justice offices. Digital automation has immeasurably enhanced productivity across the board – to the enduring benefit of everyone in the community.

II

COVID-19, painful as it is, has underscored the myriad benefits of modern court technology. During the Coronavirus crisis, we have witnessed the enormous contributions of automation to the justice system.

Technology, including video conferencing for crucial hearings and other pre-trial proceedings, has enabled us to safely and seamlessly continue our work, even as the virus dominates every other aspect of our lives.

[Introduce David Benton, my IT director and the architect of the clerk of court's digitized system.]