

Annual Report of the Florida Courts E-Filing Authority to the Membership

I have given this annual report for the past several years and this is the first time I believe I can say that I am seeing the top of the mountain.

We are no longer struggling against time to make a deadline or get another court division added to the portal.

We are still adding filers.

We are still adding services and making the portal better.

And, it is working.

To describe this past year, I think it is accurate to say that this has been a year of stability and improvement.

I believe that this is what was envisioned by then-Chief Justice Ricky Polston when he entered the first order, mandating all attorneys electronically file their documents in Florida.

Because of the stability we have achieved, we have been able to accommodate change and review issues with the time and thoughtfulness we have needed in order to make good, sound, and lasting decisions.

Let me put it in perspective. At this point last year, the portal accepted all case types in all court divisions, in 67 counties. There were about 62,000 registered users. Today we have over 85,000. This number is still growing.

Over the past year we have seen a month-to-month average of 1.1 Million filings a month, an average of 54,000 per weekday, representing well over 1.7 to 1.8 Million documents monthly. One day during this program year, there were over 8,000 filings during one hour.

Think about the magnitude of that— how much different that would be if those documents were still being filed in paper.

Last year, we added an automatically generated civil cover sheet and the ability to serve parties electronically through the portal. In a little more than a year, we can document that almost 15 Million filings have used e-service - amounting to many more millions of emails, saving un-tolled hundreds of thousands of dollars to law offices.

Along with e-service has come a greater need to answer requests by users who want to know “who was served.” We developed and adopted a public records request policy this year so we could handle these requests in a standard manner.

We started with only attorneys using the portal—they were required to do so by Supreme Court order.

Today we have added the functionality to allow judges, self-represented litigants, mediators, mental health providers, court reporters, process servers, and law enforcement agencies to use the system to electronically file their court documents.

Late last June, a secure log-in was developed for judges so that they may file orders using the portal.

We have added a secure communication between the Florida Department of Corrections and Clerk’s Office using the portal to insure that sentence modifications can be sent quickly and securely from your offices to the state agency.

We have a high quality Service Center, handling both technical calls for Clerk’s Office support and customer service calls from filers. At around 3,000 customer service calls a month, resolution time for most calls is a few hours.

Clerks' Offices have gotten used to the new workflow. They have worked with us on upgraded systems and performance improvements—all both on their end and on ours. Over the year, we have seen that the amount of time it takes to docket a filing is holding steady at 1 day.

While there are other states that have some e-filing, none is as large, or all-encompassing as our system—remember, we cover all court areas, in all counties, including the five appellate courts and the Florida Supreme Court.

The Florida Supreme Court is serving all orders via the Portal and the portal links filers directly to the online Supreme Court's dockets

Portal staff is continuing to work with the five District Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court to develop more aspects of e-filing.

While we have experienced stabilization this year, we have also learned to manage change – we implemented a Portal Change Advisory Board. This board is made up of Clerks' professional IT staff. They take the many suggestions made by the users, discuss them, rank them for inclusion in the semi-annual software upgrades, and bring them to the Board of Directors for final review and discussion.

We developed a standard process for communicating those software changes with the Florida Courts Technology Commission. They are charged by the Florida Supreme Court with overseeing all court technology, so we allow them to have, well-ahead of time, the items for the software upgrades so they may have a chance to review. This has worked well this year.

In recognition of the self-represented litigant users, we are working on a software product called A2J to develop the step-by-step questions that will generate some of the more commonly used documents in case types, such as landlord tenant cases or eviction cases.

The Rules Committee has built a very good working relationship with The Florida Bar. Clerk's attorneys serve as liaisons to each of The Florida Bar Rules Committees. They attend the rules committee meetings during the year and are able to make sure that the rules being revised take into account e-filing. Having a formal relationship with The Florida Bar means a lot to us and we are proud that the liaisons have chosen to take on this role.

Lanigan & Associates, the Authority auditors, do an annual audit of the Authority financial statements and an SSAE 16 operational audit on our operations and technical systems.

Once again, the Authority received an unqualified, or "clean," audit.

That sounds like we have done a lot this year, doesn't it? But we have more to do.

Two years ago at the Clerks' Annual Conference, Justice Ricky Polston talked to the Clerks about standardization.

We were still in the beginning stages of getting all those court divisions and a single payment method actively working. We were not sure what that word meant, "standardization."

The development of one of the country's first complete e-filing systems has come a long way since we heard those words but it is becoming more clear as to what that word, "standardization," means.

But we took Justice Polston's challenge seriously and we worked on that aspect. We created standardization on the criminal side as it was implemented, to an extent because of how those who file criminal cases are connected.

But to go back to work on standardization on Civil cases..... after all our hard work to get the portal up and running in those early times so we could even accept civil filings....well, it was almost mind-boggling.

The Best Practices Committee worked on it. They brought us lists.... Our filers talked about PACER, the federal system.We looked at options.We discussed how everyone could make their filing screen options look the same—or could they?..... Would they?

After working through a multi-month process in the 4th Circuit and hearing about the success in getting consensus, the board came up with a plan to get to a higher level of standardization.

The Board of Directors met in early May and, after discussing this issue from all the angles, it all came together.

All Clerks recently received a letter from the Authority asking you to look at the drop-down menus for the first three areas that a filer sees when filing a document in the portal: division, case type and case subtype, and make them, across the state, the same.

I have asked that this be done by September 1 of this year. We have offered assistance and I am told that many of you already have quite a bit of this in place. If we can get those three areas standardized by September 1 of this year, I can really say we have reached a milestone.

And while that is a major milestone, the next step will be to examine the document descriptions – that is what the documents are called in our systems. We are aware that this area is the most difficult to deal with as each county has some unique-ness to their operations.

This next task may take us some time to find the best path to take. But we will take the time to get it as right as we can.

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I have to thank every one of you in this room for your contributions to this major effort.

It started some years back with a fledgling system that accepted e-recordings, an idea and an administrative order.

And look where we are today. We have one of the premier systems in the country

Because of each and every one of you.

Without all of you as a collective body, we would not be where we are today.

Without each of your offices helping at every step of the way, we could not continue to improve.

We have put in place the ability to listen to the users of the system—the Clerks, the Courts and the filers. We commit to take those ideas and make great plans for the coming years.

As I conclude this annual report to you, the members of the Florida Courts E-Filing Authority, I can truthfully say that we have a great story of success and I am proud to be giving this report.

I look forward to the next years and what the portal can become.

Thank you.