

BENCHMARKS

OCTOBER 2006

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FACTS ON THE
FOURTEENTH
CIRCUIT

Chief Judge William L. Wright, the Circuit and County Judges and staff of the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit welcome the newly elected members of the judiciary. Circuit Judge-elect Elijah Smiley and Bay County Judge-elect Shane Vann.



The 2006 Legislature has been good to the 14th Judicial Circuit and our rural counties. On January 2, 2007, Circuit Judge-elect Elijah Smiley will take the bench as our newest circuit judge. He will resign as a Bay County Judge and will be replaced by Bay County Judge-elect Shane Vann.

To support all our judges because of the growing cases in dependency and post-conviction hearings, the Legislature also allocated two new Trial Court Law Clerks. Currently, our circuit is conducting interviews for these positions, and we will have a third Law Clerk position available to hire in January.

Additionally, we will be filling in the void that our circuit has had in the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) program (i.e., mediation and arbitration). The 2006 Legislature allocated an ADR Director and program assistant as support staff to aid

Inspiration

Contributed by Jennifer Dyer Wells

Trial Court Administrator

in the development of a fully functioning mediation and arbitration program at the county and circuit levels throughout our circuit.

The Legislature also recognized the need to help rural counties as it pertains to their courthouses. By definition, rural counties are those counties with populations of 75,000 or less. Our circuit boasts five of its six counties as rural. These rural counties struggle to maintain their courthouses, many of which are historical buildings.

Enhancements to these public buildings to ensure security, compliance with the American with Disabilities Act, or improve health and safety concerns is a very difficult and costly venture for our counties. Therefore, the 2006 Legislature provided state grants to help with these efforts (See Spotlight on the Circuit Article on Page 2). We are thankful to the Legislature for recognizing the support that our rural counties need to ensure that our courthouses are safe, and allow access to all.

As our area continues to grow in population, we are

continually faced with new challenges. The increased need for language interpreters (see Key Elements of the Court Article on Page 3), the need to improve technology and communication, and our need to expand mediation services to help in the resolution of cases keeps all of us looking for new and improved processes to get our job done in a professional and helpful manner.

I continue to be inspired by the bright minds, interesting ideas, and positive attitudes that the employees of the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit maintain during these challenging and exciting times. It is my honor and pleasure to work with such a great group of individuals. Thank you.



SPOTLIGHT ON THE CIRCUIT

Grant-In-Aid for Courthouse Facilities

Contributed
by Robyn Hatcher,
Court Operations
Consultant

Over the last several years, the Legislature has appropriated monies to small counties to assist with needed repairs and renovations to courthouse facilities. These funds have been instrumental in helping the counties receiving aid to improve security at their courthouses, to renovate facilities to meet ADA requirements, and to make general repairs to buildings that are decades old and never meant to handle the demands of the court system today, such as technology and much needed space.

During the past Legislative session, five of our small, rural counties in the Fourteenth Circuit were fortunate enough to receive grant-in-aid funds for their courthouse facilities. The allocations were as follows:

Calhoun County - \$200,000;

Gulf County - \$300,000;

Holmes County - \$250,000;

Jackson County - \$400,000; and

Washington County - 250,000.

Specific use of these funds is presented in a spending plan developed for each county.

The focus of where to spend the money differs for each county depending on its needs. For example, Calhoun County plans to use their funds for security and ADA upgrades; Gulf County intends to replace the air handling system in the

courthouse to improve public health; Holmes County is renovating space to provide a bailiff's office and lay the ground work for future security enhancements; Jackson plans to continue its renovation project that includes security and ADA; and Washington County has funds designated for security enhancements.

As we all know, the number of citizens using our courthouses is increasing daily – even for small, rural counties.

Consequently, we must keep up with the needs for public health, ADA, and safety for the public and all employees.

Thankfully, these funds allow small counties to make great strides in each of these areas without being a huge burden on local government.



"As we all know, the number of citizens using our courthouses is increasing daily– even for small, rural counties."

Robyn Hatcher

FROM THE PERSONNEL DESK



Contributed by Larry Lyons
Administrative Services
Manager

From time to time personal transactions are initiated that result in financial institutions or businesses having a need to verify employment and salary information. Such matters could involve mortgages, credit card applications, loans, etc. To assist us in providing a timely and convenient method of employment verification, we are asking you to provide a signed release to the organization who will be contacting Court Administration to verify your employment information.

Alternatively, you can provide this authorization directly to our

Personnel Office by email; listing the name of the institution(s) you anticipate will be requesting employment verification. This simple action will expedite the request, and reduce your exposure to identify theft.

We are now in the 2006 Open Enrollment period which ends 4:30 PM Central Time, October 18, 2006. Here are a few reminders. Your changes made during the open enrollment period will take effect January 2007. Please retain a copy of any online transaction you initiate during the enrollment period. Regardless of how you enroll in, change, or cancel benefit

Elections (online, People First Service Center, or paper forms) you will receive a Benefit Confirmation Statement in the mail to review. You then have until 4:30 PM (CT), Thursday, November 2, 2006 to make corrections. Should you have questions regarding any personnel issues, please contact the Personnel Office at (850) 747-5338.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE COURT SYSTEM



Under Article V/Revision 7, one of the expenses that the State now has responsibility for is ensuring that individuals who are non-English speaking are provided language interpreters for any proceeding which may have a direct impact on their due process rights. By providing this assistance, the State and the Court System provides individuals who do not speak English with the appropriate language interpreter and ensures that they understand the court proceeding for which they are involved.

Our rural circuit has seen a great increase in the need for and use on language

interpreters over the past year. The construction industry, our agricultural demographics, and our area as a location to receive those displaced from last year's ravishing storms has brought about an increase not only in our general population but also an increase in a population of non-English speaking persons. Unfortunately, with an increase in population comes an increase in court activity; thus, our circuit has experienced a proportional increase in non-English speaking litigants.

Currently the court fifteen interpreters under contract with the Fourteenth Circuit, and we also have contracted with a language service which provides little needed or "exotic" languages via the telephone. Requests come from the various clerks' offices, Office of the Public Defender, Office of the State Attorney, or other entities

within the justice system for services for the various clients.

The 2006 Legislature passed language interpreter certification and has given the responsibility for testing and certifying language interpreters to the Supreme Court of Florida. Effective July 1, 2008, all language interpreters used by the courts shall be either duly-qualified or fully certified. This requirement involves interpreters attending a 2-day Orientation Course on Court Interpreting, and successfully passing a written exam and an oral exam. These exams are difficult. The passage rate of these exams is at about 30% of the test takers; therefore, the interpreters know they must study and be at the top of their field in order to become fully certified.

We have already begun to get vital information about

certification to all our interpreters and have encouraged them to begin studying for the certification process. We will continue to keep our interpreters up on the development of the certification program and keep our court system in compliance with our laws.



Currently, the Fourteenth Circuit has 15 interpreters under contract: 12 Spanish interpreters, 3 Russian interpreters, 1 Spanish who can be used as a Portuguese interpreter, and 1 Spanish who can be used as an Italian Interpreter.

TECH TALK

Web-Based Technology Training

As an employee of the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit, you will soon be receiving an email with instructions on how to access two new training programs through

CONTRIBUTED BY GARY HAGAN, TECHNOLOGY OFFICER

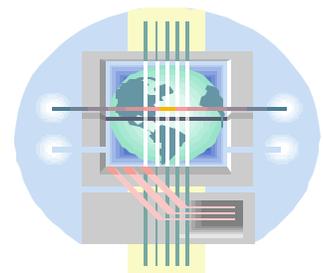
the internet. As part of a new offering from Microsoft, court employees are eligible to access E-Learning courses online at Microsoft.com.

The list of classes are limited at this time, but will be expanding in the near future as they transition from CD-based training to web-based training.

In addition to the Microsoft program, the ISS department at the OSCA has provided us with access to another web-based training program. This program currently has 297 total courses available.

We trust you will enjoy this benefit and look forward to your participation.

For more information on this article or technology related issues, contact Gary Hagan at 850-747-5410.



Birthdays



October

- 2 Judy M. Pittman
- 7 Niki Jones
- 22 Rebecca Akins
- 29 Lisa Edenfield

November

- 6 Elijah Smiley
- 12 Wade Mercer
- 22 Allen Register

December

- 12 Jason Guettler
- 16 Trish Riemer
- 17 Owen N. Powell
- 19 Carol Dunaway
- 26 Terry A. Thompson
- 28 Brantley Clark
- 29 Wendy Schlesinger

Holidays for the Quarter

Yom Kippur

Monday, October 2, 2006

Veteran's Day

Friday, November 10, 2006

Thanksgiving Day

Thursday, November 23, 2006

Friday After Thanksgiving

Friday, November 24, 2006

Friday Before Christmas

Friday, December 22, 2006

Christmas

Monday, December 25, 2006

CHIEF JUDGE: HONORABLE WILLIAM L. WRIGHT

COURT ADMINISTRATOR: JENNIFER DYER WELLS

Editor: Amber Baggett, Senior Court Program Specialist

Benchmarks is a quarterly newsletter published by and for the 14th Judicial Circuit and is intended to be a source of information regarding the courts. Rights are reserved to edit for clarity or brevity, or reject any material submitted due to space or other reasons.