

Benchmarks

Newsletter for the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit

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Transitions

Contributed by Judy M. Pittman, Chief Judge



Our Circuit and the entire State Courts System have worked hard this past year preparing for the transition of funding from county to state. Article V/Revision 7 has been our focus for several years, and this July, our efforts resulted in the shift of positions and funding as directed by the new legislation. This legislation was a direct response to the Constitutional amendment passed by the Florida voters. Now, the state is

covering the majority of the operational costs of the court system. Our counties are continuing to provide support by ensuring our facilities, technology, and communications are operational and functional.

During the past year, our Circuit had to scale back many of its services and programs due to position and funding cuts which came on the eve of the Article V/Revision 7 transition. One such service which we had to stop was the publication of our newsletter. I am very happy now, with restored staffing and funding, we can again start our quarterly newsletter. The newsletter is an excellent communication vehicle for the circuit to share program and personnel updates and keep our staff and citizens informed about what is new within our circuit. This issue is our first newsletter after a year hiatus, and I hope it will become a communication forum that will develop and prosper.

While our Circuit and the State Courts System survived the transition, there is still much work to be done. I have been renamed as a member of the Trial Court Budget Commission. The Commission is actively working on the State Courts System legislative budget request for 2005/2006. Moreover, we have identified areas in last year's Revision 7 legislation which need revision or "tweaking" so that the work of the court and the justice system can operate more productively, effectively, and economically.

The Circuit is also experiencing another type of transition as the Honorable Robert E. Brown retires and the Honorable Owen N. Powell begins his term as County Judge for Holmes County (see articles on page 3). Judge Brown served Holmes County for 26 years. However, because of age requirements, Judge Brown was required to move into "retired" status at the end of his term. With Judge Brown retiring, Judge Powell was elected by the people to move onto the judicial bench. We send our well wishes to our friend and colleague, Judge Brown. We extend a warm welcome to our newest judge, Judge Powell.

As the Circuit continues to work through transition issues, I am excited about the possibilities for renewed service which can be extended to the judges, the staff, and our citizens. We now have two full-time Magistrates (see article on page 4) which have been allocated to our circuit in order to help us move many of our civil cases much more quickly through the system. We now have more case managers who can help review and assess cases so that they can progress through the court system more efficiently. The benefits of these two enhancements, alone, will help our circuit tremendously. As more programs come on line, we will surely see their positive impacts. I remain excited about our upcoming year 2005 and about our future as a state-funded court system.

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New Beginnings

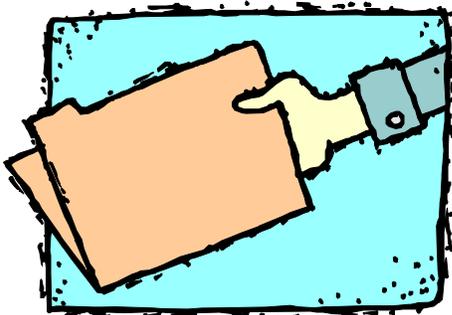
Contributed by Jennifer Dyer Wells
Trial Court Administrator

Have we been busy! Since July, court administration has gone from a bare bones staff to one which can support the judges and citizens of our circuit. New positions have been allocated to our circuit and resulted in the development or expansion of several programs within the circuit.

For example, the circuit now has an Administrative Services Manager whose function is to oversee our human resource development program. This function includes the coordination of our personnel tasks (e.g., payroll, leave status benefits, etc); development and oversight of training programs for staff; and development of materials and information about our circuit. Larry Lyons has accepted this role and will help develop a professional personnel and human resource office to serve the judges and staff. Already he has developed a power point program that Judge Pittman used to educate a group of citizens about our court system. He continues to improve the modest program that was in place for our circuit.

We have been able to expand the support in the rural counties as well. Robyn Hatcher, as our Court Operations Consultant, functions as a second in command and provides overall support and coordination to the rural counties. She has the support of Amber Baggett as Senior Court Program Specialist, who will also assist Larry Lyons with the development of needed staff training. Additionally, when judges in the rural counties need research or program development assistance, both Robyn and Amber are available to provide this service. Moreover, we now have Cary Godwin, a case manager, who serves the five rural counties reviewing pro se cases and other case flow issues.

Our case management function is expanding and is needed with our growing caseload. Additional positions have been allocated to Bay County which will help with the building caseload in our circuit seat. Syntha Alvarez, Trish Reimer, and Shlaina VanDyke are all busy reviewing and moving civil and criminal cases through the system. The case managers are also assisting the full-time magistrates which is a new asset to our circuit. Both David Johnson and Brantley Clark, our magistrates, are assisting our judges by hearing a large number of civil, dependency, and child support hearings.



New on the horizon is additional support in the area of technology support. The rural counties are now receiving technology support from Phillip Wynn, a contract technology network specialist. He has already solved many problems that have been plaguing the rural counties and has identified our rural counties as a "priority" customer. In Bay County, we have been able to hire a Technology Specialist, Terry Thomas. Terry will provide the onsite support to Bay County judges and staff.

Our growth is a sign of our circuit's positive new beginnings. We will have new and enhanced programs and new staff to bring service to our circuit and citizens. With our growth, we will focus always on customer service as the core of our organization. It is with this developing customer service that we can continue to build trust and confidence in our court system.

From the Personnel Desk

Contributed by Larry Lyons
Administrative Services Manager

Starting in 2005 the Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA) will no longer furnish a monthly Earnings Statement to employees. Earnings Statements will only be available online at the Florida



Accounting and Information Resource (FLAIR) website. The State Court System will join the other executive agencies and will no longer be the only entity receiving hard copy Earnings Statements.

To view your statement now and in the future, employees will have to establish a password to access the FLAIR website. How do we do this? From the Internet, go to <http://flair.dbf.state.fl.us/>; under the "State Employees" column click on "New to Employees' Information Center". There you will be prompted to provide some personal information, your e-mail address, and establish a password. You will then use your social security number and password to access the "Employee Information Center". There you will find a Main Menu from which you can view current and past Earnings Statements, W-4 information, reimbursements, and other financial information for state employees.

We encourage you to begin establishing your password and view the information currently on the site. We are not able to access the site for an employee -- that is an individual responsibility. However, we are available at (850) 747-5338 or SC 777-5338 to assist you if you encounter any problems.

Longtime Holmes County Judge Retires

After 26 years of service to the citizens of Holmes County, Judge Robert E. Brown retired as Holmes County Judge on January 3, 2005.

Judge Brown is a life-long native of the Florida Panhandle. He was born in Caryville, Florida. He then moved to Bonifay at the age of 5 when his father, Jessie Ross Brown, became the Sheriff of Holmes County.

As a member of the United States Navy, Judge Brown served during the Korean War and remained a member of the armed services for six years. Subsequently, Judge Brown returned to Bonifay and became a successful businessman. He owned and operated a flourishing meat processing company and ice business.



Judge Brown speaking at his retirement reception.

First elected to the bench in 1972, Judge Brown served until 1976. He was again elected in 1982 and has not been defeated since. Serving as one of Florida's few non-lawyer judges, Judge Brown completed the Non-Lawyer Judges' Training Course from the University of Florida College of Law, which is the same curriculum as that for a law degree. Non-lawyer judges were required to attend classes in Gainesville all summer plus one week per month, preparing and studying at home all while also serving on the bench.

During the some of his tenure, Judge Brown was the Circuit Representative for the County Judges. He has also been very active in his community.



He has served and been associated with Holmes County Teen Court, Bonifay Kiwanis Club, Washington-Holmes Cattlemen's Association, Mason Ester Lodge #144, Shriners Club and Scottish Rites of Panama City, Holmes County Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, Marketing Education Advisory Committee for Washington-Holmes Technical Center, Florida Highway Patrol Auxiliary - 30 years retired, and an active member of the First Baptist Church of Bonifay.

Judge Robert E. Brown was honored with a retirement reception held on December 3, 2004 in the Holmes County Courtroom. The reception was attended by many colleagues, friends and family, including his wife Ada.

Owen N. Powell Elected Holmes County Judge

Owen N. Powell, long time resident of Bonifay, Florida, was elected Holmes County Judge on November 2, 2004.

Judge Powell is a graduate of Chipola Junior College and Florida State University. He received his Juris Doctorate from Stetson College, College of Law. He has practiced law since 1973, with 27 of those years being in Holmes County.



Honorable Owen N. Powell
Studio Photograph

Powell is married to Deborah (Levens) Powell and has two sons, John and Mason Powell. Cheryl Hammond, his paralegal of 28 years, will now serve as his Judicial Assistant.

Judge Powell's investiture was held on January 4, 2005 in the Courtroom of the Holmes County Courthouse.

Elements of the Court System

A new feature of Benchmarks, Elements of the Court System will highlight a key element of the Court System in each edition.



Key Elements of the Court System

The Florida Legislature has identified elements of the Court System that are key to the operation of the day to day functions. These elements are provided for by state revenues appropriated by general law. The elements are listed by category below:

Adjudication

- ▶ Judges & Judicial Assistants
- ▶ Law Clerks
- ▶ Magistrates & Hearing Officers

Case Processing

- ▶ Mediation
- ▶ Case Managers

Due Process

- ▶ Court Interpreting
- ▶ Court Reporting
- ▶ Court Appointed Expert Witnesses

Governance

- ▶ Court Administration

Magistrates and Hearing Officers

A new element to the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit is the addition of two full-time General Magistrates to the one part-time Child Support Hearing Officer position already being utilized within the circuit.

General Magistrates and Hearing Officers are utilized to support and supplement judicial efforts by performing judicial functions to determine findings of fact that are formally recommended to the assigned judge for a final order.

Within the Fourteenth Circuit, the General Magistrates and Child Support Hearing Officers are assigned to preside over civil matters, including but not limited to Juvenile Dependency and Domestic Relations.

Currently, the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit has two full-time General Magistrates on staff. David C. Johnson is assigned to the counties of Jackson, Calhoun, Washington, Holmes and Gulf, while Brantley S. Clark, Jr. is assigned to Bay County.

Mr. Johnson is located in the Jackson County Courthouse, and his secretary is Mary Johnson.

Mr. Clark is located in the Bay County Courthouse, and his secretary is Frances A. Hall.

In addition to the magistrates on staff, the Fourteenth Circuit also employs a part-time Child Support Hearing Officer. Robert Sombathy serves in the capacity of hearing officer and is located in the Bay County Courthouse. His secretary is Eletha Cobb.



General Magistrate David C. Johnson, accompanied by his family, as he is being sworn in by Circuit Judge William L. Wright.

Highlights from Around the Circuit

Gulf County Installs New Recording System

With the guidance of Chief Judge Judy M. Pittman and Gulf County Judge Fred Witten, Gulf County's courthouse has taken another step forward into the high-tech world with a new system for recording the court record. CourtSmart is a new recording system that will save the county and state money.

The electronic system, rather than a stenographer, uses microphones and a closed-circuit video camera in the courtroom, feeding to a central monitoring room where our circuit's "digital court reporter" Becky Akins, keeps track of what is being recorded on the computer hard drives.

The files created by CourtSmart are date and time stamped and are available to multiple users on a secure system. Instead of traditional paper transcripts, the new system produces audio CD's and DVD archives of hearings. The system allows for "sealing audio records" for sealed files.

At this time the CourtSmart system is being used for all court proceedings in Gulf County, with the exception of felony trials, where live court reporters continue to be utilized.

Washington County Probation Marks One Year with Success

The Washington County Misdemeanor Probation Office marked its first year in existence on December 1, 2004. The program currently employs two full-time probation officers who supervise a combined caseload of 296 people.

The Probation department, which was previously operated by a private company, has collected approximately \$108,000 in fees for the county, producing a net benefit to the county of approximately \$40, 000.

Washington County Judge Colby Peel reports to the County Commission as to the progress of the Misdemeanor Probation Program.

Photo compliments of the Chipley Bugle.



Bay County Pretrial Release Program

The Bay County Pretrial Release Program is an intervention program designed to maximize the supervised release of defendants prior to trial, thus, reducing jail costs. The program, which began in 1992, saved a total of \$359,000 in jail bed cost for Bay County during its first full year in operation. Last year the county realized a savings of almost \$5 million in jail bed expenses.



Bay County Pretrial Release Program staff, Jerry Riddle and Stephanie Gordon.

One of the Pretrial Release Program's primary functions is to provide the judiciary with critical information including criminal history background, employment, residence, and ties to the community on defendants being considered for release or bond determination. Moreover, the program provides supervision of defendants conditionally released prior to trial and those defendants found incompetent to proceed with trial but can be released from incarceration with supervision.

By serving these two functions, the program allows screened defendants to remain within the community while under strict supervision requirements and saves local tax dollars on the daily cost for jail bed space.

The Bay County Pretrial Release Program office is staffed with two employees, Program Director Jerry Riddle and Assistant Stephanie Gordon.



Holidays for 2005

Birthdays

JANUARY

- 11 Fred N. Witten
- 15 Lora Fisher
- 21 Amber Baggett

FEBRUARY

- 4 Robin Owens
- 5 Laura Jones
- 18 Sherrie Lee-White
- 18 William L. Wright
- 21 Michael C. Overstreet
- 24 Betty Carol Spooner
- 27 Sherri Lessig

MARCH

- 3 Eletha Cobb
- 5 Mary Johnson
- 8 Glenn L. Hess
- 10 Marie Bazzel
- 10 Cary Godwin
- 13 Pam Smitherman
- 16 Linda Burd
- 19 Richard Albritton
- 25 John D. O'Brien
- 26 Woodrow W. Hatcher
- 31 Dedee S. Costello
- 31 Robyn Hatcher

January 17	Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday
March 25	Good Friday
May 30	Memorial Day
July 4	Independence Day
September 5	Labor Day
October 13	Yom Kippur
November 11	Veterans' Day
November 24	Thanksgiving Day
November 25	Friday after Thanksgiving
December 23	Day before Christmas Holiday
December 26	Christmas Holiday



CHIEF JUDGE: HON. JUDY M. PITTMAN
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.