



**GARY FITZSIMMONS
DALLAS COUNTY DISTRICT CLERK**

**OVERVIEW OF DALLAS COUNTY DISTRICT CLERK'S
DIGITAL COURTS PROJECT**

Dallas County's Long-Term Vision

The Dallas County District Clerk's Digital Courts Project fulfills the objectives of the Dallas County Strategic Plan's Vision 1, which states that Dallas County will be a model inter-agency partner by:

- Increasing e-business capacity, making it easier for customers of all kinds to conduct business with the District Clerk's office
- Creating new procedures to increase accuracy and efficiency for all parties
- Retraining much of the District Clerk's workforce to provide optimum efficiency through a new court case management system

After months of dedicated work to achieve these objectives, the Digital Courts Project is placing Dallas County on the leading edge of technological innovation to improve the judicial process and is bringing us closer to our goal of creating a paperless process within 10 years, making our office a model for others.

Measuring Our Success and Progress

A significant measurement of the project's success will be its capacity by 2011 to accept 90% of all filings electronically from remote locations, while pro se litigants can still file electronically at our filing desk. While embracing technology to the fullest extent possible, we will still accommodate customers who are unable to use that technology in filing petitions and other documents.

A critical step in creating paperless courts was taken as we began digitizing case records. It is our goal to have digitized all pending and all case records closed within a five-year period and to make them electronically retrievable by the attorneys, governmental agencies, the public, and media from remote locations.

And with digitized documents available on computers, the judiciary will have the ability to modify documents electronically from the bench, further streamlining the judicial process and moving closer to a completely digitized system.

The Many Benefits of Electronic Files

One of many benefits of digitizing the judicial process is that computers can move documents into the courts more rapidly and less expensively than conventional paper-based systems such as the postal service or couriers, and with superior security.



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Additionally, compared to staff, computers perform case-related tasks such as document retrieval more rapidly, providing better service to our courts and those who use them. Also, computer programs enable readers to look up citations and other documents, saving the time of pulling paper files, searching for the documents and replacing files.

Computers can also search for and locate key words or phrases to locate information in digitized case records. And because computers record digitized information easily and rapidly, their use greatly reduces the lengthy procedure of tracking paper files and reduces the possibility of losing files.

By facilitating document retrieval from remote locations, the digital case records management system benefits lawyers by providing an inexpensive, quickly accessed link to our courts.

Digital records will also help address one of the District Clerk's most pressing problems: space needed for the millions of pages of documents produced and stored. When fully implemented, the Digital Courts Project will have reduced the amount of space needed to store a basement full of files to the space of two file cabinets.

Addressing Challenges for a Paperless System

While paper has traditionally been considered the most portable source of information, notebooks and laptops are making that less true each day. Additionally, because court case files are generally used only on court premises where there is an abundance of computers and records can be made portable simply by printing them out, the digital system becomes even less of a challenge. Indeed, computerized files are more portable, because they can be transferred from any computer to another.

Some users of court records may lack familiarity with computers and are not comfortable using them, but that situation is being increasingly rare as computers become commonplace in homes, schools and almost every other public and private environment.

Finally, while paper records seem to some people to be more permanent and reliable than electronic records, dramatically improved computer storage capacity and security are reducing that perception. And in the case of natural disasters, such as floods, paper records are extremely vulnerable to damage and loss, while digitized records can be stored and backed up at several sites ensuring



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their safety for an infinite period.

A Model for a Fully Implemented Electronic Filing System

The filing attorney prepares the court document using whatever word processor the law office has, and the document is edited until it is in final form.

The attorney attaches the documents to the Texas Online E-Filing interface for delivery to the District Clerk.

When the District Clerk's file desk receives the documents, it opens it and makes an archival copy. The District Clerk deputies check required document content, such as a case number, parties' names and other information.

If required data are not identifiable, either because it is missing or not correctly marked, the document is returned immediately through the E-Filing system with a message stating that the document contains a critical error and informing the sender of the reason for rejection.

If the document appears acceptable, the District Clerk accepts the documents and either creates new case in the electronic case management system or adds the documents to an existing case.

An interface between the electronic case management and the judiciary is managed by the court clerk to provide easy access to the court's docket for the day.

The Future of Our Courts is a Digital One

The long-term benefits of implementing and using digital courts are so compelling that we have committed more resources to this project than to any other because we see daily the growing positive effects on our courts and customers, confirming our belief that we have chosen the best possible path to a productive future.