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Court system gets records upgrade

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Oregon's transition to a more advanced electronic records system for state courts takes a step forward this week, when courts in Polk and Benton counties go online.

Training for the new system will begin this month in Marion County, where courts are scheduled to go online by the end of December -- sometime after the largest trial court system in Multnomah County goes live.

The system is known as eCourt. It will replace the Oregon Judicial Information Network, which is based on 1980s technology that was outdated decades ago. But even at the end of the current two-year budget period in mid-2015, courts serving 17 of Oregon's 36 counties will have to wait another year before they are connected to the system.

Still, Chief Justice Thomas Balmer said the new system will enable court participants and the public to file and obtain court documents more easily and allow court workers to process cases more efficiently. People also can make payments online in the counties already connected to the system.

"Oregon eCourt is not a panacea," he said at his annual state of the court address to a joint luncheon of the Salem City Club and Marion County Bar Association. "We do not and should not expect it to address all our problems. But it is working; it has provided substantial efficiencies."

As chief justice of the Oregon Supreme Court, Balmer also is responsible for overseeing the operation of state appellate and trial courts, which together employ more than 1,500 people and have a two-year budget of about $400 million.

Although the largest chunk of the state general fund goes to support public schools, state courts reach into every corner of Oregon.

An explanation

Balmer spent about one-third of his speech explaining the system in the context of intensive news coverage and public scrutiny of the problems with the state and federal electronic marketplaces for health insurance. Other state technology projects, including eCourt itself, have had more than their share of difficulties during implementation -- although Balmer said the current transition is on time and on budget.

"Oregon eCourt is an important component in discussing the state of our courts, and our citizens' understanding of the state's ability to implement a technology project," he said.

"So I wanted to take that time and provide more detail than you otherwise would have gotten."

Oregon's replacement system had been in the planning stages for years, but Balmer said the technology changed and so did the products offered by vendors.

"It took a fair amount of courage to reassess our position and change course," Balmer said.

"We took some lumps for doing that, but I think both the Legislature and the judiciary agreed that it was the right step. Instead of buying a bunch of different products and trying to weld them together, we bought an integrated product that can do most of the things we were looking for."

The vendor for Oregon courts is Tyler Technologies, based in Sherwood, which specializes in public-sector systems. In addition to Oregon, the firm has been involved in developing statewide systems in Washington, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota and South Dakota, and metropolitan systems in Atlanta, the Dallas suburbs, Las Vegas and Miami.

Gradual rollout

Oregon's appellate courts were the first to convert to the new system, which makes briefs and other documents available to litigants and the public, and trial court files and exhibits to the appellate judges.

But Balmer said that transition involved only two courts with a total of 20 judges -- both based in Salem -- and most documents generated by the state Department of Justice and the Office of Public Defense Services, also based in Salem.

A greater challenge, he said, is the system of circuit courts that handle proceedings in all 36 counties and receive a total of 500,000 to 600,000 filings annually. Multnomah County, where Portland is, accounts for almost one-third of that total.

Balmer said those courts have to be connected to city, county and state law enforcement agencies, Driver and Motor Vehicle Services Division, Division of Child Support in the Department of Justice, Department of Human Services, Department of Corrections and others. Most use different software.

Balmer said the vendor underestimated the complexity of automating the uniform criminal judgment form, which is the primary document in sentencing criminal offenders.

Eight counties have been connected to eCourt, and Polk and Benton counties will join this week. But Balmer said people will have to be patient as court staffs in other counties, including Marion County, make the transition.
"When I ask judges and staff what is not getting done while they are working on eCourt, I often hear the phrase 'my day job' in response," Balmer said.