Courts go electronic to save cash

The move away from paper is also improving efficiency, the chief justice says

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The Register-Guard

Appeared in print: Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2010, page B2

Electronic court records will be crucial to maintaining Oregon's justice system as state revenue shortfalls persist for most of the next decade, the state's top judge told several hundred participants at a state juvenile justice summit in Eugene on Monday.

Oregon's sorry distinction as the first state to close its courthouse doors for lack of funds back in 2003 prompted dramatic changes that have allowed it to continue providing court services even as other states have slashed theirs, Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul De Muniz said in a speech at the Hilton Eugene.

He recounted what happened seven years ago when Oregon courthouses were closed every Friday for more than four months. Misdemeanors and minor felonies went unprosecuted, he said. Small claims and eviction cases went "in a box and no one touched them for five months."

"We created two kinds of justice — one for rich folks who can afford alternative dispute resolution, and another for the poor folks" relying on state courts.

That was unacceptable, De Muniz said, prompting state court officials to begin exploring ways to increase efficiencies and operate on less revenue without reducing the level of judicial services.

The agency's decision to begin moving to a paperless system in the past year has positioned it to weather its $15.3 million share of Gov. Ted Kulongoski's latest budget cuts without cutting services, the justice said.

The continuing national recession has forced other states to take even more drastic measures than Oregon did seven years ago, De Muniz told the crowd of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, foster parents, law enforcement officials and state youth workers. New Hampshire has suspended jury trials, he said. In California, there's a six-year wait for jury trials in civil cases.

But Oregon is cutting costs and saving services by switching to electronic filing and case management.

The conversion has started at the top, he said, with Oregon's Supreme Court justices abandoning their tradition of having personal judicial assistants to create, file, retrieve, amend, copy and mail paper case files.

"We do it all electronically," De Muniz said. "It saves a huge amount of paper, postage and staff time."

The chief justice told the group that on the state Supreme Court's first day this year, he went into the courtroom without any paper whatsoever — he had loaded all the relevant documents onto his iPad.

The savings realized from electronic filing have not yet been quantified because the conversion is still in its first year, state courts spokesman Phil Lemman said. But court staff members who handle such paperwork comprise 61 percent of the agency's budget, or about $230 million, he said.

The plan is to make the entire state system an "e-court," he said. The agency is seeking bids from companies who can design a single system for all of Oregon's state courts, Lemman said. It hopes to award a contract for that system early next year.

The agency has begun pilot e-court programs in five Oregon counties.

One of them — Multnomah County — has worked with the state Department of Human Services to create secure, paperless child protective service records for juvenile dependency cases, De Muniz told summit participants.

As of June, the pilot counties had electronically processed 16,000 cases containing a total 250,000 virtual pages. Lemman said those cases would have formed a stack of paper 80 feet tall if managed conventionally.

Besides saving money, creation of a "virtual courthouse" will improve court document accessibility for Oregonians, De Muniz said.

Other significant changes are in the works, the chief justice said.

They include centralized management of jury pools and billing, as well as creation of a statewide docketing system that will assign judges to cases based on their expertise rather than their geographic location.

"We're trying to look at these changes not through our own eyes, but through the lens of the litigants and the public," he said. "Things will be better, not just less expensive, for them."