

## Oregon to expand eCourt system after successful launches in

Courts in Jackson, Crook and Jefferson counties this month will take the first step toward automation as part of the Oregon Judicial Department's statewide eCourt initiative.

The program, launched in 2008 with money from the state Legislature, is intended to move the state's courts from a paper-based system to an electronic one in order to improve public safety, increase efficiency and foster a more standardized system. While the program originally was to be phased in over five years, state budget reductions have pushed the completion date back, said Phil Lemman, OJD spokesman.

The first phase was to implement eCourt in the Oregon Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals, and also install electronic filing and payment systems in those courts. Work now is under way to complete an electronic case management process for major cases, and should be finished by July 2011.

Yamhill and Multnomah counties implemented eCourt in August and September 2009, respectively. The program involves only small claims lawsuits and forcible entry and detainer cases, such as landlord-tenant disputes. While cases are still filed as paperwork, the pages are scanned and travel through the rest of the legal process electronically, Lemman said.

Since implementing eCourt, the two counties have handled more than 16,000 cases electronically. The cases totaled 250,000 pages, which would have generated an 80-foot-tall stack of paper, Lemman noted.

"That gives you an example not only of the work the courts do just within those two types of law, but also the savings we can have if we automate the system," he said.

Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Nan Waller is an executive sponsor of the eCourt governance body and has been involved in the program's implementation. She said she is able to see its value from both a technological and judicial point of view.

"I'm not a computer whiz, but I've learned so much," she said. "And I completely understand from the perspective of judges why we need to move in this direction. It's not just about efficiencies and saving paper, although those are important things, but it's about allowing us to do our jobs better."

While Waller doesn't handle small claims cases or FEDs, she already has seen how an electronic system can help. Multnomah County's juvenile court has been using Laserfiche, a precursor to the eCourt program that provides broader, more comprehensive access to information about the families involved.

"This allows judges to have access not just to cases in Multnomah County, but across the state as well," she said. "As a judge, being able to access that information easily and completely allows me to do my job better."

Waller, the county's chief family court judge, expects eCourt to have a significant impact on family law as well. Many family cases involve strained domestic relations in which one spouse has filed a restraining order against the other. The paperwork and filings required often are traumatic for those involved, she noted.

"With eCourt, people will be able to fill out TurboTax-like forms without having to come to the courthouse, which can often be very frightening for an individual," she said, adding the feature complements a pilot program in which initial hearings in domestic relations cases are conducted through videoconferencing.

Many people involved in family law cases are not able to afford an attorney, and eCourt allows them to better represent themselves and file their cases according to the correct procedures, Waller said.

In addition, police officers will be able to access the information pertaining to a particular case when they respond to calls about restraining-order violations. The eCourt system also will allow attorneys to receive more comprehensive information more quickly, she said.

Some aspects of the statewide rollout have been "recalibrated" along the way, which Waller said is to be expected with a project of this magnitude. Despite the challenges, the program has support from the Legislature and the legal community. Now the biggest obstacle is securing funding to fully implement the program and upgrade technology so that every courthouse in the state can access it.

"We know this is a hard budget time for Oregon, but it's something we absolutely need to move forward on because in the end it will help us all out so much," Waller said. "I look forward to seeing a couple of years down the road what we are able to do with this."

Lemman said future plans call for eCourt to include all civil cases as the state's budget allows. Eventually, all criminal and juvenile cases in Oregon will be fully automated as well.