



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

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Hartford, CT 06106

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Room 305
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Room 109
State Capitol
Hartford, CT 06106

To His Excellency the Governor and the Honorable General Assembly:

Pursuant to C.G.S. section 45-85, the Probate Court Budget Committee submits this annual report to summarize the savings from Probate Court restructuring and describe key efficiency measures undertaken during fiscal year 2012-13.

Savings from Restructuring

The consolidation of 117 Probate Courts into 54 and implementation of a streamlined financial structure were completed in January 2011. Since then, the savings resulting from restructuring has directly benefited the state budget. The General Fund appropriation for the Probate Courts has been steadily reduced from a high of \$11.25 million before restructuring to \$6.5 million in fiscal year 2012-13, for a total savings of \$8.5 million in the past two fiscal years. In addition, the Probate Court system returned surpluses to the General Fund of \$8.2 million in fiscal year 2010-11 and \$5.8 million in fiscal year 2011-12.

Efficiency Initiatives

The following summary highlights initiatives that are further improving the efficiency of the Probate Court system. The measures emphasize the use of technology to make it easier for the public to use the courts, save staff time and improve the accuracy of court records.

Automation of Reporting for Firearms Background Checks

Using funds from a federal grant, the Probate Courts have collaborated with several other state agencies to automate reporting to the database used by law-enforcement authorities to conduct background checks for persons seeking to buy firearms (known as the National Instant Criminal Background Check System,

or NICS). Under federal law, a person whom a court finds to be mentally ill is ineligible to buy firearms, and states are required to report all mental health adjudications to the NICS database. In Connecticut, mental health adjudications occur in the Probate Courts in conservatorship and commitment proceedings and in the Superior Court in criminal matters. Currently, reporting is conducted by means of a paper intensive and duplicative process in which records are faxed from courts to various state agencies and information is manually entered into the database.

The new system, which will launch in August 2013, establishes a single consolidated state database of all court records. Court computers systems will immediately transmit records to the state database, which, in turn, will electronically transmit the information to the federal NICS database. In addition to reducing the labor involved in complying with the reporting requirement, this automation will reduce the risk of human error and improve both the timeliness and accuracy of the information that the state submits to the NICS database.

Check Scanners

Check scanners enable courts to deposit payments into the Probate Court Administration Fund immediately upon receipt without traveling to a bank. After piloting check scanning technology at several courts, we are equipping all courts with scanners. The technology reduces the staff time and mileage expense associated with trips to the bank and enhances compliance with state policy on the frequency of deposits.

Credit Cards

For the convenience of the public, programming is underway to enable courts to accept credit cards for payment of probate fees. At the direction of the General Assembly, we are modifying the program so that credit card users will be charged for processing fees. This arrangement will save the system an estimated \$250,000 annually.

Accounts Payable Processing for Attorneys and Conservators

Probate Courts are required by statute to appoint attorneys to represent individuals in cases in which their constitutionally protected interests are at stake. Probate Courts also appoint conservators for individuals who are incapable of caring for themselves or managing their affairs. When an individual is indigent and unable to pay for the services of the attorney or conservator, the expense is paid by the Probate Court Administration Fund. Probate Court Regulations impose strict limits on the amount of fees in each case, but serving the needs of thousands of indigent parties will cost an expected \$5.3 million in fiscal year 2013-2014.

Currently, the accounts payable system for attorneys and conservators involves multiple steps and paper invoices. The attorney or conservator mails an invoice to the appointing Probate Court. The court determines whether the invoiced

amount is reasonable for the services performed, certifies the invoice for payment and forwards it by mail to Probate Court Administration. Probate Court Administration verifies compliance with the regulations and enters the invoice into the state's CORE CT accounting system for payment.

Planning is underway to convert to an online paperless invoice system. When the new system is completed, attorneys and conservators will enter their invoices into a secure module of the website. Courts will use the same module to review and certify the invoices, after which the invoices will be immediately available for processing by Probate Court Administration. The system will automatically verify invoices for compliance with the regulations and electronically transfer the information into CORE. The automated workflow process will eliminate manual data entry and improve internal controls.

Digital Document Storage System

Since 2011, Probate Courts have used a digital document storage system to preserve official case records. The system eliminates the expense of preparing and permanently storing cumbersome record books, which, in turn, reduces the need for expensive bricks-and-mortar storage facilities. The digital storage system's sophisticated search tools enable court staff and court users to quickly locate and review records.

In 2013, the Probate Courts and Probate Court Administration extended the use of the digital document storage system to administrative records. Working in collaboration with the Public Records Administrator, Probate Court Administration updated our records retention policies. The use of the digital document storage system will gradually reduce the expense of storing administrative records at an off-site private storage facility.

Kinship and Respite Funds

The Probate Courts administer two related state programs, the Kinship Fund and the Grandparents and Relatives Respite Fund. Through these programs, courts award modest grants to court-appointed guardians to purchase necessities for children in their care. Grants are made for activities such as after school programs, tutoring and summer camp, and participation is limited to guardians who are indigent and not eligible for foster care subsidies from the Department of Children and Families. Applications for grants are administered regionally at 10 Probate Courts.

To streamline processing of applications, Probate Court Administration is developing an additional module for the case management system. The module will eliminate the use of separate databases to track grant applications and avoid the need to re-enter information about the guardian and children that exists in the case management system for purposes of managing the original guardianship case. The module will also improve internal controls by automatically verifying

the eligibility of grant applicants and cross-checking applications system-wide to prevent duplicate grant awards.

Website

The Probate Courts launched a new website, ctprobate.gov, on March 1. The website provides up-to-date information designed to assist court users with cases in the Probate Courts and members of the public seeking general information about the Probate Court system. The website includes fillable forms, information about court procedures and answers to frequently asked questions.

This summer, we will launch an intranet for use by judges, court employees and probate administration staff. The intranet will consolidate key resources, including legal research tools, training materials, internal policies and automated payroll and benefit enrollment systems in a single, secure portal. The portal will ensure that courts have access to all current information and will facilitate prompt internal communications.

Server Monitoring and Off-site Backup

Probate Court Administration has installed a server-monitoring system by which the IT Department can identify potential data corrupting problems on court servers before they occur. This early detection system enables technicians to prevent or mitigate a problem before an intensive server rebuild is necessary to recover lost data.

To further improve data security and plan for disaster recovery, obsolete tape back-up drives are being replaced with off-site back-up technology. Local servers are connected by a secure line to a data storage center. The center is equipped with the latest hardware that stores the data in an easily recoverable manner.

Digital Audio Recording of Hearings

All Probate Courts are now equipped with digital audio recording devices for use during hearings. The devices are portable, enabling judges to carry them to hearings conducted at nursing homes, hospitals and other venues. After a hearing is concluded, court staff download the digital record of the hearing to the computer server, where it is saved in the case management system. The data is easily transferred to a CD for a person who requests a copy of the recording.

Uniform Compensation and Benefits Plan

In January 2011, the budget committee established a uniform compensation and benefits plan for court staff to replace the varied policies of individual courts before restructuring. During fiscal year 2012-13, the budget committee took the final step in transitioning to the system-wide pay and benefits plan by conducting an internal pay equity study. The purpose of the study, which was conducted by a professional compensation consulting firm, was to rectify pay disparities related to length of service in the courts. Recommended compensation adjustments were implemented in June 2013.

Employee Performance Evaluation System

A key component of the compensation plan for court staff is annual merit pay adjustments based on a uniform performance evaluation system. The web based system, which launched on May 1, establishes system-wide job performance criteria on which employees at all courts are evaluated. Annual performance evaluations promote professional development, and merit increases based on those evaluations incentivize employees to do their best work and deliver outstanding customer service.

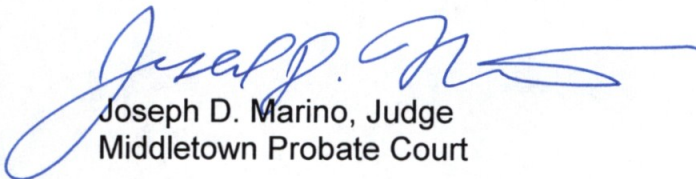
Conclusion

Probate Court restructuring significantly reduced the cost of operating the system and, as a result, the General Fund appropriation necessary to support it. The benefit to the state budget from those cost reductions is ongoing. Moreover, the streamlined court structure has enabled the system to adopt numerous measures to improve customer service and cost effectiveness.

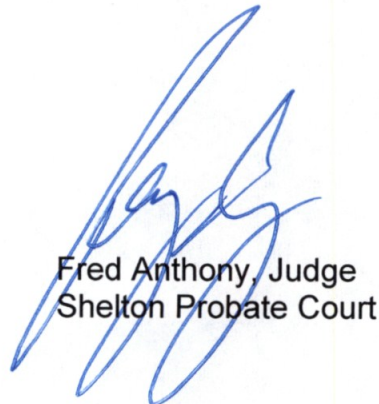
Respectfully submitted,



Paul J. Knierim
Probate Court Administrator
Chair, Probate Court Budget Committee



Joseph D. Marino, Judge
Middletown Probate Court



Fred Anthony, Judge
Shelton Probate Court