



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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Circuit Clerks discuss modernizing recordkeeping

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. – A committee of circuit clerks established by the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia will hold a meeting at 9 a.m. February 16 at the Charleston Marriott to discuss potential ways to modernize the storage of court orders.

“We are looking at the possibility of changing some of the processes we do in the clerks’ offices to bring them in line with the technology strides that have been made,” said Marion County Circuit Clerk Barbara Core, chairwoman of the committee.

Specifically, the group is studying whether circuit clerks’ offices that have the ability and capacity to scan all court orders and store them electronically also need to keep paper copies in order books, as they all currently do. Order books and the special paper used to copy orders that are then put into the books are expensive. Storing orders electronically with two backups would be cheaper, and it would be a safer alternative in the event of a fire or natural disaster.

A paper copy of each order also currently is placed in the individual court file that the order concerns. That would continue to be done if order books are eliminated.

Ms. Core estimates her office alone could save up to \$6,000 a year if she did not keep order books.

“We are trying to improve our offices as well as save the counties money and preserve the record as outlined by our duties,” said Ohio County Circuit Clerk Brenda Miller, a member of the committee. “We will still have the original paper of each order signed by the judge within each individual file, but the order books are an additional “copy” of the original or duplicate paperwork. Each clerks’ office only has so much space for storage of these books. Unfortunately, most courthouses were built long ago before storage was even a consideration.”

The Supreme Court last fall appointed Ms. Core to lead the committee and directed her to choose other committee members. The Court also directed the group to work with Supreme Court Administrative Director Steve Canterbury and Supreme Court Clerk Rory Perry to research the issue and report back to the Supreme Court by September 2010.

“I’m very excited to be on a committee that has the opportunity to bring technological improvement into circuit clerks’ offices and make them more efficient,” said Jefferson County Circuit Clerk Laura Rattenni. “It’s imperative the circuit clerks in this state continue to improve their efficiency and if this could come to pass, my office would recognize substantial savings as well. To me, that is the most important thing, preserving the record and saving money.”

“I’m looking forward to working with the Court to bring the circuit clerks’ offices into the age of technology,” said Hancock County Circuit Clerk Brenda Jackson. “This will be a cost-saving procedural change for our counties. In these times, we are all looking for ways to save money.”

Kanawha County Circuit Clerk Cathy Gatson said, “I’m pleased to be a participant on a committee which will examine the advances of this technological initiative. The committee will assess current practices, receive input from stakeholders, and then make recommendations to the Court. And our ultimate goal is to enhance access to the courts’ records and ensure their preservation.”

“I’m looking forward to improving technology in the circuit clerks’ offices,” said Upshur County Circuit Clerk Brian Gaudet. “My goal is to find cost-saving methods for counties while preserving records.”

The Supreme Court formed the committee before Governor Joe Manchin III’s request to cut the state budget because it constantly strives to spend West Virginia tax dollars judiciously.

“It’s our responsibility to be examining these things,” Mr. Canterbury said.

“The question before the committee is the first of many technological questions to be presented to circuit clerks over the next several years,” Mr. Canterbury said. “My hope is this is the foundation of the technological committee of the circuit clerks in the Unified Judicial Application system that is being developed.”

Not all clerks offices have the same technological capacity, so any recommendations of the committee will simply give circuit clerks the option to scan orders in lieu of keeping paper copies, not force them to do so, Ms. Core emphasized.

“For counties that have been investing in technology, this is a logical next step. No one is anticipating this be ordered for anyone,” Mr. Canterbury said.

The committee’s first action will be to survey circuit clerks to find out how many have the ability to scan orders, Ms. Core said.

The committee had its organizational meeting on January 12 at the Charleston Marriott. Ms. Core said she plans to invite at least four more circuit clerks to join the panel and to invite many representatives of the legal community, technological experts, and representatives of public agencies to provide their input at future meetings.

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