

The Ohio Courts Network White Paper

Accompanying text prepared for the Ohio Courts Network Presentation.

History of the Proposal:

During the October 11, 2002 meeting of the Ohio Judicial Conference Court Technology Committee, members voted to pursue an idea they had been discussing for several months; namely, the creation of a statewide network connecting all Ohio Courts. According to the proposal submitted at that meeting, the OJC Court Technology Committee identified key issues facing Ohio courts and set in motion the creation of the proposal that is before you today.

“There is no mechanism in place to fund court technology in at least three critical areas. These areas are:

1. Statewide networking of courts;
2. Staffing the development and maintenance of technology and technology standards at the Supreme Court;
3. Funding technology in courts that do not have adequate local funding sources.

“These critical needs, in particular the disparity in technology funding among our courts, are issues that must be resolved. It is right that the impetus for recognizing these problems and proposing a solution should come from this committee.”

(Agenda Item for 10-11-02 OJC Technology Committee meeting Chaired by Hon. Milt Nuzum of the Marietta Municipal Court.)

The ensuing conversation and subsequent proposal, developed by members of the OJC Court Technology Committee, was further refined in cooperation with the Supreme Court of Ohio Advisory Committee on Technology & the Courts (ACTC), chaired by Hon. John Bessey of the Franklin County Common Pleas Court. The team, comprised of members of the OJC Technology Committee, the ACTC, staff technology experts at the Supreme Court and statewide court technology personnel, have spent the past several months defining and describing a technology system that will meet the original goals set forth in that October meeting, as well as others that have come to light during the development of this proposal.

The Ohio Courts Network concept has been presented to and endorsed by the following stakeholder groups and organizations:

- The Ohio Courts of Appeals Judges Association
- The Ohio Common Pleas Judges Association
- The Ohio Association of Probate Judges
- The Municipal and County Judges Association of Ohio
- The Ohio Clerk of Courts Association
- The Ohio Association of County & Municipal Court Clerks
- The Ohio Association of Court Administrators
- The Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Technology and the Courts

Additionally, the following organizations and agencies have reviewed, provided guidance and/or made recommendations on various portions of this proposal:

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- The Ohio Department of Administrative Services, Technology Division
- The Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services
- The National Center for State Courts
- The Gartner Technology Group
- The Mid-Atlantic Justice Consortium
- The U.S. Department of Justice
- The technology offices of the state courts of Texas, Utah, and California

The assistance of these organizations and the insight they provided were invaluable in the formation of this proposal.

Goals:

The goals and objectives primarily focus on promoting the integrity and interoperability of court systems with each other and justice system partners to ensure the continuity of the judiciary in Ohio. (*See the July 2002: National Strategy for Homeland Security.*)

An integrated, statewide justice information network is necessary to ensure that all justice stakeholders have the accurate information they require, when and where they need it, to better administer justice and enhance the safety and well being of the people of the State of Ohio and across the country. Information contained in the court system is critical to this effort.

The Current Environment and some Barriers to Collaboration:

Today, over 99% of all state courts are automated, uniquely positioning Ohio to successfully build a statewide information network. However, information technology systems in Ohio do not easily share information with other courts and justice system partners. Often, information that is available is incomplete, inaccurate, and provides minimal value to information sharing efforts.

Information technology systems in Ohio courts have been designed to meet local operational needs and do not adequately provide statewide justice information. With the burden of development placed locally, the ability of individual courts to acquire sophisticated information technology systems varies widely. Due to this independent development, no standards exist from which to develop opportunities for information sharing and collaboration among courts and justice system partners.

Public safety demands improved security measures. Today, court information is used to make critical decisions regarding background checks, handgun purchases, issuance of commercial driver and pilot licenses, immigration, amber alerts, domestic violence protections and child support compliance. These are vital to the safety of Ohio communities.

The Proposal for an Ohio Courts Network:

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This proposal, simply stated, recommends the building of a secure private network connecting all Ohio courts to an information repository and to the Internet.

Our task will be to use current, proven networking and integration technologies to provide the physical infrastructure to connect each Ohio court, via a T-1 or better broadband connection.

The creation of an information repository will allow for the automated collection and reporting of information from local systems to be sent over a secure network and translated at a central point to enable the sharing of critical information among courts.

Utilization of a Web portal will allow courts on the system to access internet resources, share new application technologies and provide a single point of contact for justice system partners to access critical court information; as well as providing public access to appropriate court resources.

The purpose of an Ohio Courts Network is not to replicate every piece of information in a local court case management system, but rather to identify reporting elements that are critical to investigations, dispositions, sentencing, and other critical tasks performed by courts and justice system partners. The goal is to gather specific information to share and by doing so, streamlining the process to a substantial degree.

Why now?

We've already laid the groundwork by automating these courts, uniquely positioning Ohio to successfully build a statewide information network to enable those courts to share information with one another.

Advances in critical information sharing technologies and the maturity of the Internet allow us to take advantage of proven technical resources to federate and integrate information from a wide variety of systems. While this is not new innovation in the world of technology, integration brokers and other information sharing applications, until recently, lacked the proven maturity to enable us to take advantage of them. Today we can.

Society today is more mobile than ever. Systems that communicate are better able to track multi-jurisdictional crimes. A collaborative information-sharing system will reduce burden on local court budgets and staff.

Now is the time, due to the current budget crisis, the availability of federal and homeland security funds, the national and statewide focus on information sharing, security and infrastructure-- for all these reasons we have reached a unique point in time where it has never been as important as it is now to invest and lead the Ohio Judiciary into the 21st century.

Advantages:

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You may ask yourself, “Why do we need an Ohio Courts Network?” “How will it benefit Ohio or my local court?” Let me suggest just a few ways this network will make you and your local court more efficient and better able to serve the public. Consider a few of the many advantages that an Ohio Courts Network can provide:

- Equitable distribution of resources across all courts to eliminate the digital divide between urban and rural courts, thus improving the ability to share information;
- Improved access to information, such as:
 - Quicker turnaround time on public information requests.
 - Expanded legal research functionality.
 - Online dockets and case information from every local court.
 - Online access to local court rules, procedures, documents.
- Access to a repository that can act as a replicate court database to aid in disaster recovery. This reduces the cost of security, disaster recovery and business continuity by standardizing and consolidating in a central location. This feature will be especially helpful to small courts and local law enforcement which might not be able to afford it otherwise;
- Access to a secure, shared network provides access to court information for judges and criminal justice partners while retaining municipal, regional and state agency control over their local systems and information;
- Data requests from external agencies impose substantial demands on local courts. Automated data reporting and a repository enables courts and agencies to extract information themselves thereby eliminating the burden;
- Minimizes the investment required in new information technologies by providing choices directed towards streamlining existing information technology systems to accommodate the use of future technologies;
- Generates new revenue by providing infrastructure and technology that allows future, fee-based court services and provides a secure portal for electronic transactions;
- Reduces costs now and in the future by improving efficiency, improving information sharing, reducing staffing needs for paper processes, lowers delivery and postage costs, reduces office supply needs, reduces storage space needs, and increases efficiency to request for public record information;
- A shared network can provide communications capability for reduced costs and wider availability of CLE courses, meeting

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attendance/participation, staff training and professional development through video- and Web-conferencing.

We live in a world where electronic communication is becoming the norm. Many Ohio courts have already implemented local court Web sites and Internet-based payment systems for traffic violations. Many are currently planning to implement e-filing for court documents. The cost and time savings for this element of a statewide court network alone justify our consideration.

Real time access to information is essential in identifying and addressing crime and providing justice for all Ohioans. A secure Internet-based information sharing system is the fastest most efficient way to get critical data to those who need it.

The Funding Model:

A network is essential to efficient court operations. Unfortunately, due to the current budget crisis, funds for an initiative of this scope are not likely to come from the Ohio legislature. Fortunately, there is a model in place for us to follow. By state statute, courts can assess court costs on each case for the computer operations of the clerk's office in an amount not to exceed \$10 per case and for the judge not to exceed \$3 per case. Our proposal is to follow these established methods for paying for court operations and request the legislature to require each court to assess costs for the operation of the Ohio Courts Network.

This funding model provides the base budget for the on-going operation, maintenance and support costs for the Ohio Courts Network. The cost to initially develop and build a system of this type must come from other sources. Initial implementation costs to build this information sharing network will be sought through federal funding sources. A proposal for implementation funds to the Federal Government will have significantly more impact and a higher probability of success if accompanied by a sound commitment to ongoing operational costs. We hope you agree that the return on an investment of this nature is extraordinarily high and that this proposal outlines sound policy to take Ohio Courts into future.

A Final Word:

We hope these documents provide you with the information necessary for discussion and decision-making.

Mary Beth Parisi, Manager of Technology Policy & Planning at the Supreme Court of Ohio, is available to answer questions and discuss these materials. She can be reached at tpp@sconet.state.oh.us, or at 614.644.9308. We encourage you to review these documents and share with us any and all questions or comments you might have.