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Alabama introduces court e-filing system

By Dinya Sarkar

Alabama court officials are introducing an e-filing system this year that would potentially allow thousands of state attorneys to securely file complaints, discoveries, proposed orders and other documents via the Internet.

By the end of 2006, officials from the Alabama Administrative Office of Courts (AOC) want attorneys to electronically file about 80 percent of all civil cases through AlaFile, said Mike Carroll, AOC's deputy director. The office oversees the state's unified court system and is responsible for centralized purchasing, personnel issues, technology and other matters.

An estimated 3,000 attorneys account for 75 percent of civil cases, which include family matters such as divorces and child support, Carroll said. State officials are training attorneys and their staffs in Alabama's 67 counties to use the system. He said they have trained about 1,000 attorneys out of 14,000 in the state on the system so far.

State officials are excluding criminal cases – felonies and misdemeanors – from electronic filings because the state must first take legislative action, he added. The court system handles about 700,000 cases annually.

The AOC, which has 2,000 employees, dealt with budget cutbacks three years ago and laid off 250 employees. Forced to do more with less, the office sought to improve efficiency.

"We weren't prepared to fund these projects by laying off more personnel," Carroll said.

The ball got rolling when Drayton Nabers was appointed chief justice to the state's Supreme Court about 18 months ago.

"We had the problem. We had the tools in our hands. But we didn't have somebody pull the trigger in getting us to meet the issues at hand," Carroll said. "And when he got there, he pulled the trigger for us."

AOC officials decided to enhance an existing case management system called Alacourt, developed by On-Line Information Services (OLIS), based in Mobile, Ala. The state has had a seven-year partnership with OLIS, which provides a monthly subscription service to attorneys who can view and retrieve information about a case via a secure Web site.

In the case management system, all state attorneys were assigned unique identification numbers, which they can also use in the e-filing system, he said. Also, procedures require attorneys to maintain original documents for two years in case someone questions the authenticity of an electronic document.

The state and OLIS started working on the e-filing project in January 2005 and launched the first test in September. Seven counties are participating in the project, and the state has been training more attorneys, he said. To date, the court has been electronically receiving motions on cases and original complaints.

Attorneys send electronic submissions to a court clerk's office, which automatically routes them to judge assigned to the cases. Carroll said the system cuts down on paper handling, improves worker productivity and speeds the movement of cases. He said judges could also generate orders and e-mail all attorneys involved in a case almost instantly, shortening a process that can take three or four days.

He said the state put little funding into this project. Most of it was used to bolster infrastructure in terms of redundancy.

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