

HARRIS COUNTY JUSTICE COURTS BECOME TECHNOLOGY LEADERS WITH SOFTWARE, SERVER UPGRADES

Implementation of electronic court notices, online dispute resolution now possible

Dec. 2, 2021 — When the 16 Harris County Justice Courts opened for business on Monday after a long-awaited weekend upgrade to their case management software, it was business as usual for judges, clerks, and customers.

The smooth transition appeared to happen overnight. But the work began long before the mid-November “upgrade weekend.”

More than a dozen employees — analysts, technicians, programmers, developers — spent over a year planning for the upgrade, methodically testing every process and updating every connection as they readied for launch.

On Nov. 15, 2021, it was finally a go.

“It’s been a big improvement, and there’s more to come,” said Precinct 1, Place 1 Justice of the Peace Eric Carter, Justice Courts presiding judge. “There are more tools available. As time goes by and we continue to transition, we’ll get even faster and even more efficient. We’re all working steadily to achieve that.”

Led by Harris County Courts Office of Court Management in conjunction with Harris County’s Universal Services, the project called for an upgrade to the latest version of Odyssey Case Manager, software that manages case files for Justice Courts. It also included installation of new, robust servers with the powerful databases needed to host the upgraded software.

Office of Court Management Justice Court Services Director Jaime Brew said the upgrade carries the same “look and feel” as the previous version, eliminating the need for additional training. But, she noted, it provides the opportunity to implement new features, including online dispute resolution and electronic notices and text message reminders.

Carter and fellow Co-Presiding Judge Holly Williamson both expressed interest in the implementation.

“Harris County should be a leader in technology and have the best and most advanced system. With this upgrade, we have that,” said Williamson, Precinct 8, Place 1 Justice of the Peace. “Instead of being a lagger, we’re a leader in technology and digitizing and becoming paperless.”

The Justice Courts digital transformation began in 2016 when Odyssey case management software was first implemented.

Williamson said she remembered her old inbox — overflowing with a towering stack of thick casefiles, each with a different item needing her attention. When an issue was urgent, she’d dig through dozens of files, searching for what seemed like a needle in a haystack.

While her inbox is still just as full, she now has all the information she needs right at her fingertips. She can easily sort and review casefiles online and sign orders electronically — a huge time saver.

Carter agreed.

“In terms of our work, it’s a huge improvement. It’s a critical step in terms of making that shift to a paperless system,” Carter said. “I remember the paper files we had. Just upkeep and maintenance of those hard files was an incredible expense and time expenditure for the county and the court system and everyone involved.”

Not all justice of the peace courts across the state operate on the same software system, members of the upgrade team noted. Doing so, they said, provides several benefits, including the ability to see a more complete picture of a defendant’s arrests and warrants across all precincts. It also provides for standardized forms and consistent processes, which benefit litigants and lawyers.

“In the end, these upgrades and this software isn’t for us. It’s for the customer, for the people who come in and file evictions and small claims and get traffic tickets,” said Eric Cardin, a member of the upgrade team and field services technician with the Office of Court Management Technology Services Division. “The No. 1 thing is getting people in and out, making the process as fast and as efficient as possible.”

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