



Lubbock County

Office of Court Administration

Strategic Plan

Est. October 2012

Mission Statement

It is the goal of the District Courts and County Courts-at-Law to provide a just, fair, equitable, efficient, timely, and impartial adjudication of the rights of litigants within the bounds of substantive law and procedural law as promulgated in Texas. We will strive to meet this objective expeditiously and at the least expense practicable to the litigants, their attorneys, the State, the County, and the respective courts.

Purpose

It is the purpose of this strategic plan to identify and accordingly plan all projects, goals, and initiatives that serve Lubbock County through the District and County Courts-at-Law, as well as the Office of Court Administration. The plan will serve to successfully guide the Office of Court Administration in the support of the effective and efficient administration of justice for the Courts and the community it serves. Through the management, organization, and strategic handling of all judicial and administrative efforts, the Office of Court Administration seeks to fulfill the goals of the District Courts, County Courts-at-Law, and Lubbock County.

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Lubbock County District & County Courts-at-Law Governance Principles & Values

The principles below are found in one of the series of papers¹ entitled, *Perspectives on State Court Leadership – A Case for Court Governance Principles*², and will serve as a structure for practices of court governance in Lubbock County. The principles below are a credit to the effort and work produced by distinguished members, including Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson, Supreme Court of Texas, participating in the Executive Sessions.

To conclude this particular series, courts are challenged to operate with the highest standard:

*“...if you assume for the moment that the principles set forth are viable and appropriate, would the state-level governance of your court system stand up to them? What about the governance within your individual judicial districts or courts? How would you know whose opinion would count, and how would you initiate meaningful improvements? If we ignore the question of how we can most effectively govern our courts, then are we not relegating the judiciary to something less than an equal branch of government and hindering our ability to provide the public with a fair and efficient forum of resolving disputes? **Courts should carefully consider these questions along with the...unifying principles to maximize their own operability in favor of the most efficient, fair and highest standards of operation.**”*

The Lubbock County Board of Judges adopted the following principles, as provided in *Perspectives on State Court Leadership – A Case for Court Governance Principles*, on October 5, 2012 to serve as unifying beliefs and a foundation for court governance in Lubbock County. The values by which the Courts shall operate include:

1) “A well-defined governance structure for policy decision-making and administration for the entire court system.”

The principle...suggests that structure should be explicit, and the authority for policy decision-making and implementation well-defined.

2) Meaningful input from all levels into the decision-making process.

...the quality of the decision-making process is vitally enhanced by the knowledge and insights of all parts of the systems.

3) Selection of judicial leadership based on competency, not seniority or rotation.

The complexity of modern court administration demands a set of skills not part of traditional judicial selection and training.

¹ Developed as a result of Executive Sessions for State Court Leaders held at the Harvard Kennedy School

² Christine M. Durham and Daniel J. Becker, *Perspectives on State Court Leadership - A Case for Court Governance Principles*: <http://www.ncsc.org/Services-and-Experts/Court-leadership/Harvard-Executive-Session.aspx>.

4) Commitment to transparency and accountability.

We in the courts should know exactly how productive we are, how well we are serving public need, and what parts of the systems and services need attention and improvement.

5) A focus on policy level issues; delegation with clarity to administrative staff; and a commitment to evaluation.

An avoidance of micro-management by the policy-maker and clear authority for implementation in the managers are both important for the credibility and effectiveness of court governance, and can minimize the opportunities for undermining policy at the operational level.

6) Open communication on decisions and how they are reached.

To the extent judges, and staff, feel that decisions emerge from a 'black box,' without their input and prior knowledge, the potential for discomfort and dissatisfaction, not to mention active defiance or other bad behavior is magnified. A good system of governance does everything it can to keep information flowing.

7) Clear, well-understood and well-respected roles and responsibilities among the governing entity, presiding judge(s), court administrators, boards of judges, and court committees.

...it is particularly important in court management for the assignments and authority of leaders and managers to be clear, explicit, and included in the general orientation of new judges and staff, as well as in the training of new and potential judicial leadership.

8) A system that speaks with a single voice.

This does not imply only one voice; rather a unified message is necessary. Competing voices purporting to speak for the judiciary undermine the institutional independence of the courts and leave other parts of government (and the public) free to choose the messages they prefer in relation to court policy and administration. This is potentially very damaging both to the actual welfare of court systems and ultimately to the level of respect and attention afforded them.

9) Authority to allocate resources and spend appropriated funds independent of the legislative and executive branches.

Courts with the authority to manage their own funds can ensure that priorities are dictated by agreed-upon policy and planning and not by the 'project du jour.'

10) Positive institutional relationships that foster trust among other branches and constituencies.

Care and strategic attention must be afforded to building personal and professional relationships that will ensure an adequate level of credibility when the judiciary is in conversation with other parts of state government.

11) The judicial branch should govern and administer operations that are core to the process of adjudication.

Court Governance Goals

Goal 1 – Enhance the Administration of Justice

The Courts value the administration of justice through a process that embodies the veracity of fairness and expeditiousness. The Courts strive to enhance such administration through regular review and evaluation of its processes, methods, and procedures, so that the administration of justice is sought in the most enhanced and cost-efficient manner possible. In the development of enhancements, the Courts strive to utilize and mirror processes or initiatives modeled after proven evidence-based practices.

While cost-efficiency is sought, the Courts, however, will not jeopardize the integrity of the judicial process in an effort to reduce costs. The Courts shall pursue resources necessary to support effective and efficient operations, and to expend those resources judiciously.

To facilitate a timely process, the Court has sought or seeks to:

- Improve the court appointment process and enhance the quality of representation for indigent persons accused of crimes
- Advancement of court process automation, scheduling, and accessibility through systems evaluation and use of technology
- Investigate the efficiency of the court management process
- Collaborate initiatives to more effectively monitor and handle mental health offenders
- Institute methods that provide equal access to justice for individuals with Limited English Proficiency and visual, auditory, and mobility impairments.

The Courts utilize and pursue county funding, as well as grant funding for its programs and in the administration of justice. With or without the availability of funds, the Commissioners Court has continually shown support for and been an integral part of the programs, processes, and initiatives the Courts have instituted and pursued. Specific programs or projects have and continue to include:

- Specialty Court programs
- Mental health initiatives
- Managed Assigned Counsel programs
- Regional Public Defender for Capital Cases project
- Use of technology
- Court Reporter exhibit project
- Equal Access to Justice

Goal 2 – Broaden Access to Justice and Service to the Public

The Courts believe justice should be accessible to all participants. Participants include any person with whom the Courts interact. The Courts acknowledge the need for accessible facilities, but realize an even greater need is the effective participation of all who appear before them. Effective participation occurs when participants are actively involved in and understand the process. The Courts will work toward effective participation by alleviating the burden of linguistic difficulties, disabilities, and economic barriers many of the Courts participants face. The Courts will provide the public and self-represented litigants (SRL) with information that is easily understandable and readily available.

To improve the effectiveness and access to justice of indigent persons accused of crimes, the Courts will continue to:

- Promptly appoint attorneys to indigent criminal defendants through the Managed Assigned Counsel program.
- Promptly appoint attorneys to indigent criminal defendants facing the death penalty through the Regional Public Defender for Capital Cases. Ultimately, improvements in the above areas lessen the economic burden by eliminating the cost associated with retaining counsel.

To decrease the obstacles that disabled participants and those with limited English proficiency may encounter, the Courts will:

- Continue to schedule interpreters for the hearing impaired and those with limited English proficiency for court appearances at no cost to the participant and work to perfect the process.
- Pursue alternatives for in-person interpretation like video interpretation, computer-assisted real-time captioning, or personal sound amplifiers.
- Update and amend the Limited English Proficiency policy as needed.

Create and implement an Access to Justice Policy consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The above resolutions will enable more effective participation by reducing language barriers and educating the public to the services the Courts offer. The Courts recognize that lawsuits involving self-represented litigants are on the rise. In fact, of all civil dispositions in fiscal year 2012, more than 19% had at least one SRL. Further, of all divorce dispositions in fiscal year 2012, more than 42% had at least one SRL. In conjunction with self-represented litigants, the Courts recognize the need for website improvements. To address these trends:

- The Courts established a kiosk in the law library to assist litigants with drafting motions, petitions, and order and created a judicial information video.
- The Courts will continue to monitor the public's need for education and resources when representing themselves.
- The Courts will improve their website by providing to the attorneys automated forms, reports, resolutions, and local rules.
- The Courts will also continue to improve the availability of forms and data to the general public.

- The Courts administer the online access program by providing technical support, reprogramming as needed, and user management.

Goal 3 – Promote Competence, Professionalism and Civility

The Courts' aim is to provide respectful, competent and professional conduct to all court participants, including court staff. Court personnel must be well-trained and receive the support necessary to produce excellent service. Court personnel work best when their role is well-defined and well-understood. When each member understands and takes responsibility for their role in the process, the result will be a positive work environment, job satisfaction among personnel, and high achievement.

In order to achieve excellent service and timely dispositions, judicial officers must be educated in caseload management, best practices, and emerging areas of the law. As the Courts promote this goal, enhancement of the administration of justice (Goal 1) will be realized.

The Courts endeavor to:

- Improve case management for all case types
- Make advancements in family law case management
- Create and implement a policy regarding required language in Orders for Essential Needs Licenses.
- Gain oversight of the expunction process to ensure all records related to expunction are removed.
- Consider revisions to the attorney ad litem policy in non-CPS cases and explore automating the process

The Courts acknowledge a need to be accountable to each other, to Commissioners' Court, and the general public. Keeping this in mind, the Courts resolve to:

- Report monthly on court statistics to the Board of Judges, and post the report on the Courts website
- Implement the CourTools dashboard
- Continue research into Specialty court sustainability and areas of improvement within those courts
- Collect data and dockets regarding the mental health court and the current status of mental health inmates
- Monitor previously established case standards and implement necessary improvements to ensure achievement of those standards

The Courts promote high standards of conduct, proficiency, personal behavior, and fairness when interacting with court personnel. Several projects will be instituted to address each of the above concerns. They include:

- Continuing education
- Study with departmental personnel and court staff involving time studies and potential changes to job duties, procedures and policies

Goal 4 – Effectively Utilize Technology

The Courts strive to have courtrooms that are “smart”. Technology should be used to enhance productivity and improve citizen access. Technology must be used to support the achievement of the Court’s mission. Currently, the Courts are utilizing iPads, laptops, and smartphones for communication and remote capabilities. Judges are able to follow along on their laptop as a witness testifies with real-time transcription. Instead of a whiteboard and dry erase markers, litigants are using power point presentations. All of these advancements result in more cost-efficient operations and greater case clarity when rendering decisions. The Courts are investigating other measures that will boost productivity and decrease costs across the board.

Some of these measures are:

- Video visitation between a party’s attorney and the jailed party. This will decrease travel time and mileage for the attorney and may result in more interaction with the client. Ultimately, the result will be more effective assistance of counsel.
- Closed circuit testimony for physicians testifying in a mental health case. Like the above measure, this will decrease travel time and increase cost-efficiency for the parties involved and result in timely, final orders.
- Expansion of courtroom technology. As mentioned previously, these expansions will increase juror and litigant satisfaction, decrease the time spent in court, and increase the cost-efficiency of the judiciary.
- Update the attorneys and bondsmen on the emailer system. Currently, this system sends electronic notices, settings, and other correspondence to attorneys. The Courts would like to include bondsmen in this system. This process saves money and time and allows personnel to perform other necessary functions.
- Oversight of electronic disposition reporting (EDR). Currently, IT manages the reporting and error codes. The Courts believe that quality assurance in EDR could rest with them. Regulating this process would free up programmer hours and county dollars.
- Evaluate individual courtrooms for their technological needs as well as for their ease of use. The Courts need to ensure that parties will be treated equitably and will have access to the same technology wherever their case is heard.

Goal 5 – Build Trust and Confidence through Community Outreach

The Courts value the community's trust and will strive to uphold that confidence. Much of the population does not have an understanding in the day-to-day operations of the court, the departments that aid the judiciary, or what the Courts do behind the scenes. Through education and outreach, the Courts hope to nurture the public's faith in the process.

The Courts place a high priority on open government. In this regard, the Courts are pursuing increased community outreach and enhance community perceptions. The Courts are considering these additions:

- Creating a FAQ page on the Courts website
- Creating a general email for the public to ask questions and provide feedback about general court operations.
- Provide court tours and education for Lubbock schools and other organizations

