Florida State Courts

2014-2015

Annual Report
The Supreme Court of Florida

Florida State Courts Annual Report
July 1, 2014 – June 30, 2015

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Peggy A. Quince
Charles T. Canady
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Justices

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The Florida Supreme Court moved to its current location, the Supreme Court Building, in 1949. Above is a view of the Court rotunda. Embedded in the center of the rotunda floor is a replica of the Court’s seal surrounded by eight marble columns. The seal includes the motto, *Sat Cito Si Recte*, which means, “Soon enough if done rightly.” The phrase emphasizes the importance of taking the time necessary to achieve true justice.
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Mission

The mission of the judicial branch is to protect rights and liberties, uphold and interpret the law, and provide for the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Vision

Justice in Florida will be accessible, fair, effective, responsive, and accountable.

To be accessible, the Florida justice system will be convenient, understandable, timely, and affordable to everyone.

To be fair, it will respect the dignity of every person, regardless of race, class, gender or other characteristic; apply the law appropriately to the circumstances of individual cases, and include judges and court staff that reflect the community’s diversity.

To be effective, it will uphold the law and apply rules and procedures consistently and in a timely manner, resolve cases with finality, and provide enforceable decisions.

To be responsive, it will anticipate and respond to the needs of all members of society, and provide a variety of dispute resolution methods.

To be accountable, the Florida justice system will use public resources efficiently, and in a way that the public can understand.
Every day, thousands of people turn to the courts in our state with a vast variety of needs and problems. The dilemmas and crises concern their families and their homes, their jobs or their businesses, their communities, their health, their safety. The issues often are extremely complex, difficult, and distressing. The cases are always important.

Also important is the role that courts play in our democracy and in our society. Courts dispense justice, confirm the rule of law and, as every schoolchild knows, provide an essential check and balance in our democracy.

Both perspectives bring into sharp focus the vital importance of courts and may motivate you to explore this annual report on the Florida judiciary. But I believe there is a stronger reason for you to spend time with this report. Courts must have the trust and confidence of the people they serve if they are to fulfill their constitutional role. Annual reports such as this are intended to increase knowledge and understanding of this branch of government with the goal of fostering public trust.

So this report is written for a wide audience—not just Florida's judges or court staff, but the people they serve. I am quite sure that readers who spend time perusing this report will come away with greater trust in the judicial branch of government. On behalf of myself and all the men and women who work in our state’s courts, I thank you for your time and attention.

What will you find in this annual report? In this opening message, I mention only a few highlights, topics that I believe will interest many readers. I encourage you to browse through the report to discover the wide array of informative articles and graphics on court initiatives and programs in the fiscal year extending from July 1, 2014, through June 30, 2015.

A few months into the 2014-15 fiscal year, I met in the rotunda of the Florida Supreme Court with leaders from The Florida Bar and the Florida Bar Foundation to sign an administrative order creating the Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice.

This 27-member commission, which I chair, includes leaders from the other two branches of government, the legal community, and the world of business. The commission has an extremely important job: to study the unmet civil legal needs of disadvantaged, low-income, and moderate-income Floridians and to recommend ways to bridge the gap so that all people have access to meaningful justice—not just those who can afford to hire an attorney. Many individuals and groups in the legal community have dedicated their careers to helping people who cannot afford attorneys. But this problem is simply too big for the legal community to solve on its own. This is a societal problem and it needs a societal solution. I am greatly encouraged by the energy and creativity the Commission on Access to Civil Justice has brought to bear on its task and I look forward to its recommendations next year.

It is said that there is a time and a tide to all things. As one initiative begins, another concludes. And in both instances the development is a positive one. The Mortgage Foreclosure Initiative was successful in dramatically reducing the backlog of foreclosure cases that flooded our courts several years ago when the housing market collapsed. But we have come through on the other side of the storm and are moving close to normal caseload
levels. Read the good news in this report. Many people—judges, magistrates, and court staff—labored mightily to handle these cases and I thank them for their dedication.

This annual report also has information about advancements in technology, including electronic filing by attorneys, electronic case management by judges and court staff, access to court records, and plans to effectively harness technological tools for the trial courts.

I hope you will take time to learn about the work of the Judicial Management Council, which this report describes. Do not be deceived by the name—the JMC has exciting and very important projects in the works, including updating the Florida judiciary’s long-range plan and its communication plan.

In this annual report, there are facts and figures about how many and what kinds of courts Florida has and how many and what kinds of cases are coming in the front doors of those courts. The numbers may surprise you. More than 3.5 million filings were received in Florida’s trial courts in the 2013-14 fiscal year beginning in July 2013 and ending in June 2014. Nearly 25,000 filings were received in Florida’s five District Courts of Appeal in that same time frame and more than 2,500 in the Florida Supreme Court. And, as I mentioned at the beginning, these cases are often complex, difficult, and distressing—and always important.

Florida’s courts handle these thousands of important cases with a budget that is a tiny slice of the entire state budget—literally less than one percent of the entire budget. If that leads you to wonder how the courts can do so much with so little, I believe the explanation lies in our truly excellent workforce and its record of innovation. Without question, our courts would benefit from better funding—as would the thousands of people who turn to them. But thanks to the dedication of our employees, our courts function with the highest level of efficiency and effectiveness possible with the budget we are given.

I extend my thanks to all the women and men who work in the Florida judiciary and who do so much to make our courts accessible, fair, effective, responsive, and accountable. They are smart and they are committed to the mission of Florida’s courts to “protect rights and liberties, uphold and interpret the law, and provide for the peaceful resolution of disputes.” It is my honor to lead them as Florida’s chief justice.
Justice Labarga was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in January 2009; he is the second Hispanic to sit on the court. He is the court’s fifty-sixth chief justice of Florida.

Born in Havana, Cuba, Justice Labarga was a young boy when he ventured to Pahokee, Florida, with his family. He received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Florida in 1976, and, three years later, he earned his law degree, also from the University of Florida. He spent three years as an assistant public defender (from 1979 – 1982), five years as an assistant state attorney (from 1982 – 1987), and nine years in private practice, all in the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit. In 1996, he was appointed a circuit judge in the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit, where he served in the family, civil, and criminal divisions and as the administrative judge of the civil division. Then in December 2008, he was appointed to the Fourth District Court of Appeal. However, Justice Labarga was on the appellate bench only one day before the governor selected him to serve on the Florida Supreme Court.

Justice Labarga and his wife Zulma have two children.

Barbara J. Pariente
Justice

Justice Pariente was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in December 1997. From 2004 – 2006, she was the chief justice, the second woman to serve in that role.

Born and raised in New York City, Justice Pariente received her BA from Boston University and her JD from George Washington University Law School. But Florida has been her home since 1973. After a two-year judicial clerkship in Fort Lauderdale, she spent 18 years in private practice in West Palm Beach, specializing in civil trial litigation. Then, in September 1993, she was appointed to the Fourth District Court of Appeal, where she served until her appointment to the Supreme Court.

During her years with the Supreme Court, she has actively supported programs that promote successful alternatives to incarceration, such as Florida’s drug courts. She has also worked to improve methods for handling cases involving families and children in the courts; she promotes judicial education on the unified family court and advocates for improved case management, case coordination, and non-adversarial methods for resolving family disputes. Because of her longstanding commitment to children, Justice Pariente continues to be a mentor to school-age children.

Justice Pariente is married to retired Judge Frederick A. Hazouri, Fourth District Court of Appeal, and they have three married children and 10 grandchildren.

R. Fred Lewis
Justice

Justice Lewis was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in December 1998, and he served as chief justice from 2006 – 2008.

Born in Beckley, West Virginia, Justice Lewis made Florida his home in 1965, when he arrived to attend Florida Southern College in Lakeland. He then went to the University of Miami School of Law, and, after graduating, he attended the United States Army Adjutant General School. After his discharge from the military, he entered private practice in Miami, where he specialized in civil trial and appellate litigation until his appointment to the Florida Supreme Court.

While serving as chief justice, he founded Justice Teaching, an organization that pairs legal professionals with elementary, middle, and high schools in Florida to enhance civic and law-related education; currently, over 4,000 volunteer lawyers and judges are placed with and active in Florida’s public and private schools. He also convened the first inter-branch mental health summit, which developed and proposed a comprehensive plan to address the increasing needs of those with mental illnesses who are involved in the criminal justice system. In addition, he established
a task force to develop a survey with which to audit all court facilities in the state with the goal of identifying and removing obstacles that inhibit access to justice for people with disabilities.

Justice Lewis and his wife Judith have two children, Elle and Lindsay.

Peggy A. Quince
Justice

Justice Quince was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in December 1998, and she served as chief justice from 2008 – 2010. She has the distinction of being the first African-American woman on the court.

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, Justice Quince received her BS from Howard University and her JD from the Catholic University of America. She began her legal career in 1975 in Washington, DC, as a hearing officer with the Rental Accommodations Office administering the city’s new rent control law. She entered private practice in Virginia in 1977, specializing in real estate and domestic relations, and then moved to Bradenton, Florida, in 1978 to open a law office, where she practiced general civil law until 1980. From there, she joined the Attorney General’s Office, Criminal Division, serving for nearly 14 years. In 1994, she was appointed to the Second District Court of Appeal, where she remained until her appointment to the Supreme Court.

Justice Quince has been active in many civic and community organizations, including Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Jack and Jill of America, the Urban League, the NAACP, and The Links, Inc. She has also received numerous awards, especially for her work on behalf of girls, women, minorities, civil rights issues, and various school programs.

Justice Quince has two daughters, Peggy LaVerne and Laura LaVerne.

Charles T. Canady
Justice

Justice Canady was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in August 2008, and he served as chief justice from 2010 – 2012.

Born in Lakeland, Florida, Justice Canady has the unusual distinction of having served in all three branches of government. Returning to Lakeland after receiving his BA from Haverford College and his JD from Yale Law School, he went into private practice, concentrating on real estate law. In 1984, he successfully ran for a seat in the Florida House and served for three terms. Then in 1993, he was elected to the US House, serving until 2001. Throughout his tenure in Congress, he was a member of the House Judiciary Committee, which sparked his interest in appellate work; he chaired the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution from 1995 to 2001. After leaving Washington, DC, he returned to Florida and settled in Tallahassee, where he served as the governor’s general counsel. In 2002, the governor appointed him to the Second District Court of Appeal, where he remained until his appointment to the Florida Supreme Court.

Justice Canady and his wife, Jennifer Houghton, have two children.

Ricky Polston
Justice

Justice Polston was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in October 2008, and he served as chief justice from 2012 – 2014.

A native of Graceville, Florida, Justice Polston grew up on a farm that raised peanuts, watermelon, and cattle. He began his professional life as a certified public accountant: he received his BS in accounting from Florida State University in 1977 and developed a thriving career (in fact, he is still a licensed CPA). Nine years later, he received his law degree, also from Florida State University. He then went into private practice, where he handled cases
in state, federal, and appellate court. He remained in private practice until his appointment to the First District Court of Appeal in 2001, where he served until he was appointed to the Supreme Court.

Justice Polston and his wife, Deborah Ehler Polston, are the parents of ten children: in addition to their four biological children, they are raising a sibling group of six children whom they adopted from the state’s foster care system.

**James E.C. Perry**

*Justice*

Justice Perry was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court in March 2009.

Born in New Bern, North Carolina, Justice Perry received his BA in business administration and accounting in 1966 from Saint Augustine’s College. Drafted into the Army soon after he graduated, he went to officer candidate school, got a commission, and was eventually promoted to first lieutenant.

The assassination of Martin Luther King prompted his decision to go to law school: he felt that as a lawyer, he could do the most good. After earning his JD from Columbia University School of Law in 1972, he was determined “to go back to the South to fight for justice.” He arrived in Florida in 1973 and has lived here ever since. He was in private practice, specializing in civil and business law, until his 2000 appointment to the circuit bench in the Eighteenth Judicial Circuit—the first African-American appointed to that circuit. For a two-year term (2003 – 05), he was chief judge of the circuit. He served there until his appointment to the Supreme Court.

Involved in many community and civic organizations, Justice Perry is especially committed to those that serve at-risk children, and he has received numerous awards and honors for his work on behalf of children, minorities, and social justice issues.

Justice Perry and his wife, Adrienne M. Perry, a retired professor in the Department of Education at Stetson University, have three children.
Justices of the Florida Supreme Court. Seated (l – r) are Justice Pariente, Chief Justice Labarga, and Justice Lewis; standing (l – r) are Justice Polston, Justice Quince, Justice Canady, and Justice Perry.
Chief Justice Jorge Labarga, who recently completed the first year of his two-year term as the chief administrative officer of Florida’s judicial branch, frequently reminds listeners that Florida has now passed New York to become the nation’s third most populous state. And much needs to be done to accommodate the state’s growth and changes, he cautions. With the burgeoning state population, for instance, the judiciary must have the resources necessary to be able to protect and support the safety of all its citizens, especially its most vulnerable—children, families, and elders. In addition, because Florida’s economy is influenced by the presence of many domestic, international, and multi-national businesses—and because state leaders have been making energetic efforts to entice a variety of new businesses to Florida—resources are needed to administer and manage the kinds of complex civil cases that are increasingly being filed in the state courts: as the chief justice emphasizes, “Businesses of all sizes need an effective and efficient court system” so that they “can count on timely resolution of disputes that inevitably crop up in the business world.” At the same time, to handle these cases, the branch must have the ability to attract and retain judges who can effectively perform the demanding work of the courts—and the ability to hire and retain capable, well-qualified court personnel who can dexterously support the work of the judiciary. These are “challenging times in our profession,” he often points out, and the judicial branch has been rising to meet them.

The 2014 – 2015 Florida State Courts Annual Report illustrates the ways in which the branch has been addressing the challenges of ensuring that all Florida residents can achieve justice and resolve disputes in courts that aspire to be accessible, fair, effective, responsive, and accountable. These efforts are categorized within the context of the five long-range issues of the Long-Range Strategic Plan for the Florida Judicial Branch. The long-range issues—which are the high-priority areas that the branch, in seeking to fulfill its mission and reach toward its vision, must address over the long term—are Strengthening Governance and Independence; Improving the Administration of Justice; Supporting Competence and Quality; Enhancing Court Access and Services; and Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence. (Take this link to the branch’s 2009 – 2015 long-range plan.)

Long-Range Issue #1:
Strengthening Governance and Independence

To fulfill its mission, the judicial branch must strengthen its ability to fully function as a coequal and independent branch of government, to govern itself with coherence and clarity of purpose, to manage and control its internal operations, and to be accountable to the people.

In this era of demanding workloads and limited resources, Florida’s judicial branch is especially mindful of the need to govern itself effectively and efficiently—a goal that depends, in large part, on having revenues sufficient to support its legislatively-authorized budget. To achieve these objectives, branch leaders continue working steadily to ensure that the judiciary has sufficient and stable funding and to fortify the branch governance structure so the judiciary can develop and implement policies in a responsive, coherent, and timely manner.

State Courts System Funding

Brief History of Court Funding
In 1972, more than two-thirds of Florida voters approved reforms to Article V of the state constitution that sought to bring greater consistency and uniformity to the judicial branch. The ultimate goal of these reforms was to ensure that litigants, regardless of where in Florida they reside, receive similar treatment under Florida law. This constitutional revision had seismic effects on the judicial branch: outcomes included the reorganization of Florida’s 16 different types of trial courts into a two-tier system of 20 circuit and 67 county courts; the institution of a series of requirements designed to ensure that judges would be qualified and impartial; and the requirement that the salaries of judges and their assistants be paid by the state, rather than by local governments.
However, most of the other costs of running the courts system were still shouldered by the counties, which often meant substantial discrepancies in funding and services between one county and another. That changed in 2004, with the implementation of section 14 to Article V of the Florida Constitution, commonly called Revision 7. Approved by 67 percent of Florida voters in 1998, Revision 7 had two purposes: to relieve local governments of the increasing costs of subsidizing the trial courts and to ensure equity in court funding across each county in the state.

With the 2004 implementation of Revision 7, general revenue became the primary funding source for the courts. This means when the economy is robust, and sales tax and property revenues are growing, the state’s general revenue fund flourishes, giving rise to a healthy court budget. Conversely, when the economy is pinched, every entity that depends on state funding—including the courts system—feels the squeeze. Indeed, during the gloomiest stretch of the recent economic downturn, when the state’s general revenue fund plunged dramatically (from fiscal years 2007 – 08 through 2008 – 09), the court budget suffered a 12 percent reduction resulting in the elimination of nearly 300 staff positions, a hiring and travel freeze, a reduction in the number of judicial education programs, and a suspension in the work of numerous court committees.

And, as is typical in times of economic distress, just as court services were being reduced or eliminated, citizens and businesses were turning to the courts in greater numbers.

At the same time, foreclosure case filings began rising at historical levels, causing a spike in backlogged foreclosure cases. This had both direct and indirect economic consequences, further destabilizing Florida’s already fragile financial state.

To ensure the timely administration of justice and to safeguard the viability of the courts system, branch leaders began advocating the adoption of budgeting practices that would better stabilize the operations of the courts during periods of fiscal crisis.

To protect the courts from further reductions in budget and personnel during economically-distressed times, in January 2009, lawmakers established the State Courts Revenue Trust Fund, which they bolstered with higher filing fees and some fine revenues. With the creation of this dedicated funding source for the branch, the courts shifted from being primarily general revenue-funded to being primarily trust-funded (for instance, in the first year after this change was instituted, fiscal year 2009 – 10, the court budget was 70 percent trust-funded; in fiscal years 2010 – 11 and 2011 – 12, it was 90 percent trust-funded).

In spring 2009, after foreclosure filings began reaching singular heights, the legislature designated foreclosure filing fees as the principal source of revenue for the trust fund. However, with this change—coupled with the shift to being primarily trust-funded—the judicial branch budget became vulnerable to volatility beyond its control. This vulnerability became especially pronounced in October 2010, when foreclosure filings, which had grown to average more than 30,000 per month, fell to under 9,000 per month. Inescapably, this monumental drop in filings caused a huge shortfall in the trust fund, and when trust fund revenue was insufficient to support the branch’s appropriated budget, the chief justice had to secure emergency funding from the governor and legislature.

Seeking to restore revenue stability to the state courts system, the legislature adopted a different approach in spring 2012: given the unpredictable swings in mortgage foreclosure filings, lawmakers decided to direct most of those filing fees away from the courts system’s trust fund and into the state’s general revenue fund (which, because of its size, can better withstand the swings), thereby making general revenue the primary funding source for the courts once again.

In fiscal year 2014 – 15, for instance, 78 percent of the court budget derived from general revenue, with 22 percent coming from trust funds; in the 2015 – 16 fiscal year, 81 percent is coming from general revenue and 19 percent, from trust funds. But even with this return to being predominantly general revenue-funded, the judicial branch continues to experience some fiscal instability because the trust fund does not generate enough to cover all the costs for which it is responsible.
Additionally, since the adoption of this strategy in 2012, estimated revenues have been falling short of actual revenues; deficits are also projected for fiscal years 2015-16 and 2016-17.

Note: Florida’s courts system is paid for in part by court users, pursuant to fees specified by the legislature. Such court-related revenue also supports the clerks of court and various non-court state entities and programs. All told, Florida’s judicial branch consistently receives a little less than one percent of the state’s total budget (for fiscal year 2014-15, for instance, the courts were appropriated .65 percent of the state budget). [To learn more about court funding and courts system appropriations, take this link.]

Funding for the 2014 – 15 Fiscal Year

The state continues to exhibit slow, but steady signs of recovery from the Great Recession. In the 2013 – 14 fiscal year, Florida enjoyed its first budget surplus in six years, and in fiscal year 2014 – 15, lawmakers were working with a surplus once again. In its legislative budget request for that year, the judicial branch sought adequate funding for its “people, places, and tools,” and lawmakers responded to this call. The courts system received $501.6 million for the fiscal year. [Note: this figure included $24.2 million for pass through/legislative (member) project funding not sought in the judicial branch’s legislative budget request; $23.6 million in nonrecurring funds for building needs and for temporary resources to help address the backlog of foreclosure cases; and $33.3 million for legislatively-approved supplemental appropriations related to fiscal year 2013 – 14 increased costs in employee benefits.]

This budget included funding for three new DCA judgeships, for the first phase of a two-part project to build a new courthouse for the Fourth DCA, and for maintenance, repairs, and some security issues at the Second, Third, and Fifth DCAs. Problem-solving courts also received funding: after a successful five-year pilot, the adult post-adjudicatory expansion drug courts were appropriated recurring dollars; funding was also earmarked for training for judges and court employees who work in problem-solving court dockets, for establishing veterans courts in two additional counties, and for sustaining the mental health diversion program in Miami-Dade.

The branch’s number one priority this year was employee pay. And while court employees did not receive the 3.5 percent across-the-board competitive salary adjustment sought by the branch, the legislature’s budget package included $8.1 million in recurring dollars for a salary adjustment targeted at court personnel to address identified salary equity, retention, and recruitment issues.

Funding for the 2015 – 16 Fiscal Year

Again this year, the legislature had a budget surplus. From its $78.3 billion budget, lawmakers appropriated $516.3 million to the judicial branch, representing an increase of 3 percent over the previous year’s budget. [Note: this figure includes $13.9 million for pass through/legislative (member) project funding not sought in the judicial branch’s legislative budget request; $17.4 million in nonrecurring funds for building needs; and $6.2 million for legislatively-approved supplemental appropriations related to fiscal year 2014 – 15 increased costs in employee-related benefits and expenses.]

The 2015 – 16 judicial branch budget includes $2 million for additional case managers; $750,000 for court interpreters; funding for additional senior judge days; and funding for the statewide replacement of hardware for the courts system’s network infrastructure. Funding was also provided to address facilities issues for the Third and Fifth DCAs and to advance to the next phase of construction for a new Fourth DCA building.

However, the branch’s top budget priority—recurring funds to address recruitment, retention, and equity issues affecting court personnel and to make judicial salaries more competitive—was not funded. Also not funded was the branch’s request for $25.6 million as part of a comprehensive plan to address technology needs of the trial courts related to case processing, due process, and achieving a minimum level of technology services statewide.
State Courts Administrator PK Jameson said, “While we did not reach our goals for the session, we certainly made progress.” She also noted that with the 2016 – 17 legislative session beginning in January 2016, which is two months earlier than usual, priority issues that were not funded for the 2015 – 16 fiscal year will be fresh in lawmakers’ minds when they return to Tallahassee.

Judicial Management Council

Florida’s Judicial Management Council (JMC), which serves as a high-level management consultant to the supreme court, has been offering guidance and support to the judicial branch for more than six decades. The current council has 15 voting members: two justices (presently, Chief Justice Labarga chairs the JMC, and Justice Polston serves as the second justice member), three DCA judges, three circuit court judges, three county court judges, and four public members; the state courts administrator serves as a non-voting member. As prescribed in the Florida Rules of Judicial Administration (rule 2.225), the council has five areas of responsibility: to identify potential crisis situations affecting the branch and develop strategies for addressing them; to identify and evaluate information that will assist in improving the performance and effectiveness of the branch; to develop and monitor progress related to the branch’s long-range planning efforts; to review the charges of the various court and Florida Bar commissions and committees; and to address other issues the court brings before it.

The JMC’s Education and Outreach Workgroup has striven to develop a branch-wide communication plan that can help the courts build relationships with a variety of partners; enhance public understanding of and support for the judicial branch; speak clearly and purposefully about the judicial branch; support open lines of communication; and communicate effectively using coordinated, strategic efforts.

The JMC, which convenes at least quarterly, had its inaugural meeting in January 2013 and, based on the council’s charges and on the issues raised by members at that meeting, the chief justice formed three workgroups: the Access to Justice Workgroup, the Performance Workgroup, and the Education and Outreach Workgroup; then in winter 2014, Chief Justice Labarga added a fourth, the Long-Range Strategic Planning Workgroup. The workgroups continue to make meaningful progress in addressing their responsibilities.

The Access to Justice Workgroup responds to the JMC’s first charge: to identify potential crisis situations affecting the branch and develop strategies to address them. For its first project, the workgroup has been focusing on the development and implementation of interactive, web-based, guided “interviews” to facilitate self-represented litigants’ access to the courts. These documents are being called interviews rather than forms because the latter tends to connote static documents, while the former signifies dynamic documents that change as users interact with them. For an example of how these interviews will operate, consider tax preparation software: this software guides users through a series of questions and generates the appropriate document for the IRS at the end of the process. Using a similar technology, courts hope to enable self-represented litigants to easily complete and print court documents that are ready to be filed. Since receiving supreme court approval for this proposal in April 2014, the workgroup has made significant progress in what is now called the DIY Florida Project. This year, the workgroup has been overseeing the development and review of interviews...
based on existing forms. After the interviews are developed, they are reviewed for legal sufficiency and accuracy by groups with subject matter expertise. Currently under review are some simple dissolution matters in the family law area, small claims, and landlord/tenant (evictions) interviews.

The Performance Workgroup addresses the JMC’s second charge: to identify and evaluate information that will assist in improving the performance and effectiveness of the branch. Stressing the need for reliable information in order to function adeptly, the workgroup’s first project was a detailed review of filing and disposition trends by case type and level of court; then it turned its attention to available time to disposition data. After synthesizing and interpreting these trends and data, the workgroup drafted a report recommending the shift from the court’s current data collection plan, the summary reporting system (which provides aggregated data and does not satisfy the current business needs of the courts), to a more detailed reporting system that will provide valid and reliable data; the report emphasizes that detailed performance reporting will contribute significantly to the quality of justice in Florida by “improving adjudicatory outcomes through case management, increasing operational efficiency through efficient use of resources, and supporting organizational priorities through legislative resource and budgetary requests.” The report, which was submitted to the supreme court in February 2015, includes recommendations about how to meet future branch needs for uniform and consistent data reporting and analysis in some crucial performance areas. After approving the report, the court tasked the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability with addressing the workgroup’s first recommendation regarding data collection and reporting requirements for the trial courts; the commission will present final recommendations to the court later this year.

The Education and Outreach Workgroup focuses on issues related to effective internal and external communication, public trust and confidence, and the use of clear, unified messages within and outside the judicial branch. The workgroup’s first project has been to update the branch-wide communication plan. Published in 2000, the original plan concentrated largely on external communications, but the plan currently in development substantially addresses internal branch communications as well. The workgroup has striven to develop a plan that can help the courts build relationships with a variety of partners; enhance public understanding of and support for the judicial branch; speak clearly and purposefully about the judicial branch; support open lines of communication; and communicate effectively using coordinated, strategic efforts. As currently constructed, the plan is founded on four strategic issues that must be addressed over the long term in order to strengthen meaningful communication between the courts and key audiences (e.g., the public, court users, justice system partners, the executive and legislative branches, the media, and judges and court employees). The four strategic areas are Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence, Speaking with One Voice, Improving Communication Methods, and Strengthening Internal Communication. For each strategic issue, the plan outlines specific goals toward which the branch should aspire and offers distinct strategies designed to achieve these goals. After
The Year in Review

Improving the Administration of Justice

receiving preliminary approval by the JMC, a draft of the Court Communication Plan for the Judicial Branch of Florida was circulated throughout the courts system and revised based on readers’ comments and suggestions. After the plan was reviewed and voted on by the full JMC in fall 2015, it was submitted to and approved by the supreme court; implementation will begin on January 1, 2016.

The Long-Range Strategic Planning Workgroup is responsible for re-evaluating and refreshing the judicial branch's long-range plan. Long-range plans are not intended to be fixed, long-term roadmaps; indeed, in order to be truly useful and relevant, long-range plans must evolve and respond to changing problems and opportunities, so they are constructed with the understanding that they are ongoing projects that need to be reviewed and updated periodically. The workgroup is drafting what will become the third iteration of the branch-wide plan. The first plan, Taking Bearings and Setting Course: The Long-Range Strategic Plan for the Florida Judicial Branch, was published in 1998; then 11 years later, the plan was revised to steer the state courts system from 2009 through 2015. [Take this link to read the branch’s long-range plans.] As workgroup members prepared to revise the plan again, they sought to understand and be responsive to local conditions throughout the state, so they launched a comprehensive outreach effort to gather feedback about the courts system from as broad a spectrum of Floridians as possible—utilizing a variety of strategies for gathering people’s opinions: six regional meetings for the public and public officials; written feedback (electronic surveys targeting various court audiences; an online public comments page; and written comments via email or regular mail); and a public mail survey. The workgroup also coordinated meetings with various business-related groups and facilitated a meeting with statewide justice partner agencies. After reviewing and analyzing the research findings, the workgroup developed a first draft of the long-range issues and goals; after outreaching the draft and incorporating the ideas and recommendations of those who reviewed it, the workgroup presented the final draft to the full JMC, which approved it. The plan was then submitted to and approved by the supreme court and will take effect on January 1, 2016.

Long-Range Issue #2:
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The judicial branch remains committed to ongoing improvement in the administration of justice, including effective case processing policies and the efficient management of resources.

Each year, millions of complaints and petitions are filed in the state’s trial and appellate courts. To resolve these cases—which range from simple traffic citations to complex civil disputes with multiple parties to high-profile criminal proceedings—Florida’s courts utilize a variety of dispute resolution methods, including diversion, mediation, plea, and adjudication by trial.

Managing large caseloads, and administering the personnel and resources needed to support the work of the judges who handle these cases, are formidable tasks, even under fiscally flourishing conditions. Nevertheless, through periods of
economic vigor—and through seasons of financial hardship, like the recent six-year stretch when Florida, like the rest of the nation, was struggling through the global recession—the judicial branch remains committed to developing methods for administering justice as efficiently as possible. During the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, these efforts included advances in the courts system’s performance and accountability initiatives, its technology modernization projects, its family court and problem-solving court endeavors, and its alternative dispute resolution practices. In addition, since implementing its Mortgage Foreclosure Reduction Initiative, the branch continues to make significant headway in reducing the backlogged cases while ensuring that the rights of the parties involved in litigation are protected.

Performance and Accountability

In the late 1990s, the branch’s Judicial Management Council established the Committee on District Court of Appeal Performance and Accountability and the Committee on Trial Court Performance and Accountability to enhance the performance of Florida’s courts and to improve their ability to be accountable to the people. In 2002, in response to the increasing workload demands on these committees, the supreme court separated them from the Judicial Management Council, establishing them as discrete commissions.

The Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability, currently chaired by Judge Vance Salter, Third DCA, and the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability, currently chaired by Judge Diana Moreland, Twelfth Circuit, propose policies and procedures on matters related to the capable and effective functioning of Florida’s courts through developing comprehensive resource management, performance measurement, and accountability programs. The work of these commissions supports the branch’s efforts to “utilize public resources effectively, efficiently, and in an accountable manner”—one of the goals of long-range issue #2 of the strategic plan.

Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability

In fiscal year 2014 – 15, the Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability continued its focus on dependency and termination of parental rights appeals. In 2005, then Chief Justice Barbara Pariente directed the commission to review appeals of juvenile dependency and termination of parental rights cases with an eye toward improving the timeliness of the dispositions and thereby minimizing the harm to children affected by these sensitive family proceedings. In 2006, the commission submitted its report and recommendations, entitled Delay in Dependency and Termination of Parental Rights Cases, to the supreme court; the court then directed the commission to propose timelines and rule changes that would expedite these cases. The commission filed a supplemental report the following year, and, in 2009, the court adopted timeframes in these matters and charged the commission with monitoring the management of these cases.

The DCAs developed statistical reports in order to review eight median timeframes related to filing, transmitting the record, and case processing milestones. Some of these timeframes are within the courts’ direct control, and others are dependent on the parties and lower court processes—but all are important to monitor through the cycle of a dependency appeal. In 2011, and again in 2014, the commission released a Performance Monitoring Report: Dependency and Termination of Parental Rights Appeals, providing a review of findings for each DCA in meeting the eight timeframes. In addition to demonstrating continued improvements in most of the timeframes, both reports showed that all the DCAs consistently meet four of the eight timeframes as well as the overall performance goal of 195 median days from final judgment (lower tribunal data rendered) to final disposition. However, the commission also identified areas in need of improvement in four of the interim timeframes: these timeframes involve the receipt of documents such as the record and briefs, and delays may be caused by factors at the lower tribunal or with appellate counsel.

To address this concern, in July 2014, the supreme court instructed the Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability and the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability to establish a joint workgroup to identify the issues that cause delays in the receipt of essential documents that constitute the record in dependency and termination of parental rights appeals and to determine processes that may advance the receipt of these documents. In addition to reviewing
data and identifying issues that need to be addressed, the workgroup established sub-groups tasked with identifying best practices, focusing on court reporters, district court clerks, court administration, and judges. The workgroup reviewed the sub-groups’ recommendations and drafted a report, for which feedback is now being sought from judges, DCA clerks and clerks of the circuit court, trial court administrators, appellate attorneys for the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel, the Department of Children and Families, and the statewide Guardian ad Litem Office. The workgroup will submit a final report to the two commissions by the end of the calendar year.

Every four years, the Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability is required by court rule to review the workload trends of the DCAs and to consider the need for adjustments to the relative workload weights. To perform this review, the commission, utilizing the Delphi-based weighted caseload system it adopted in 2005, analyzes caseload statistics based on the complexity of the various kinds of cases filed with the DCAs and the amount of time needed for judges to handle these cases. The supreme court employs these statistics in determining whether to certify the need for increasing or decreasing the number of judges in each DCA.

The Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability also performed a relative case weight study during fiscal year 2014 – 15. Every four years, the commission is required by court rule to review the workload trends of the DCAs and to consider the need for adjustments to the relative workload weights. To perform this review, the commission, utilizing the Delphi-based weighted caseload system it adopted in 2005, analyzes caseload statistics based on the complexity of the various kinds of cases filed with the DCAs and the amount of time needed for judges to handle these cases. The supreme court employs these statistics in determining whether to certify the need for increasing or decreasing the number of judges in each DCA.

Relative case weights are based on Delphi principles of consensus determination and provide an alternative to conducting a full weighted caseload study. This approach allows judges to estimate the amount of time various cases take, without directly measuring time spent on each case activity. The relative case weights provide information regarding the judicial workload involved in each type of case, show how a court’s judicial workload has increased or decreased over time, and allow for a comparative assessment of the distribution of judicial workload among the districts.

For this study, the relative weighted caseload was determined by surveying a representative sample of judges on the relative degree of judicial effort put into the various categories of DCA cases. Each category was assigned a relative weight number based on the statewide average of the weight calculated through a survey. These weights were then applied to each court’s dispositions on the merits to determine the weighted caseload value.

After analyzing the relative case weights, the commission filed a report and three recommendations with the supreme court. The court approved two of the recommendations: to eliminate a relative case weight modifier that was adopted in 2009 for the First DCA (which had been proposed to reflect workload issues associated with the great number of complex rule challenges filed in Tallahassee); and to authorize the commission to review the weighted case disposition threshold to determine whether it is still an accurate benchmark for the certification process. The court indicated that it would take up the third recommendation—to revise the relative case weights—after the commission reviews and reports on the disposition threshold; the report was submitted, and the court approved it in October 2015.

Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability

During the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, while the Commission on DCA Performance and Accountability was reviewing workload trends and considering adjustments to the relative workload weights for the DCAs, the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability initiated efforts to update the case weights used to evaluate judicial workload in the county and circuit courts.
In 1999, the court began using a Delphi-based weighted caseload system to determine and certify the need for additional trial court judges. This system gauges whether new judges are needed based on two components: the number of cases filed and the amount of time it takes for judges to handle different types of cases based on their complexity. For the 1999 workload assessment, OSCA, with the support of the National Center for State Courts, measured judicial workload using a time study—for which nearly 120 judges tracked their time spent on different types of cases.

Case weights need to be reassessed periodically, however: new legislative mandates, changes in court rules, new court initiatives, evolving technology, evolving case precedent, growing case complexity, and the availability of supporting resources all have the ability to influence case weights, so the court has to update them regularly to ensure their validity. They were last updated in 2006–07, though a time study was not performed for that update. Since then, because judicial workload has been affected by a number of factors, the case weights must be revisited to ensure they continue to be an accurate reflection of current judicial workload. In order to re-align case weights with current actualities, the commission is overseeing the execution of a new time study. In addition to ensuring accurate, verifiable data to support the annual certification of judicial need that the supreme court presents to the legislature, this study will document the full range of workload activity facing judges; capture data on the impact of specialty courts; and assess the impact of e-filing and paperless courts.

Staffed by OSCA and the National Center for State Courts—and under the leadership of the Judicial Needs Assessment Committee (a 40-judge body that comprises a county and circuit judge from each circuit)—this time study, called the Judicial Workload Study, will record 20 business days of activity, tracking the time, broken down into small increments, spent on 27 case types. And participation is being sought from all circuit and county court judges—as well as all senior judges, magistrates, child support enforcement hearing officers, and civil traffic infraction hearing officers. Indeed, this will be the first time—in Florida and across the nation—that a complete assessment of all judicial and quasi-judicial officers will be evaluated together.

The time study will take place between September 28 and October 25, 2015; in December, site visits will be conducted in eight circuits to glean feedback on local workload factors and concerns; also in December, all trial court judges will be issued a Sufficiency of Time Survey to gather feedback on case dockets, law changes, and other statutory requirements that could be impacting judicial workload. Once the preliminary case weights are established, they will be reviewed, and, if necessary, adjusted by groups of subject matter experts, and after a final review and approval, the Judicial Needs Assessment Committee will submit a report to the supreme court for review and approval. If the supreme court adopts new case weights, it will implement them in its preparation of the certification opinion to the legislature.

In addition to overseeing the Judicial Workload Study, the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability has continued to focus on technology-based strategies for moving cases more efficiently and effectively through the trial court process. The courts system had significant breakthrough in December 2012, when, after a concerted, two-year effort, the commission, together with its Court Statistics and Workload Committee and with the Florida Courts Technology Commission, submitted The Trial Court Integrated Management Solution (TIMS) report to the supreme court. Ambitious in scope, the report offered a framework for a standardized, statewide, integrated data management solution for capturing and reporting case and court activity information for use both at the circuit and statewide levels—in short, it defined the kind of data the courts need to collect about the activity of the courts and the kind of system the branch needs to build in order to collect these data. [Take this link to the TIMS report.] Because branch leaders realized they cannot tackle such a colossal project all at once, they determined to work on a series of small, self-contained projects that will eventually be...
“snapped together” to form what is now called the Integrated Trial Court Adjudicatory System (ITCAS). In other words, the branch has adopted an enterprise view, and it is building the various components slowly and deliberately with that global perspective ever in mind. Over the last few years, the court has been focusing on two key elements of this system.

First is the Court Application Processing System (CAPS). Consisting of workstations and software, this interactive case management application enables judges to view and work on electronic documents, to manage their cases electronically from any location and across many devices, and to issue court documents electronically. It also provides judges with basic tools and capabilities at the local level to manage and track case activity. Currently, the majority of circuits are using the CAPS viewers to assist with moving their backlogged foreclosure cases.

The second element of the Integrated Trial Court Adjudicatory System is called the Judicial Data Management Services Project (JDMS). This project involves a state-level data management strategy that will pull court activity data from multiple sources and integrate them into a coherent whole. Ultimately, the data it provides will enable courts to measure adjudicatory outcomes and evaluate their efficiency; lead to increased operational efficiency through the adroit use of shared resources; and support supreme court efforts to establish organizational priorities through legislative resource and budgetary requests. The judicial branch has high aspirations for the JDMS—indeed, the courts system’s collection and management of foreclosure data for the Foreclosure Initiative was a “proof of concept” for the project—and during the 2015 legislative session, lawmakers showed their support, appropriating funding for operational support for staff augmentation, software development, licensing, hardware, and equipment for the development of the JDMS Project.

The other major technology initiative in which the commission has been involved is the use of remote interpreting systems to contain the costs of interpreting resources while maintaining accuracy. Florida continues to experience significant growth in its non-English speaking population—a trend also reflected in the courts—and the judicial branch has been taking steps to improve its ability to handle cases and other matters involving parties or witnesses who have limited English proficiency. These efforts include expanding the use of technology to improve efficiencies while maintaining quality.

As early as 2007, some of Florida’s trial courts began using audio and video technology to provide interpreting services remotely within their circuits; this is referred to as the “circuit model.” Over the last few years, the branch began to develop what it calls a “regional model”—a more advanced remote interpreting solution that envisions sharing interpreting resources among different circuits. The regional model, as envisioned, includes a state-level call manager (to manage the shared services) and has the potential to provide judges with scheduled and on-demand access to qualified staff and/or contractual interpreters. Expected benefits of the regional model include the elimination of travel, improved efficiency

In order to re-align case weights with current actualities, the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability is overseeing the execution of a new time study. This time study, called the Judicial Workload Study, will record 20 business days of activity, tracking the time, broken down into small increments, spent on 27 case types. And participation is being sought from all circuit and county court judges—as well as all senior judges, magistrates, child support enforcement hearing officers, and civil traffic infraction hearing officers. Indeed, this will be the first time—in Florida and across the nation—that a complete assessment of all judicial and quasi-judicial officers will be evaluated together.
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in case processing, improved effectiveness in the delivery of interpreting services, and increased opportunity to share interpreter resources among circuits and with other states.

In 2010, several circuits began preliminary explorations of a regional model pilot. Then in fiscal year 2013 – 14, the branch received funding to expand the piloting efforts of the regional model: the Third, Seventh, Ninth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Circuits began sharing remote interpreting resources, and OSCA housed the call manager. A joint workgroup including members from the commission, the Due Process Technology Workgroup, and the Court Interpreter Certification Board was established to make recommendations on the business processes for the regional model; it is currently drafting its report.

Meanwhile, over a six-month period during the pilot, the joint workgroup collected workload data from all interpreters providing services within that timeframe: using a web-based form, interpreters entered information on every proceeding for which they interpreted. These data provide descriptive information about the interpreter, the level of qualification, and the actual time involved in interpreting each event. From the data, the workgroup is drawing information about interpreter workload, which will be used to establish threshold standards—that is, the standard number of events each interpreter can accomplish in a given period.

Technology

To support their day-to-day operations, Florida’s courts rely increasingly on information technology. In the past, court technology was relegated to discrete IT units or departments. But now, it permeates all aspects of the judicial branch and affects everyone who works in the courts system. It also touches, and creates expectations in, everyone who relies on the courts: attorneys, justice partners, jurors, the media, court users, and the public. In most every area of court business, IT plays an elemental role these days—in data management, case management, document management and imaging, workflow management, digital court reporting, remote court interpreting, electronic filing, and electronic access to court-based information, for instance. IT is also being harnessed to facilitate access to civil justice: for example, the branch, in collaboration with The Florida Bar and the Florida Court Clerks and Comptrollers, is currently developing web-based, interactive, guided “interviews” that shepherd self-represented litigants through the process of electronically creating certain documents that are ready for filing (for more on the DIY Florida project, see the article on the Judicial Management Council above).

In fiscal year 2014 – 2015, the judicial branch continued to make significant strides toward its goal of developing a comprehensive electronic courts structure. This objective includes the implementation of a statewide electronic filing solution (e-filing) for the trial and appellate courts; the integration of e-filing with other automated court processes; and electronic access to the courts. It also includes the branch’s development of an Integrated Trial Court Adjudicatory System: a standardized, statewide, integrated data management solution for capturing and reporting case and court activity information for use both at the circuit and statewide levels (this endeavor is being overseen by the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability in cooperation with the Florida Courts Technology Commission; see previous article for more information). In addition, to review, prioritize, develop, and implement the manifold, complex technology solutions that support efficient, effective, and timely access to justice, the branch has instituted IT governance structures at all levels of court.

Florida Courts Technology Commission

Established in 1995 under the direction of the supreme court, the Florida Courts Technology Commission (originally called the Court Technology Users Committee) oversees, manages, and directs the development and use of technology within the branch; coordinates and reviews recommendations concerning court policy matters that involve the use of technology; and establishes the technology policies and standards by which all court committees and workgroups must abide.
To address its extensive responsibilities, the commission creates committees, subcommittees, and workgroups, assigning specific tasks to each. When a task is completed, the entity that oversaw its implementation is sunned; such is the case with the E-Filing Committee and the Trial Court Integrated Management Solution Committee, for example. And when the commission takes on a new task, it creates an additional body to address it; recent examples are the Proposed Order Workgroup, the Operational Procedure Review Workgroup, the Data Exchange Workgroup, and the Document Storage Workgroup. The commission is chaired by Judge Lisa Taylor Munyon, Ninth Circuit.

**E-Filing**

E-filing refers to the electronic submission of court documents from lawyers and litigants to the clerks of court and from the lower tribunals to the appellate courts. E-filing reduces costs for the courts, clerks, and court users (e.g., the cost of printing, copying, mailing—and the expenses associated with the time it takes to perform these tasks); improves case processing and case management; and enhances users’ access to the courts without significantly increasing their costs to use the courts.

The judicial branch began working to automate the process for filing court documents in 1979, when the supreme court adopted its first rules governing e-filing (back then, e-filing meant filing by fax). In 2008, the legislature supported these efforts by mandating a transition to the electronic filing of court records and requesting that the supreme court set e-filing standards; the Florida Courts Technology Commission was directed to set the standards, and the court adopted them in 2009. (Take this link to the Standards for Electronic Access to the Courts.) Not long after, the Florida Court Clerks and Comptrollers reported that it had created an electronic portal—a statewide website for the secure electronic transmission of court records to and from the Florida courts—that the branch could use. Together, the supreme court and clerks established the Florida Courts E-Filing Authority: the public entity that owns the portal, makes its business decisions, and is responsible for designing, developing, implementing, operating, upgrading, supporting, and maintaining the portal in keeping with the branch’s e-filing standards.

After the branch and clerks of court addressed the necessary technical matters for e-filing documents to the trial courts (e.g., creating data envelopes for each of the 10 trial court divisions, developing and receiving approval for each county’s e-filing plans, and building an interface between each circuit court and the portal), the portal went live: files began coming through the portal in early January 2011.

Now, all 67 counties accept filings through the portal—as do the supreme court and the Second DCA. And the number of registered users continues to rise steadily. As of August 31, 2015, the portal had 94,538 registered users—among them, attorneys (who are required to file through the portal), judges, and self-represented litigants. In addition, mediators, process servers, court reporters, mental health professionals, and law enforcement officials can now file court documents through the portal—and, soon, various state and local agencies, insurance companies, and creditors will be able to as well.

As expected, portal traffic continues to get heavier, with documents being filed every hour of every day. On an average weekday, for instance, the portal conveys more than 54,000 electronic submissions—and it conveys, on average, 1.8 million documents per month. According to former clerk of the supreme court Tom Hall, who was an E-Filing Authority member at its inception and now consults with the Florida Court Clerks and Comptrollers on e-filing issues, Florida is one of a very few states that are “attempts a total, top-to-bottom e-filing system”—adding that Florida also has one of the most advanced and least trouble-ridden systems among them. (This link goes to the Florida Courts E-Filing Portal.)

**Court Application Processing System**

A critical corollary to e-filing court documents is the implementation of a system that enables judges and court staff to view and respond to those documents electronically and to enhance the management of cases. The Court Application Processing System (CAPS) is designed to meet these needs.
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CAPs, which must adhere to standards developed by the Florida Courts Technology Commission, is a computer application system designed for in-court and in-chambers use by trial court judges and court staff, allowing them to work electronically on cases from any location and across many devices and data sources. It provides judges with rapid and reliable access to case information; it provides access to and use of case files and other data in the course of managing cases, scheduling and conducting hearings, adjudicating disputes, and recording and reporting judicial activity; and it allows judges to prepare, electronically sign, file, and serve orders. A vital component to the adjudicatory function of Florida’s trial court judges, this web-based processing system has the potential to serve as the framework for a fully automated trial court case management system.

The initial hardware and software for CAPS was purchased with National Mortgage Settlement funding that lawmakers appropriated to the state courts system in fiscal years 2013 – 14 and 2014 – 15 to address the glut of backlogged foreclosure cases. The branch is currently seeking to make this technology available in all civil divisions and the criminal division.

Appellate Courts Technology Solutions
E-filing is just one of many automated court processes that the judicial branch is implementing as it migrates to a comprehensive electronic courts structure. Keeping its sight on the bigger picture while laying the groundwork for appellate e-filing, the judicial branch has been working to develop software applications that will enable the seamless integration of e-filing with other judicial processes—such as case management, document management, and workflow management. Since June 2010, the appellate courts have been participating in two projects designed to facilitate this migration: the electronic Florida Appellate Courts Technology Solution (eFACTS) and iDCA/eDCA.

eFACTS, developed by OSCA’s Information Systems Services Unit, was piloted in the supreme court (which has been using eFACTS since June 2012) and the Second DCA (which began using eFACTS in August 2013). eFACTS utilizes the Microsoft web application platform and includes electronic document management and workflows: eFACTS captures electronic as well as scanned documents, storing them in a secure environment; facilitates the logical organization of the documents and automatically inputs the data for case management purposes; and enables users to locate, retrieve, and work on the documents they need, when they need them. Other features include electronic judicial voting, tracking of administrative matters, administrative and correspondence tracking, billing related to court filings, and tasking. Users can use their mobile devices to vote remotely, review cases, and access documents easily and securely at their convenience.

In addition, eFACTS accommodates electronic filing through the portal. Attorneys have been required to e-file documents through the portal to the supreme court since April 1, 2013, and to the Second DCA since October 1, 2013. And since June 30, 2014, both courts have been accepting transmittals from the lower tribunals through the portal.

The other appellate courts technology system, called iDCA/eDCA, was originally developed by the First DCA for workers compensation cases. It is closely connected to the court’s existing case management system and includes e-filing, document management, and tasking features designed for the appellate process. It involves three closely linked sites: Internal DCA (iDCA), an internal component for document management for use by judges and law clerks; External DCA (eDCA), a portal for the transmittal of all filings with the court (this site also includes access to public digitized documents for those listed as the attorney or party of record as well as e-service of court orders, opinions, etc.); and the Case Review system. iDCA/eDCA is successfully deployed at the First, Third, Fourth, and Fifth DCAs.

eFACTS is currently running parallel with iDCA/eDCA at these district courts, and judges and court staff have been exploring the eFACTS features. Meanwhile, eFACTS continues to be modified to accommodate the needs and preferences of these users and to provide some of the valued features of iDCA/eDCA. For example, the remaining functionality of the old case management system was recently moved into eFACTS, and the DCAs and supreme court have been exploring it, comparing it to the old system; when each court feels the time is right, the old case management system interface will be removed. In this manner, the district courts will gradually transition to eFACTS—a move that will also enable them to accept filings through the statewide e-filing portal.
To facilitate this implementation of eFACTS, in November 2014, the supreme court created the eFACTS Change Advisory Board (a nine-member board that includes a justice, three DCA judges, the supreme court clerk, two DCA clerks, an ISS representative, and a DCA systems administrator). The board is charged with assisting with oversight of the eFACTS implementation, identifying the specific functionality and significant design features for inclusion in each version of eFACTS, and establishing priorities for the development of and changes and enhancements to eFACTS. This board is now responsible for approving, prioritizing, planning and overseeing any modifications to eFACTS.

Electronic Access to the Courts

While the term e-filing literally refers to the electronic transmission of court documents to the Florida courts, it actually signifies the more global goal of electronic access to the courts—that is, the use of information technologies to enhance the accessibility of the courts. Electronic access includes the many automated processes that make the courts more open and reachable by all users—judges, court personnel, and clerks of court; attorneys, self-represented litigants, and other parties; justice system partners and other user groups; and the public. While advancing toward the full implementation of statewide e-filing, the judicial branch has kept its sight on the more universal goal of electronic access to the courts.

One of its most persevering goals has been to establish a mechanism for providing remote access to court records while protecting people’s privacy rights. Since 2003, with the creation of the supreme court’s Committee on Privacy and Court Records, the branch has been directing considerable efforts toward developing the infrastructure and policies needed to protect and curtail confidential and sensitive information in court records while establishing the means for providing public access to non-confidential records. Among these efforts was the adoption, in 2007, of a limited moratorium on access to electronic court records to address concerns about sensitive and confidential information contained therein. (To read the 2007 Interim Policy on Electronic Release of Court Records, follow this link.)

In addition, the court has adopted rules and amendments to minimize the presence of sensitive and confidential information in court records, to require filers to identify and safeguard confidential information in their pleadings, and to require the automatic redaction of a standard list of 22 statutory public records exemptions by the clerks of court.

In May 2014, the supreme court took the next logical step toward responsible public access to electronic court records. At the recommendation of the Florida Courts Technology Commission, it adopted the Standards for Access to Electronic Court Records and the Access Security Matrix—documents that, together, provide a carefully-structured apparatus to facilitate appropriate, differentiated levels of access to court records to judges, to court and clerks office personnel, and to members of the general public and user groups with specialized credentials. (The standards and matrix are based on a model developed by the Manatee County Clerk of Court for a pilot program that operated under supreme court oversight from 2007 – 2011.) Both are living documents that continue to be modified as statutes, rules, and administrative orders are revised or issued. (Follow this link to the administrative order adopting the standards and the security matrix.)

To ensure that sufficient security measures are in place, clerks of court who seek to make court records electronically accessible must file an application with the court. The Florida Courts Technology Commission is responsible for reviewing and approving each application. Once a clerk receives approval, he or she must participate in a 90-day pilot program that monitors and coordinates all established clerk initiatives relating to online access to electronic court records. After participating in the pilot, the clerk can submit a letter to the Florida Courts Technology Commission seeking approval to go into a full production system.

During the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, after the court amended the administrative order to clarify procedures and timeframes related to the orderly transition to the standards and the security matrix, 59 clerks of court submitted applications to make court records
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electronically available. All received approval to participate in the 90-day pilot program—after which, they can request approval to implement their systems. As of November 2015, 13 counties had requested to move their online electronic records access systems from pilot to implementation. The Florida Courts Technology Commission and its Access Governance Board were reviewing those requests to ensure compliance with the applicable standards and security matrix before making a recommendation to the supreme court on final approval.

Florida Trial Courts Technology Strategic Plan

The judicial branch has made great strides in developing and implementing technology solutions to support efficient and effective access to justice. But it has also faced some significant challenges, especially in its efforts to respond to trial court technology needs: because funding for trial court “communications services” (as referenced in the Florida constitution) falls under the jurisdiction of each of the 67 boards of county commissioners, technology resources differ from one county to another, resulting in disparities in the level of information and the services that the trial courts are able to provide. Another challenge the branch faces is the lack of state-level automation, which results in inconsistent communication between local automation systems and in a fractured data collection environment generally.

To address these concerns, in 2013, the supreme court directed the Trial Court Budget Commission to explore potential revenue sources to support the trial courts’ future technology needs. The commission then established the Trial Court Technology Funding Strategies Workgroup to develop recommendations regarding the resources necessary to adequately fund the acquisition, support, maintenance, and refresh of technologies required to undergird the business needs of the trial courts—with the goal of developing the technology infrastructure needed to help ensure equal justice to Floridians in all 20 circuits.

To propose a funding structure for future trial court technology needs, the workgroup determined that the branch would first need to develop a comprehensive technology plan to address those needs, estimate what those technologies might cost, and define a mechanism for funding them. With National Center for State Courts support, and with the input of the 20 trial court administrators and the 20 trial court technology officers, the workgroup developed a strategic plan that identifies the critical business capabilities and the corresponding technical capabilities that the trial courts must have in order to function effectively. The plan also defines three main projects. The first is the development of an infrastructure to effectively manage court business processes (the plan recommends the expansion of the Court Application Processing System, which provides judges and staff with the electronic case file information they need to perform their adjudicatory function). The second project is the furnishing of tools to perform more accurate and reliable digital court reporting and remote court interpreting (e.g., continued integration of digital equipment and funds devoted to refreshing previously purchased equipment). And the third is the provision of a minimum level of technology support services across the state (e.g., for dedicated IT support staff, for bandwidth, for training and education). (Take this link to read the strategic plan.)

To develop, implement, and sustain these projects, the workgroup also calculated the courts system’s funding needs over the next four years, emphasizing that, in addition to county funding, the courts system would need adequate and reliable state funding. It then developed, for the legislature’s consideration, a comprehensive funding structure to support, maintain, and refresh the necessary technology elements. The biggest request was for fiscal year 2015 – 16, for which $25.6 million in non-recurring funds was sought. The workgroup also proposed, and the supreme court approved, the concept of dedicated revenue streams to sufficiently cover the costs of maintaining and sustaining this technology in years to come.

Although lawmakers did not appropriate funding for this project for the 2015 – 16 fiscal year, they did express interest in it and are likely to re-consider it in the upcoming legislative session: for fiscal year 2016 – 17, the judicial branch resubmitted the trial court technology request, refining the explanatory narrative and revising the total amount to $25.3 million. In addition, this request is for recurring and non-recurring general revenue (rather than pursuing dedicated revenue streams).
Behind the Scenes
Meanwhile, working inconspicuously in the background, the Support Services Team of the courts system’s Information Systems Services (ISS) plays a critical role in supporting court operations in all 93 courts statewide (67 county, 20 circuit, and five appellate courts plus the supreme court). Housed in OSCA, the team serves as a “24 x 7 x 365 service provider” responsible for supplying and maintaining reliable technical operations for servers, data storage, disaster recovery, security, mobile devices, phone support (Voice over Internet Protocol), teleconferencing, audio visual services, and all related networking infrastructure.

In the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, the Support Services Team continued to focus on several ongoing projects. Among them, it provided network architecture, implementation, and support for the statewide remote interpreting project; installed virtual servers at the supreme court, the DCAs and OSCA, allowing for enhanced continuity of operations, disaster recovery, device consolidation, and energy savings; and carried out multiple system enhancements, upgrades, and new product rollouts (enhancements replaced outdated hardware, software, and networking equipment and increased data storage capacity, and infrastructure upgrades included new servers, local and wide area networking appliances, storage area networks, wireless services, and remote interpretation systems; infrastructure upgrades also supported the statewide expansion of e-filing and the platform configuration for the imminent version upgrade of the branch’s Judicial Inquiry System).

Also during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, the Support Services Team replaced all the network switches and upgraded the end-of-life Voice over Internet Protocol phone system appliances for the supreme court/OSCA; it also procured and installed 150 printers for the supreme court/OSCA and the DCAs, replacing devices that were 10-plus years old. In addition, the team procured and installed storage area networks at the DCAs, increasing their data storage by a cumulative 36 terabytes (raw). The Support Services Team also worked on several projects in the supreme court Data Center that have ramifications for the entire state courts system. For example, it expanded the branch’s storage area network capacity, more than tripling its prior capacity; it continued server consolidation of its rack-mounted virtual servers, dramatically reducing rack space as well as electrical and cooling needs, and providing for a higher level of redundancy and disaster recovery/continuity of operations from system failures; it installed a monitoring system allowing ISS to map all the electrical circuits in the Data Center, balance its three-phase system, and provide 24 x 7 monitoring and alerting whenever any issues arise; and it procured and had installed two 10-ton air conditioning units that provide standby and replacement (when necessary) cooling for the Data Center that—if not cooled sufficiently to offset the intense heat generated by servers—can quickly
get hot enough to melt plastic. Finally, ISS received a $1.4 million legislative appropriation for fiscal year 2015 – 16 to carry out a statewide upgrade/replacement of the courts system’s networking infrastructure.

**Court Improvement: Family Court**

Separation and divorce, child support, termination of parental rights, delinquency, dependency, family violence, child neglect and abuse, substance abuse, mental illness—some of life’s most complex, distressing, and private family matters end up being adjudicated in the courts. Since launching its first family court initiative in 1991, the judicial branch has been working with federal, state, and community partners to develop comprehensive, integrated approaches to handling these sensitive matters. Through its implementation of innovative practices and programs under the aegis of family court, drug court, and veterans court, and through its efforts to address the underlying problems leading to the repeated incarceration of people with mental illnesses, the branch works to resolve family-related disputes in a fair, timely, efficient, and cost-effective way. (Information about family court initiatives is below; for information on Florida’s drug courts, veterans courts, and mental health initiatives, see the following article, on problem-solving courts.)

Many of the branch’s innovative family court programs, projects, and practices are spearheaded by the supreme court’s Steering Committee on Families and Children in the Court (originally called the Family Court Steering Committee), established in 1994. Receiving authority and direction through an administrative order of the chief justice, and currently chaired by Justice Barbara Pariente, this 23-member body of judges, quasi-judicial officers, and justice system partners provides guidance and support to courts around the state, helping to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of family court operations. (This link goes to the 2014 administrative order governing the steering committee.) Also providing assistance in advancing the family court goals is OSCA’s Office of Court Improvement (OCI); in addition to staffing the steering committee, OCI develops and coordinates a wide range of family court trainings, publications, and other projects. (Take this link to learn more about the work of OCI.)

Justice Barbara Pariente, who chairs the Steering Committee on Families and Children in the Court, was one of the featured speakers at the fall 2014 “We Are the Village” conference—a collaboration between the Florida Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts and OSCA.

Department of Education, created an online School-Justice Partnership Tool Kit, conceived as an ongoing mechanism to develop and encourage collaborations among the courts, school resource officers and school administrators, state agencies, service providers, and law enforcement in each county. This “how-to guide,” largely based on the Palm Beach
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County School-Justice Partnership, offers alternatives to arrests, suspensions, and expulsions—such as the adoption of practices like a model discipline code, school liaisons in the courtroom, and juvenile probation officers stationed in schools. These alternatives have already begun to show positive outcomes for children: Palm Beach County’s School-Justice Probation Pilot, for example, has resulted in a 48.8 percent reduction in out-of-school suspensions; a 42.7 percent reduction in discipline referrals; and a 10.4 percent decrease in parole violations. [This link goes to the School-Justice Partnership Tool Kit.]

In addition to Palm Beach County, Broward and Pinellas counties have established school-justice partnerships, and five additional counties are preparing to implement one. To help these new sites launch their partnerships, the steering committee and OCI are hosting a school-justice partnership kick-off in fall 2015. Gathering together various stakeholders (e.g., representatives from the courts, school boards, law enforcement, state attorneys offices, and public defenders offices), this event will introduce participants to best practices geared toward helping them implement a partnership, design one that works best for their specific jurisdiction, and maintain their partnership.

The steering committee also spearheaded the creation of the Family Court Tool Kit on Trauma and Child Development, which addresses the age-appropriate development needs of youth, including children who have experienced trauma. Designed for judges, magistrates, hearing officers who preside over family court cases, and court partners (e.g., mediators, attorneys, parenting coordinators, case managers, probation officers, and clerks who handle family court cases), this tool kit details promising practices for moving toward a trauma-responsive court that is informed about childhood development and the architecture of the developing brain. It contains critical, front-line, science-based information that can aid in determining children’s needs based on developmental milestones and the impact of trauma. Through the information it provides and the practices it recommends, this tool kit can enhance judicial decision-making, thereby helping to improve outcomes for children. The branch has now produced three family court tool kits, all of which are repositories of practical strategies designed to assist judges and court staff in responding effectively and efficiently to the judicial needs of Florida’s families. [Take this link to the family court tool kits.]

Another of the steering committee’s responsibilities is to provide assistance to the judicial branch’s statewide, multidisciplinary Dependency Court Improvement Panel, which was established in 2009 by then Chief Justice Peggy Quince to improve courtroom practices and decision-making in dependency cases. (The panel was created in response to a federal Child and Family Services Review that discovered a number of shortcomings in Florida’s child welfare system; while the Department of Children and Families is responsible for addressing most of the deficiencies, the courts system, through the Dependency Court Improvement Panel, has been taking concurrent action to improve dependency court.) The panel, with the support of OCI, has been concentrating on two projects lately: an Early Childhood Court Initiative and an Evidence-Based Parenting Initiative.

The Early Childhood Court Initiative grew out a concern for a pattern that was becoming increasingly evident to judges on the family court bench. Called the multigenerational transmission of trauma and maltreatment, this pattern unfolds as follows: children who are maltreated often end up suffering a host of developmental issues (e.g., cognitive problems, speech delays, health problems, motor delays, and mental health problems); if the underlying factors are not addressed, the effects worsen over time, and the child appearing in dependency court today is likely to end up in delinquency court years later—and, later still, in court again, facing, perhaps, a domestic violence injunction or a paternity matter.

To address this concern, many courts across Florida began establishing Early Childhood Court Teams. Comprising judges, case workers, attorneys, and parent and community organizations, these teams collaborate with experts in early childhood development and mental health to learn how to identify and expand evidence-based services for, and how to prevent the further traumatization of, young children. The Early Childhood Court Initiative was established in March 2014, when OCI received a grant (from Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families) to provide training, technical assistance, judicial coaching with national judicial experts, support for sustainability, and enhancement of data collection and data analysis. At a two-day, statewide kick-off in April, at which 225 Early Childhood Court Team members came together, OCI began “connecting the dots” among the 17 Early Childhood Court Teams across Florida. The agenda included an overview of federal and state early childhood court initiatives; sessions on child-parent psychotherapy, early childhood court team roles and responsibilities, building community resources, and family time/visitation; and break-out discussions.
Improving the Administration of Justice

by circuit. Each team returned home with an action plan—and with fresh ideas and tools to assist with gauging its circuit’s readiness for implementing the plan. These action plans will support the goals of the Early Childhood Court Initiative: safety for Florida’s youngest and most vulnerable children; a shortened time to permanency; and enhanced child well-being.

And the Evidence-Based Parenting Initiative—which developed in response to questions regarding parental access to quality services—is a project that supports the implementation of parenting practices that derive from the best research evidence and clinical experience and have been shown to produce positive results. Through this initiative, the Dependency Panel encourages parenting providers to offer evidence-based programs and helps them develop effective ways to convey information on parental progress to the judges and magistrates in the courtroom. The initiative also supports efforts to ensure that judges, judicial staff, and community stakeholders understand the process for establishing an evidence-based parenting program and for accessing programs that meet the research-based criteria. Among the focuses of the initiative are universal requirements for evidence-based parenting classes, pre- and post-test measures, parent readiness, and parent-child observations with children five and under. Thus far, 13 circuits are participating in the initiative; the Dependency Panel is aiming for statewide implementation of evidence-based services.

The new chair of the Dependency Panel is Judge Hope Bristol, Seventeenth Circuit. As the panel moves forward, it will continue to advance the Early Childhood Court Initiative and the Evidence-Based Parenting Initiative as well as other strategies for improving the stability, safety, and emotional well-being of children involved in Florida’s courts system.

Increasingly, many of the branch’s family court projects—like the School-Justice Partnerships, the Early Childhood Court Initiative, and the Evidence-Based Parenting Initiative—involves multi-systems work. Multi-systems partnerships recognize the benefits of collective impact in two ways: they aim to improve outcomes for children and families involved in multiple systems; and they offer effective methods for tackling large, complex social issues that affect children and families. In fiscal year 2014 – 15, the branch underlined its commitment to multi-systems partnerships through its participation in several other projects.

The Florida Children and Youth Cabinet, established in 2007, consists of 20 members representing state agencies that serve children, e.g., the Department of Children, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and the Department of Education; a justice of the supreme court—Justice Barbara Pariente—is among the ex officio members. The cabinet is charged with promoting collaboration among these agencies to work more efficiently and effectively for Florida’s children and youths. For its current major project, all cabinet entities are developing “process maps” that show how families and children move through Florida’s various social services and justice systems. The goal is to uncover gaps, overlap, duplication, and junctures at which one’s services connect with the services of other entities. This year, the courts system completed process maps for dependency, delinquency, domestic violence injunction, and dissolution of marriage cases.

Another multiple-systems partnership in which the branch has been involved is the Multi-Agency Child Welfare Workgroup. Established in 2007, the workgroup comprises OCI, the Department of Children and Families, Children’s Legal Services, Guardian ad Litem, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the University of South Florida, the Office of Regional Counsel, the FSU Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Florida Coalition for Children, the Executive Office of the Governor, and the Florida Institute for Child Welfare. By sharing information, data, perspectives, and ideas, the group seeks to make recommendations about policy and practice changes to the entities that serve the child welfare system.
Recently, the workgroup has been focusing on re-entry into care. Using the court data system (the Florida Dependency Court Information System), OCI identified 720 children whose cases were closed in dependency court in the 2012 calendar year and who subsequently suffered additional abuse/neglect events and re-entered the child welfare system. With the assistance of two researchers from the Florida Institute for Child Welfare, the workgroup is now performing a thorough analysis of the data associated with these 720 children. Through this analysis, the workgroup aims to develop evidence-informed recommendations about how Florida’s child welfare system can prevent the re-traumatization of children in its care.

Also in fiscal year 2014 – 15, a Multi-System Collaboration Training and Technical Assistance Program Grant (offered by the Center for Coordinated Assistance to States) was awarded to a partnership of the Florida state courts, the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet, the Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Juvenile Justice. The grant offers guidance on how Florida can align and streamline all its multi-systems work for maximum efficiency and impact. So far, the grant team has focused on two areas: identifying and understanding all the different statewide, state-level groups that affect children and families and mapping the process for youths deemed incompetent to proceed in delinquency court.

In addition to making significant progress in the dependency division of family court, the branch developed some important resources for the domestic violence division during the 2014-15 fiscal year.

Domestic violence cases involve many different entities—law enforcement, judges and court staff, state attorneys, public defenders, advocates, probation officers, and other professionals in the domestic violence field. In order for this complex, intricate system to operate effectively—and in order to ensure the safety of the victims, protect the due process rights of all parties, and hold perpetrators accountable—these entities must endeavor to respond as a coordinated community: all must be well-informed about the numerous components of the process and must strive to work collaboratively to help families access resources and navigate the justice system.

At the April 2015 “kick-off” meeting for the Early Childhood Court Initiative, 225 Early Childhood Court Team members came together in Tampa for a two-day program that included an overview of federal and state early childhood court initiatives; sessions on child-parent psychotherapy, early childhood court team roles and responsibilities, how to know whether early childhood court works, building community resources, and family time/visitation; and break-out discussions by circuit/Early Childhood Court Teams.
ensure a safe, efficient, and economic civil domestic violence process; and provide further education and training—
itemizing the components of each action and proposing innovative solutions and projects to address each component.
This report, and the input of the Domestic Violence Advisory Group, continue to guide OCI’s domestic violence-related
goals and plans.  (Follow this link to access the 2014 Domestic Violence Action Report.)

Soon after the long-range plan was published, OCI established the Florida Judicial Institute on Domestic Violence—now
called the Florida Institute on Interpersonal Violence (to reflect changes in the STOP Violence Against Women Grant
formula that expand the reach of the domestic violence umbrella to include sexual violence).  Developed in response to
a call for devoting more resources to education and training on the subjects of domestic violence, sexual violence, dating
violence, repeat violence, and stalking, the institute is a repository of helpful resources, including case law updates, a
calendar of training events, publications and materials prepared by Florida state courts system entities as well as other
state and national organizations, and links to a plethora of training opportunities—webinars, virtual court, videos, and
online and in-person training events—all of which aim to support the Florida courts system’s response to issues associated
with interpersonal violence.  (Take this link to access the Florida Institute on Interpersonal Violence.)

One of the institute’s principal objectives is to enhance statewide
consistency and uniformity in the handling of domestic violence
cases, and, toward this end, the institute facilitated a two-day
training for judges involved with domestic violence injunctions
specifically or with domestic violence issues generally.  The
institute began offering its Regional Training Program in fall 2014.
Since then, the training has been held in eight cities; after the
final training takes place in early 2016, every area of the state
will have hosted one.  This program was designed as a “best
practices” approach to the manifold challenges (substantive,
procedural, and other) unique to domestic violence cases,
especially domestic violence injunctions.  Focuses included
domestic violence dynamics, the effects of domestic violence
on children, elder abuse, and other civil protective injunctions
(dating violence, sexual violence, repeat violence, and stalking).
The institute is currently anticipating a phase II of the training;
while phase I worked to ensure that judges across the state are
on the same page with regard to domestic violence injunctions,
the second phase will address rarer matters that occasionally
arise during domestic violence injunctions (weapons issues and
immigration issues, for example).

OCI also continues to coordinate webinars on various topics
of relevance to those who work with domestic violence cases.
For fiscal year 2014 – 15, four webinars were offered: Strangulation: All Things Medical; Strangulation: All Things Legal;
Immigration: Options for Victims of Crime; and The Intersection of Stalking and Sexual Violence.  (To view the webinar
materials, take this link.)

Moreover, now that approximately one-third of OSCA’s STOP Grant funding is required to be directed toward projects
addressing sexual violence within a domestic violence framework, OCI is planning a major training in fall 2015 to bring
together domestic violence and sexual violence coordinators and case managers from across the state.  This training
will focus on the issues surrounding strangulation, including medical evidence, case management considerations, typical
defenses, and the use of experts.  In addition, OCI staff will conduct surveys and convene focus groups with judges and
stakeholder groups across Florida to discover what is being done, and what needs to be done, vis-à-vis sexual violence;
the goal will be to determine what projects are likely to yield the greatest benefits.  Anticipated projects include a sexual
violence benchbook, additional training programs, and helpful materials designed for judges handling sexual violence on
the criminal bench.
Finally, OCI continues to expand its catalog of domestic violence-related publications. Staff updated the Domestic Violence Benchbook in September 2014, and they also updated The Civil Injunction for Protection Brochure for Petitioners and The Civil injunction for Protection Brochure for Respondents to reflect recent changes in state law regarding injunctions related to stalking. Other recent OCI publications include Promising Practices for Determining Time-Sharing in Domestic Violence Cases, which addresses temporary parenting plans and time-sharing schedules within the context of domestic violence proceedings; Mediation and Domestic Violence: A Quick Reference Guide for Mediators, which explains the dynamics of family violence for mediators who help litigants navigate the court process; and Elder Abuse & Civil Orders for Protection: A Florida Courts Benchcard, which draws attention to the special needs of elders who are victims of domestic violence and other forms of abuse. Finally, OCI promulgated Seventh Circuit Judge John M. Alexander’s publication, How to Prepare for an Injunction for Protection Court Hearing, which offers pro se litigants a general idea of what they need to bring to court, how the hearing will be conducted, and what to do if they feel unsafe.

Court Improvement: Problem-Solving Courts and Initiatives

In 1989, in Miami-Dade County, Eleventh Circuit Judge Herbert Klein, with approval from the Florida Supreme Court and the support of a range of state and local community leaders, conceived and implemented the nation’s first drug court. In actualizing his vision, Judge Klein set in motion what became the national drug court movement: these days, more than 3,400 drug courts are in operation across the country, according to the National Institute of Justice, and they can be found in every state and US territory, as well as in 23 other countries. Judge Klein’s pioneering efforts also sparked a profound change in the way the US responds when a person suffering from drug and/or alcohol addiction is arrested. Often called “the most successful criminal justice reform of our nation’s history,” drug court has since prompted the creation of other kinds of problem-solving dockets using the drug court model—among them, mental health court, veterans court, domestic violence court, and truancy court.

Problem-solving dockets are designed to help individuals who have specific needs and problems that are not being addressed, or cannot adequately be addressed, in traditional courts. Although most problem-solving dockets are relatively new, studies have already shown that this approach, which hinges on differentiated case management (that is, adapting the case management process to the requirements of specific case types), significantly reduces crime—and provides better treatment outcomes and produces better cost benefits than other criminal justice strategies. Ultimately, it has a more positive effect on the lives of the participants, their families, their victims, and their communities.

The most prevalent problem-solving courts in Florida are drug court, mental health court, and veterans court. Currently, Florida has 95 drug courts: 51 adult, 24 juvenile, 16 dependency, and four DUI courts. The state also has 27 mental health courts and 24 veterans courts, with two more in the planning stages. [For more information about Florida’s problem-solving dockets, follow this link.]

Many of the initiatives discussed below have grown out of the recommendations of the supreme court’s Task Force on Substance Abuse and Mental Health Issues in the Courts. Established in 2010, this task force (a merger of the court’s Task Force on Treatment-Based Drug Court and the Mental Health Subcommittee) is charged with addressing the needs and challenges of individuals with serious mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders who become involved in the justice system. Chaired by Judge Steven Leifman, Miami-Dade County, and supported by OSCA’s Office of Court Improvement
(OCI), the task force has 21 members, including judges, quasi-judicial officers, justice system partners, and representatives from Florida’s Department of Children and Families, Department of Corrections, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, and Agency for Health Care Administration.  [This link goes to the 2014 administrative order governing the task force.]

Drug Court
Florida’s legislature has a long history of support for drug court. In 1993, for instance, lawmakers provided for pretrial substance abuse education and treatment intervention programs for eligible nonviolent felony offenders; these programs were the precursors to the various forms of drug court that exist in the state today. And in 2001, the legislature, stating that it “recognizes that the integration of judicial supervision, treatment, accountability, and sanctions greatly increases the effectiveness of substance abuse treatment,” encouraged the implementation of drug courts “in each judicial circuit in an effort to reduce crime and recidivism, abuse and neglect cases, and family dysfunction by breaking the cycle of addiction which is the most predominant cause of cases entering the justice system” [Section 397.334, Florida Statutes (2001)]. The legislature also fostered the development of adult post-adjudicatory drug courts: in 2009, when the economy was deep in the throes of the recession and the prison population was still growing, lawmakers, in an effort to conserve public dollars, supported the expansion of the number of adult post-adjudicatory drug courts in the state; although the program was initially funded with $18.9 million in federal stimulus money, lawmakers voted to fund the initiative after the grant expired in 2013, and then in 2014, they appropriated recurring dollars to continue the program long-term.

In Florida, drug court comprises a 12 to 18-month process during which nonviolent offenders whose crimes are related to a substance abuse disorder or addiction are placed in a treatment program under the close supervision of a judge and a team of treatment and justice system professionals. Although each drug court in the state is singular, reflecting the needs, priorities, and culture of its local community, drug courts tend to have certain features in common: for example, they take a less adversarial approach than traditional criminal justice strategies; they require participants to maintain ongoing interaction with the court; they collaborate closely with community partners to offer a range of treatment and rehabilitation services; they require participants to undergo frequent, random alcohol and drug tests, closely monitoring compliance and conferring rewards and, when necessary, imposing sanctions; and they are structured to achieve positive outcomes for the participants—and for those whose lives they touched. In 2014, close to 4,500 participants graduated from drug court (and almost 7,800 were admitted); 114 drug-free babies were born to female participants; 158 parents who participated were reunited with their children; and 221 children of participants were reunited with their parents.

Also during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, the number of problem-solving courts utilizing the Florida Drug Court Case Management System increased significantly. The system was originally designed for collecting and managing data for the eight courts involved in piloting the adult post-adjudicatory drug court expansion program, but OSCA has been augmenting it to manage cases in other problem-solving dockets throughout the state. It is now being used by nearly 60 courts, including adult drug courts, DUI courts, family dependency drug courts, juvenile drug courts, mental health courts, and veterans courts.

Web-based for easy and secure access, the Florida Drug Court Case Management System streamlines data collection and entry, allowing problem-solving court coordinators and case managers to manage their caseloads and monitor program outcomes efficiently. Among its benefits are instant client-level and program-level reports, custom staffing reports and dockets, customizable drug test panels, and bulk tasks for quickly entering routine data. The system also has a mechanism for performing local and statewide evaluations, which provide the branch with a reliable measure of the effectiveness and efficiency of the various problem-solving courts. Participating courts bear no cost to use this system. [Take this link to learn more about the Florida Drug Court Case Management System.]

In addition, in 2015, Florida Partners in Crisis, the Florida Association of Drug Court Professionals, and OSCA collaborated to develop content for and help plan a comprehensive, two-day training conference called Transitioning Science into Practice. More than 300 justice system stakeholders, judges, and court staff attended the statewide program, participating
in plenary sessions and workshops on “the latest” in successful diversion, re-entry, and community integration strategies for people with substance use and mental health disorders.

**Mental Health Initiatives**
The same circumstances that spurred the development of drug courts prompted the creation of mental health diversion programs, mental health dockets, and mental health courts: offenders in need of treatment services. With the reduced availability of community resources to provide treatment for people with serious mental illnesses—one of the consequences of the recent recession—the courts began seeing a significant increase in the number of repeat offenders with untreated mental illnesses. Florida’s jails and prisons are not designed, equipped, or funded to accommodate these offenders. However, the drug court model offers a viable alternative. Like drug courts, mental health courts hold offenders accountable while connecting them to the treatment services they need to address their mental health disorders. Monitoring and treating them in a mental health court is more effective, efficient, and economical than the remedies available through traditional justice system approaches.

In addition to promoting the establishment of mental health dockets across the state, the Task Force on Substance Abuse and Mental Health Issues in the Courts also advocates the development of safe, effective, and cost-efficient alternative placement options for people adjudicated incompetent to proceed or not guilty by reason of insanity.

Task force chair Judge Leifman underscores that Florida’s current forensic treatment system does not prevent individuals from becoming involved in the justice system—nor does it reduce recidivism to jails, prisons, and state hospitals. Moreover, it is expensive: it costs approximately $507 million annually to house people with mental illnesses in Florida’s prisons and forensic treatment facilities—and an additional $327 million each year to house them in local jails. Based on historic growth rates, these expenditures are forecast to increase significantly, by as much as a billion dollars each year over the next decade.

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Instead of recommending admission to forensic treatment facilities for individuals with serious mental illnesses or co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, the task force recommends community-based services and support, recognizing that this alternative approach saves taxpayer dollars—and it also redirects the state’s financial priorities from the incarceration of nonviolent offenders to their rehabilitation.

Thus the task force continues to explore the options for expanding the Miami-Dade Forensic Alternative Center (MD-FAC), a successful, community-based forensic commitment program that aims to successfully reintegrate its patients into the community. Established in August 2009, this program is a collaborative effort between the Eleventh Judicial Circuit and the Department of Children and Families; it admits adults age 18 and older who have been found by the circuit to be incompetent to proceed on a second or third degree felony, who do not have significant histories of violent felony offenses, and who are not likely to face incarceration if convicted of their alleged offenses. In addition, admission is limited to individuals who would otherwise be committed to the Department of Children and Families and admitted to state forensic treatment facilities.
Individuals admitted to the program are diverted from forensic treatment facilities into a secure inpatient setting where they receive crisis stabilization and short-term residential treatment services, which include illness management and community re-entry. When they are ready to step down to less restrictive community placement and outpatient services, they are given re-entry assistance and ongoing support services. Unlike state forensic treatment facilities, this program keeps in the program—rather than in jail—those individuals who are awaiting trial once their competency has been restored; as a result, these individuals are less likely to experience deterioration of psychiatric functioning and be declared incompetent to proceed again.

In an analysis comparing patients treated at the MD-FAC with demographically comparable individuals committed to a state facility, researchers at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine found that patients admitted to the MD-FAC had lower recidivism rates, and their likelihood of not returning to jail in the year following discharge was doubled (and, for those who did return to jail, they spent two-thirds fewer days incarcerated than the state facility patients did). In addition, the average length of stay was one-third shorter at the MD-FAC inpatient unit and cost half as much as inpatient admission to a state forensic treatment facility. Judge Leifman and the task force continue to press for the passage of bills to support the expansion of this program to other areas in the state.

For his panoply of efforts to help people with mental illnesses who are in the criminal justice system or are at risk of incarceration, Judge Leifman was recently named the recipient of the 2015 William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence. Presented by the National Center for State Courts, the Rehnquist Award is one of the nation’s highest judicial honors. Judge Leifman is the first Florida judge on whom this prestigious honor has been bestowed. (Take this link to the news release.)

Veterans Court
The US is home to approximately 22 million veterans, and, according to the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, more than 1.5 million live in Florida (around 8 percent of the state’s total population). Indeed, Florida has the third largest population of veterans in the nation. Veterans frequently return home with physical injuries—but war commonly leaves profound psychological scars as well. In addition to depression, veterans often suffer from two “signature injuries” of war—traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder; all three are risk factors for substance abuse. Veterans often find it difficult to re-assimilate into their communities—and those with untreated substance abuse or mental health issues may find it even harder to return to their home lives. These challenges can lead to criminal activity.

Veterans court was founded in 2008 in Buffalo, NY, to address the substance abuse and mental health needs of veterans within the criminal justice system. Veterans court utilizes the drug court model: it holds offenders answerable for their offenses while connecting them with treatment services that address the complex needs associated with substance abuse, mental illness, and concerns particular to the traumatic experience of war. However, veterans court is different from drug court and mental health court in that it relies significantly on the use of mentors—other veterans in the community who volunteer to support defendants with one-on-one time and attention. In addition, veterans courts leverage resources from the US Department of Veterans Affairs to serve these offenders’ treatment needs.

Florida launched its first veterans docket in 2010, and 24 are now operational, with two more in the planning stages. These dockets have been showing great promise, and lawmakers are encouraging the development of more special dockets and diversion programs for veterans.
Alternative Dispute Resolution

Among its proposals for handling cases in a more efficient, effective, and timely manner, the long-range plan recommends that the courts system “continue to explore and implement effective alternative dispute resolution processes.” By promoting communication—and thereby opening the door to problem-solving—between parties, by conserving judicial time, and by helping the branch use public resources responsibly, mediation and other alternative dispute resolution methods help to improve the administration of justice.

Initially galvanized by grassroots, community-based efforts, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) had its beginning in Dade County’s first citizen dispute settlement center, established in 1975. Thirteen years later, in 1988, ADR was brought under the umbrella of the Florida courts system; former Chief Justice Joseph Boyd and Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte, former president of the American Bar Association and former dean of the FSU College of Law, lent support to this effort when, in 1986, they established the Florida Dispute Resolution Center (DRC) as the first statewide hub for ADR education, training, and research. Soon thereafter, the branch began developing what has been the most comprehensive court-connected mediation program in the nation.

Housed in the supreme court building, the DRC sponsors the annual conference for alternative dispute resolution professionals; conducts county mediation training for volunteer mediators; oversees the process governing complaints filed against court-appointed mediators; provides ADR-related assistance to local courts throughout the state, as needed; and staffs four supreme court mediation boards and committees (the Supreme Court Committee on ADR Rules and Policy, the Mediator Ethics Advisory Committee, a mediator grievance board, and a grievance board for certified mediation training programs). The DRC also certifies mediators and mediation training programs in five areas: county, family, circuit, dependency, and appellate. Currently, more than 5,800 supreme court-certified mediators serve the state and its citizens.

The DRC’s crowning continuing education event of the 2014 – 15 fiscal year was its twenty-second annual statewide conference. Like the DRC’s two prior annual programs—“Twenty and in Transition” and “Expanding Our Horizons”—the summer 2014 program, “The Challenge of Change,” paid homage to the considerable transformations that ADR in Florida has been undergoing these last few years.

Some of these changes have been spurred by new technologies, including the DRC’s significant expansion of its web presence and its automation and streamlining of many of its processes to better assist mediators, trainers, attorneys, and the public.
The Year in Review

But some of the most remarkable developments are connected to the broadening scope of ADR. In the past, most people associated ADR with mediation. But now, mediation is regarded as just one of many ADR processes. Among the various new ADR roles, for instance, is the parenting coordinator (parenting coordination is a child-focused ADR process in which mental health or legal professionals with mediation training assist parents in creating and implementing their parenting plan). Indeed, the scope of the DRC has recently expanded to include some oversight for parenting coordination training program approvals and oversight of the process governing complaints filed against parenting coordinators.

With the expanding range of ADR, neutrals are keen to learn about a growing number of areas. And the DRC has been working to ensure that its annual programs address these expanding education interests. The summer 2014 program, for instance, offered sessions on non-binding arbitration, parenting coordination, and eldercare coordination (modeled after parenting coordination, this ADR process is designed for high-conflict guardianship and mental health cases that include issues related to the care, safety, and needs of elders). Continuing Mediation Education credits are not awarded for the sessions on emerging ADR processes, so, in order to give attendees the chance to learn about some of these developments while still earning the same number of CME hours they had been able to earn in the past, the DRC extended the length of the conference by two hours.

For the summer 2015 program, in addition to lengthening the conference, the DRC abbreviated the workshop sessions slightly and added an additional set of sessions to enable participants to learn about a greater variety of topics while still completing their CMEs. In addition to participating in CME-earning sessions, conferees could take a half-day pre-conference arbitration training and could explore sessions on arbitration, parenting coordination, eldercare coordination, and collaborative law.

Mr. James Alfini (center) received the Sharon Press Excellence in Alternative Dispute Resolution Award in 2014; he is flanked by former award recipient Mr. Mike Bridenback and Ms Janice Fleisher, chief of the Dispute Resolution Center. Mr. Alfini was the director of Education Research at the DRC from 1985 – 1991 and served on the supreme court’s first Arbitration and Mediation Rules Committee.

At the Fifth Circuit in January 2015, 20 trainees completed the Dispute Resolution Center’s certified county mediation training; pictured here are the trainees and their instructors.
In another significant development of the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, the Committee on ADR Rules and Policy, currently chaired by Judge Rodney Smith, Eleventh Circuit, proposed significant revisions to the Florida Rules for Certified and Court-Appointed Mediators—specifically to section three, which focuses on mediator discipline. First adopted in 1992, the rules provide ethical standards of conduct for certified and court-appointed mediators; they were designed to guide mediators in the performance of their services—and to instill public confidence in the mediation process.

However, much has changed since the rules and the certification requirement were initially adopted. For instance, the number of court-certified mediators has grown from a few hundred to more than 5,800. Drafters of the original disciplinary rules could not have anticipated the current number and complexity of rule violation grievances and issues relating to applicants’ good moral character. In addition, over the course of applying the rules to individual complaints and certification applications for 23 years, the board that enforces the rules (the Mediator Qualifications Board) became aware of areas in need of additions and amendments in order to close gaps, clarify and crystalize currently-utilized procedures, strengthen the authority of the board, and address situations that have arisen for which no direction exists. The revisions proposed by the Committee on ADR Rules and Policy endeavor to attend to these issues.

It is important to bear in mind that, each year in Florida, approximately 125,000 court-connected mediations take place—and less than .03 percent of those mediations result in grievances.

Also in fiscal year 2014 – 15, the DRC, in order to ensure the preservation of the long, rich history of mediation in Florida, launched an Archiving Project. For this endeavor, staff, after developing a classification scheme, evaluated every historically-valuable, ADR-related, hard-copy document in the DRC’s possession. In the course of unearthing and reviewing all these papers, staff have been able to compile an up-to-date record of every person who has ever served on any of the supreme court’s ADR-related committees—each one's name, term(s), and, if he/she left the committee, when and why. In addition to safeguarding the history of ADR in Florida, this project has the added benefit of significantly reducing the DRC’s paper-reliance.

Indeed, each of the last few years, the DRC has added to its repertoire of paper-free initiatives. In 2013 – 14, for instance, it implemented an automated mediator renewal process, and in 2014 – 15, it automated the process of sending reminders to mediators, letting them know they need to renew their certification. Soon, all DRC applications and resource handbooks will be electronic, and the center is also working on developing an online newsletter. Through these expanded uses of technology, the DRC seeks to streamline its processes; to provide ready assistance to ADR professionals and trainers; to save resources, both human and financial; and to be kind to the environment. (For more information about alternative dispute resolution in Florida, follow this link.)
Florida’s economy and its housing market are certainly rebounding, and economists have good reason to expect both to continue strengthening—as evidenced by the decrease in Florida’s foreclosure filing activity during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, down about 15.3 percent from the year prior. Nonetheless, a backlog still exists. And to address the glut of backlogged cases while protecting the rights of the parties involved in litigation, the judicial branch launched, and the legislature funded, a two-year Foreclosure Initiative that began on July 1, 2013 and came to a close at the end of June 2015. Throughout its duration, the courts made significant progress in reducing the backlog.

Fundamental to the initiative’s success was the $21.3 million that the legislature appropriated to the Florida courts system from the National Mortgage Settlement funds: $16 million for human resources such as additional senior judge days, general magistrates, and case managers, and $5.3 million for technology enhancements; lawmakers also designated $9.7 million to the clerks of court to assist with these cases (the funding was earmarked for fiscal years 2013 – 14 and 2014 – 15).

Equally critical to the initiative’s success was the trial courts’ implementation of the practical strategies recommended in the judicial branch’s Foreclosure Backlog Reduction Plan, released in April 2013. The plan, developed by the Trial Court Budget Commission’s Foreclosure Initiative Workgroup, took a bottom-up approach, basing its recommendations largely on process improvements that were already showing great potential at the local level. In developing the plan, the workgroup aimed to present the trial courts with a range of viable, resourceful, cost-effective methods to consider in addressing their backlog crisis. The plan offered four recommendations to address the problems impeding the just and timely processing of foreclosure cases. Three recommendations pertained to personnel and case management: implement more active judicial or quasi-judicial case management (including the expanded use of general magistrates into the civil division); develop a case management plan (by the chief judge) that optimizes the circuit’s use of existing and additional resources in the resolution of these cases; and hire additional case management personnel to attend especially to the older foreclosure cases. The fourth recommendation pertained to technology resources—specifically, the deployment of Court Application Processing System viewers, which provide judges with electronic case file information needed to perform their adjudicatory function. (To read the plan, take this link.)

The supreme court adopted the plan in June 2013, and the Foreclosure Initiative was launched. Since then, the backlog of residential mortgage foreclosure cases has diminished considerably. When the initiative began, on July 1, 2013 (the start of the 2013 – 14 fiscal year), more than 329,000 foreclosure cases were pending before the courts; and when the initiative ended, on June 30, 2015 (the end of the 2014 – 15 fiscal year), 83,179 foreclosure cases were pending—a figure that factors in the 163,152 new foreclosure cases that were filed within that time span. Altogether, the courts disposed of 378,446 foreclosure cases during the two-year stretch of the initiative.

Although the backlog has not yet returned to its normal level, OSCA projects that the branch will be seeing normal levels sometime in the 2015 – 16 fiscal year. Several developments are supporting branch efforts to achieve that goal. First, in an administrative order released on April 1, 2015, the supreme court directed the clerks of the circuit courts to continue providing additional case information that enables the courts system to better assess the status of foreclosure cases in the circuits (specifically, information that allows the courts to compute time to disposition, age of pending cases, and clearance rate) and to identify and focus on the older cases. And, second, during the 2015 legislative session, lawmakers appropriated funding for additional senior judges days (senior judges have been playing an invaluable role in ensuring the just and timely resolution of the pending mortgage foreclosure cases) and for additional case managers (circuits can use these additional positions to support their backlog reduction efforts). Since 2007, Florida’s courts have been experiencing unusually high levels of foreclosure filing activity. But with continued support from the legislature and with the ongoing implementation of the strategies recommended in the Foreclosure Backlog Reduction Plan, Florida’s courts system is finally seeing the light at the end of the very long “foreclosure crisis tunnel.” (For more information about the Florida courts system’s response to the foreclosure crisis, take this link.)
Long-Range Issue #3: 
Supporting Competence and Quality

The Florida State Courts System is committed to having a workforce that is highly qualified and dedicated to service.

To meet the demands of justice in the twenty-first century, judicial officers and court staff must have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to administer the justice system fairly, effectively, and in ways that promote trust and confidence. As Long-Range Issue #3 emphasizes, “Advanced levels of training and development are critical to enable those who work within the system to effectively perform the challenging work of the courts and meet the demands placed on them.”

Education for Judges and Court Personnel

Throughout the year, numerous entities within the courts system offer high-quality education and training opportunities for the people who work in the judicial branch, making efficient and effective use of limited funding and staff resources. For instance, the Standing Committee on Fairness and Diversity—with the help of the 26 diversity teams (one in each circuit court and DCA, and one for the supreme court and OSCA) and the judges who have become certified diversity trainers—conduct diversity awareness trainings both locally and regionally. Also on the local level, many courts coordinate trainings for members of their workforce: several circuits regularly offer continuing education programs for their court interpreters, for instance, and the First DCA recently instituted a brown bag lunch education program for its staff attorneys (and, via videoconferencing technology, the First DCA shares these trainings with court attorneys in other parts of the state).

In addition, several OSCA units develop, or facilitate, education programs for judges, court personnel, and justice system partners across Florida. The Office of Court Improvement, for instance, continues to organize live education opportunities as well as to expand its repertoire of web-based training tools (webinars, training modules, virtual courts, “tool kits,” videos, and publications) for family court and problem-solving court professionals and for those who are involved in these systems and are seeking guidance. And the Florida Dispute Resolution Center, in addition to conducting local mediation education programs, facilitates a statewide conference each year for alternative dispute resolution professionals, giving attendees a chance to expand their knowledge base, and to earn continuing education credits, in mediator ethics, cultural diversity, domestic violence education, and other topics of relevance to their practice. In addition, the Court Services Unit offers regular orientation workshops and administers written and oral language exams for foreign language interpreters who seek certification to interpret for the courts. And the branch’s statewide ADA coordinator organizes conference call trainings and statewide education programs for the circuit and appellate courts’ ADA coordinators on topics related to court access for people with disabilities. Furthermore, the Administrative Services Division and the Personnel Services Unit periodically arrange statewide instructional events on topics of benefit to court staff who work in budget services, finance and accounting, general services, and human resources, and the General Services Unit facilitates trainings on emergency preparedness for the branch’s emergency coordinating officers. Readers can learn more about this wealth of instructional offerings elsewhere in this annual report.

This section of the report focuses on the education programs and resources supported by the Florida Court Education Council (FCEC), which was established by the supreme court in 1978 to coordinate and oversee the creation and maintenance of a comprehensive education program for judges and some court personnel groups and to manage the budget that sustains these ventures. Chaired by Chief Justice Jorge Labarga, the council, with the support of two OSCA units (Court Education and Publications), provides continuing education through live programs, both statewide and local, and through distance learning events, publications, and other self-learning resources.
Education for Judges and Quasi-Judicial Officers

Judges are required to earn a minimum of 30 approved credit hours of continuing judicial education every three years, and new judges have to satisfy additional requirements. Each year, the council works with the leaders of the judicial conferences and colleges to help judges meet their educational obligations.

Florida’s judicial branch has three judicial conferences: the Conference of County Court Judges of Florida, the Florida Conference of Circuit Judges, and the Florida Conference of District Court of Appeal Judges. One of the functions of these conferences is to make sure their respective judges are able to satisfy the continuing education mandate. Through representation on the council, each conference helps to develop educational policy, and with the assistance of OSCA’s Court Education Section, each conference also coordinates its own live education programs. The Conference of County Court Judges of Florida and the Florida Conference of Circuit Judges offered their annual education programs in summer 2014 (the trial court administrators held their yearly education event at the same time and place as the circuit judges’ program). And the Florida Conference of District Court of Appeal Judges held its annual education program in fall 2014 (at the same time and place, the appellate clerks and marshals held their yearly education events).

The branch’s two judicial colleges—the Florida College of Advanced Judicial Studies and the Florida Judicial College—also offer training and development opportunities. The Florida College of Advanced Judicial Studies is a comprehensive continuing judicial education program for those seeking to hone existing skills or to delve deeply into a subject matter area; also available are courses that encourage thoughtful reflection on the meaning of justice. Florida’s appellate and trial judges, as well as its general magistrates and child support enforcement hearing officers, may apply to attend this annual program. Altogether, the June 2015 program had 281 participants.

Trial court judges who are new to the bench—and, since 2013, all new general magistrates and child support enforcement hearing officers as well—are required to participate in the Florida Judicial College program. This intensive, 10-day program has three phases. The first phase, a pre-bench program typically held in January, explores the art and science of judging through a series of orientation sessions, a mock trial experience, and a trial skills workshop; this year, phase one drew 80 new judges and 10 general magistrates/child support enforcement hearing officers. The second phase, two months later, focuses on more substantive and procedural matters; attending this phase were 83 new judges and 10 general magistrates/child support enforcement hearing officers. The third phase, held in Tallahassee, offers participants several chances to meet and interact with the supreme court justices. During lunch with the justices, program participants were treated to some sound advice, both professional and personal, about being an appellate judge.
child support enforcement hearing officers. In addition, 49 judges who were preparing to rotate to a new division attended the three-day “Fundamentals” portion of the second phase. The third phase consists of a year-long mentoring program for new judges.

The FCEC also sponsors an education program for judges new to the appellate bench: the New Appellate Judges Program was held in spring 2015. New appellate judges who have never sat on the trial bench must also attend the first phase of the Florida Judicial College.

In order to be able to offer the hundreds of hours of continuing judicial education needed each year, court education leaders rely substantially on the time and dedication of a roster of judges who generously agree to serve as faculty. Judges who want to teach other judges are required to take a faculty training course that, in a small-group setting (typically no more than 16 participants), introduces them to adult education principles and prepares them to create participatory learning activities.

In these two-day faculty training programs, which are offered at least once a year, judges learn how to do a needs assessment, develop learning objectives, team teach, reach different kinds of learners, and plan a successful course. Participants also have a chance to work with some of the courts system’s most experienced and accomplished judicial faculty, who share practical and anecdotal tips about what works (and what is likely to flounder). These training programs ensure that the FCEC’s education initiatives remain needs-based, learner-driven, and relevant and that the faculty are skilled at meaningfully responding to the needs of the students. Two faculty training programs were offered during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, and, altogether, 36 judges, general magistrates, and hearing officers participated in them.

Judges who have already taken a faculty training periodically have the opportunity to refresh and advance their skills by participating in a faculty enrichment program. Two were offered during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year. One was for faculty who were preparing to teach at the Florida Judicial College or the Florida College of Advanced Judicial Studies. The second offered a unique learning experience for first-time circuit judicial educators who were getting ready to teach at the upcoming Florida Conference of Circuit Judges education program: spearheaded by Chief Judge Frederick Lauten, Ninth Circuit, who chairs the Judicial Education Committee of the Florida Conference of Circuit Judges, this Circuit Faculty Enrichment Event gave participants a chance to “practice” the PowerPoint presentations and other active learning activities they had already prepared and to explore strategies for improving them.

Education for Court Personnel
Long-Range Issue #3 emphasizes that, like judges, court personnel should “have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to serve and perform at the highest professional levels.” To meet this goal, the FCEC, through its Florida Court Personnel Committee and with the support of OSCA’s Court Education Section, continues to develop education and training opportunities for employees who work in Florida’s courts system.

Efforts to build a flourishing education program for court personnel began in 2006, when the FCEC hired a consultant to perform an education needs assessment of six categories of court personnel and to make recommendations about their training needs and the most effective methods for addressing them. Not long after, the council established the Florida Court Personnel Committee to construct a plan for meeting these educational needs. Since 2008, the FCEC has provided funding for numerous statewide educational initiatives for court personnel groups, and it has also granted funding assistance to support local education programs developed by court personnel.
Supporting Competence and Quality

In fiscal year 2014 – 15, the council funded 15 local training programs on various topics, including leadership, teamwork and conflict resolution, diversity and sexual harassment prevention, the art of communication, generational differences, and advanced differentiated case management. In addition to sponsoring a two-day faculty training program for court personnel, the council supported four statewide programs: the Judicial Assistants Association of Florida and the Florida Trial Court Staff Attorneys received support for their annual conferences; the Florida Court Public Information Officers were allocated funds for an education program; and for the fourth year, the FCEC sponsored the Florida Court Personnel Institute, a two-day program tailored to the education needs of Florida’s court employees. This year, 89 court personnel participated in the institute, which offered three tracks: Leadership in Place; Continuity and Long-Term Planning; and a program for appellate law clerks and staff attorneys. Each year, participants have been enthusiastic about the institute’s level of instruction and its direct applicability to their work lives; evaluations confirm that attendees are energized by the experience and appreciate the opportunity to meet others at similar professional levels from across the state.

Thanks to the work of the Florida Court Personnel Committee over the last seven years, the number of court employees who have been able to benefit from educational offerings has mushroomed: the 100-plus education initiatives designed for court personnel have enhanced the knowledge and abilities of more than 4,000 attendees altogether (note: some employees have had the opportunity to attend more than one program over time, so this number reflects the number of program participants, not the number of court employees who have attended programs). Most impressive is that all of this has been achieved with a quite modest budget, largely because the vast majority of programs are developed and offered on the local level. The committee, currently chaired by Judge Angela Cowden, Tenth Circuit, remains committed to providing court employees with the tools they need to perform their work with competence, quality, fairness, and impartiality.

Publications and Other Self-Learning Resources

To supplement the scope of training and educational offerings for judges and court personnel, Long-Range Issue #3 recommends that the branch continue to expand its repository of self-learning resources and web-based materials. To help the courts system achieve this goal, the FCEC supports judicial and staff efforts to develop new court education publications, update existing ones, devise distance learning events for court personnel, and expand the online Court Education Resource Library.

The FCEC’s Publications Committee, with the assistance of OSCA’s Publications Unit, worked steadily to boost its catalog of online publications during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year. A new addition to the resource library is the Duty Judge Manual, and the following publications were updated: An Aid to Understanding Canon 7; the Contempt Benchguide; the Criminal Benchguide for Circuit Judges; Handling Florida Cases Involving Self-Represented Litigants; A Judge’s Guide to the Practices, Procedures, and Appropriate Use of General Magistrates and Child Support Enforcement Hearing Officers; the Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee Opinions Topical Index; the Judicial Ethics Benchguide; and the Judicial Administration Benchguide. Moreover, on a quarterly basis, the committee continued to produce its cumulative and indexed Domestic Violence Case Law Summaries and its Traffic-Related Appellate Opinion Summaries.

In addition, for court personnel, the FCEC supports the development of distance learning courses that are related to publications in the online Court Education Resource Library, and in fiscal year 2014 – 15, two webinars were presented: Social Media Issues for Florida Court Personnel and Family and Medical Leave Act Issues for Florida Court Personnel. The first drew 95 participants from around the state, and the second, 77.
The Year in Review

Enhancing Court Access and Services

The Publications Committee also continues to augment the online Court Education Resource Library. The resource library provides browsers with easy access to a host of educational materials: links to publications and other materials prepared by the committee and various OSCA units; materials from live court education programs and other educational events; and useful articles, curricula, handbooks, and reports from other state and national organizations.

Finally, at the Publications Committee’s direction, the Publications Unit developed a responsive user interface to serve as an additional entry point into the Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee opinions (which are posted on the Sixth Judicial Circuit’s website). The interface initially in place was designed for PC access; the responsive user interface has been designed for access by mobile devices. The interface is being tested, and it should soon be ready for general release.

Long-Range Issue #4:
Enhancing Court Access and Services

*Florida’s judicial branch is committed to improving access to courts, and to providing the highest quality of services to everyone who enters a courthouse.*

Issue #4 of the long-range plan begins with the following declaration: “Public access to the courts is a cornerstone of our justice system. Article I, section 21 of the Constitution of the State of Florida requires that ‘the courts shall be open to every person for redress of any injury, and justice shall be administered without sale, denial or delay.’ Inherent in this mandate is the precept that our courts are neutral bodies that will interpret the law fairly, and will ensure equal treatment of all parties.”

At the same time, the long-range plan recognizes that “There are obstacles that litigants face...in seeking access to the courts.” Among the impediments it specifies are economic barriers, cultural and attitudinal biases, language and communication obstructions, and physical and electronic hurdles.

The judicial branch is actively committed to identifying and reducing these obstacles. Through its endeavors to ameliorate access to civil justice, to promote diversity awareness, to expand the pool of certified court interpreters, and to facilitate architectural and electronic access for people with disabilities—and through its steps to keep the courthouse doors open, even in emergencies—the judicial branch aspires to ensure that all people have meaningful access to Florida’s courts and that everyone who enters the courts, whether literally or virtually, is treated fairly and respectfully.

**Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice**

At his passing of the gavel ceremony on June 30, 2014, Chief Justice Jorge Labarga spoke passionately about the challenges faced by disadvantaged, low-income, and moderate-income Floridians when seeking meaningful and informed access to the civil justice system. One of the most effective ways to navigate the legal system is to engage legal representation, he pointed out. And legal representation is guaranteed for low-income individuals in criminal cases—but in civil cases (e.g., those related to family matters, home ownership and landlord-tenant issues, and veterans’ benefits), defendants have no right to representation. They either must pay out of pocket for legal counsel (often not an option, as attorney fees in Florida run upwards of $250 per hour). Or
they must represent themselves—and try to make sense of a spate of processes, laws, rules, and forms that can be mystifying to non-lawyers. The chief justice also noted that, in the past, these Floridians could apply for free or low-cost legal help through legal aid services—but because the funding sources for these services have diminished steadily these last few years, only a small percentage of those who need civil legal assistance are actually able to obtain it. In short, for these Floridians who are caught in the “civil justice gap,” securing legal representation for civil matters is often not feasible. And although Florida’s courts have been working to develop forms, instructions, and other self-help resources, and although other entities in the justice system have tried, within the scope of their authority, to improve the availability and delivery of legal services, many Floridians still encounter obstacles when seeking access to the civil justice system. Calling this a critical issue for the state, the chief justice announced that access to justice for all Floridians would be one of the top priorities of his two-year administration.

At a ceremony in the Florida Supreme Court rotunda on November 24, 2014, he signed an administrative order creating the Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice. Recognizing that access to civil justice is a societal concern, he emphasized that the solutions would require a broad, holistic approach that depends on all segments of society, not just its attorneys and lawmakers. Therefore, this commission “bring[s] together the three branches of government, the Bar, civil legal aid providers, the business community, and other well-known stakeholders in a coordinated effort to identify and remove these economic barriers to civil justice.” Urging the 27-member commission to “consider Florida’s legal assistance delivery system as a whole,” his administrative order directs members to “consider and evaluate components of a continuum of services for the unrepresented, taking into account consumer needs and preferences.” Among the components suggested are “interactive forms; unbundled legal services; the involvement of court, law, and public libraries; and other innovations and alternatives.” The administrative order also bids the commission to “examine ways to leverage technology in expanding access to civil justice for disadvantaged, low income, and moderate income Floridians.”

At the commission’s first meeting, held in Tallahassee in January 2015, members learned about the scope of the problem and the urgent need for action and discovered what other state access commissions have been doing to address the issue (the keynote speaker was The Honorable Nathan Hecht, chief justice of the Supreme Court of Texas, who has played a major role in the access to justice efforts in his home state). Members then began considering the role the commission could play in improving the availability and delivery of judicial and legal services for Floridians who fall into the civil justice gap. To carry out the commission’s charges, Chief Justice Labarga, who chairs the commission, also announced the creation of five subcommittees: Outreach, Access to and the Delivery of Legal Services, Continuum of Services, Technology, and Funding. The commission has now met three times, and the subcommittees, and the commission as a whole, have already made significant headway.
The Year in Review

Enhancing Court Access and Services

The commission’s first act was to create an Access to Justice Knowledge Base—a searchable database containing links to information about the initiatives of the Florida organizations, courts, bar, and other justice system partners that are already working to enhance access to civil justice as well as the resources that are currently available. The database also includes links to a wealth of reports, white papers, articles, and information from all across the country about access to civil justice resources and programs. A project of The Florida Bar, the knowledge base, which will be updated regularly, was designed to enable commission members to learn about what is now available in the state—and to study the host of ideas that other states have implemented, many of which can be customized to suit Florida’s purposes. (Take this link to access the knowledge base.)

An idea that holds out particular promise is the statewide Triage Gateway, envisioned as an online intake system (available 24/7 by any device with internet access) that gives people with little knowledge about the legal system a place to start. After considering dozens of factors—such as individual and household information, location, the specific legal issue, and the individual’s ability to handle that issue—the statewide gateway portal would guide the user to the proper legal resources, e.g., court forms, software that takes the user through the process of filling out forms online, self-help centers, legal aid programs, lawyer referral services, and other resources as they become available. The commission voted to support, in concept, the creation of the statewide gateway portal and directed the Access to and the Delivery of Legal Services Subcommittee to develop a plan to realize the concept for further review by the commission.

In October 2015, the commission released its interim report, offering its preliminary recommendations for supreme court consideration; it will submit a final report in June 2016. Reflecting on the urgency of ensuring that vulnerable and underserved Floridians have meaningful access to justice, Chief Justice Labarga acknowledges that “The challenge is very great, and there’s no doubt we are at the beginning of a long journey. But we are making progress.” (This link goes to the website of the Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice.)

Fairness and Diversity Awareness

The judicial branch works mindfully to create court settings that are free of bias—environments in which judges, court personnel, attorneys, and litigants treat each other with courtesy, dignity, and consideration. This aspiration is reflected in one of the goals of Long-Range Issue #4: “Florida’s courts will treat all people fairly and with respect.”

For nearly 30 years, the branch has been striving to realize this vision with the help of several supreme court-appointed committees, including the Gender Bias Study Commission (1987), the Racial and Ethnic Bias Study Commission (1989), the Committee on the Court-Related Needs of Elders and Persons with Disabilities (early 1990s), and the Commission on Fairness (1987). In 2004, the court established the Standing Committee on Fairness and Diversity “to advance the State Courts System’s efforts to eliminate from court operations bias that is based on race, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, financial status, or any characteristic that is without legal relevance.” Since 2008, the committee has been chaired by Judge Scott Bernstein, Eleventh Circuit.

Over the last 11 years, the committee has made great progress. Among its accomplishments, it created an online court diversity information resource center; produced a report titled Promoting and Ensuring the Diversity of Judicial Staff Attorneys and Law Clerks, whose recommendations continue to be implemented by the courts; coordinated an extensive outreach project on perceptions of fairness in Florida’s courts and prepared a comprehensive report based on the findings; and coordinated the development of a courts-specific survey instrument for evaluating all state court facilities to determine their accessibility to people with disabilities. Ongoing projects include the coordination of regular diversity and sensitivity awareness programs for judges and court staff; the implementation of 26 diversity teams (one in each circuit court and DCA and one in the supreme court/OSCA) to advance
court-wide education programs and to produce and promulgate public educational materials; the encouragement of local initiatives to strengthen court-community relationships; the production of practical educational materials to help judges, court staff, and attorneys recognize, respond to, and understand their role in eliminating bias from the courtroom; and collaborations with the Florida Court Education Council to identify and recommend resources for implementing fairness and diversity training for judges and court personnel at the local, regional, and state levels.  

Due to a rule change recommended by the committee and supported by the Florida Court Education Council, judges can use approved courses in fairness and diversity training to fulfill the four-hour ethics requirement they must meet every three years.  In addition, new judges are required to attend a full-day, in-person fairness and diversity training within three years of becoming a judge.  So one of the committee’s leading responsibilities is to ensure that diversity awareness programs are regularly available.  To date, more than 1,000 judges and senior judges have completed a full-day training program.  The committee expanded its mission to include the provision of trainings for court staff—and, so far, hundreds have participated in a training.

In addition, the committee worked with the courts system’s 26 diversity teams, providing support for sustaining diversity awareness by combining diversity education programs with other local initiatives designed to appreciate differences and celebrate diversity—initiatives like diversity mixers and minority mentoring picnics, for instance.

The committee also supported local court efforts to reach out to and educate the public about the courts system, thereby strengthening court-community relationships and enhancing the public image of the judicial branch.  Recent court-community relationship-building activities include courthouse tours, Justice Teaching and other school outreach initiatives, teen courts, Law Day and Constitution Day activities, “meet your judge” and “inside the courts” programs, jury appreciation events, adoption events, speaker’s bureaus, citizens guides, citizen advisory committees, and the like.  

To advance fairness and diversity in the legal profession, the committee also carries on with its efforts to build partnerships and collaborations with the Supreme Court of Florida Commission on Professionalism, local bar associations, community organizations, and Florida law schools.  Members of the committee participated in numerous events sponsored by these entities to help develop, implement, and enhance diversity education programs and opportunities in the legal profession.  In addition, the committee maintains connections with the deans of the Florida law schools and offers itself as a resource to the schools and their students.  Committee members also took advantage of opportunities to give presentations at and to participate in various local, regional, and statewide fairness and diversity events—diversity picnics, diversity mixers, cultural awareness presentations, and diversity symposiums, for example.  

Finally, Judge Bernstein continues to serve on the advisory board for the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts.  This organization works to address and build solutions for fairness issues and to share research and resources.
Court Interpreters Program

The most recent US census figures reveal that half of the nation’s foreign-born population resides in four states: California, New York, Texas, and Florida. Altogether, 19.4 percent of Florida’s population (which is approximately 19.9 million) is foreign born, with 27.4 percent speaking a language other than English at home.

The judicial branch understands that language barriers can hinder access to the courts and court services: Long-Range Issue #4 acknowledges that “Our system of jurisprudence may be unfamiliar to citizens from other nations, and may present a level of complexity that is intimidating and frustrating”—and that “Non-English speakers and those not fluent in English generally have significant difficulty understanding the courts system and may not be able to fully participate in the court process.” Recognizing that meaningful access to the courts should be available for all people, regardless of their ability to communicate effectively in the English language, the judicial branch is committed to building its pool of accomplished court interpreters and to harnessing technology to facilitate the sharing of interpreting resources among circuits.

To reduce the effects of language barriers, the courts must have access to a reserve of well-qualified spoken language interpreters—and judges and trial court administrators must have the means to evaluate the credentials of interpreters seeking appointment. To support these efforts, the supreme court adopted the Florida Rules for Certification and Regulation of Spoken Language Court Interpreters (referred to as the Court Interpreter Rules) in 2006. In adopting the rules, the court also created the Court Interpreter Certification Board; currently chaired by Judge J. Kevin Abdoney, Tenth Circuit, the board is tasked with certifying, regulating, and disciplining court interpreters as well as with suspending and revoking certification. At the same time, the court established the Court Interpreter Certification and Regulation Program.

In 2014 and, again, in 2015, the supreme court adopted significant changes to the Court Interpreter Rules. The 2014 rule amendments were designed to improve the overall quality of interpreting services available in the courts; they were proposed by the Court Interpreter Certification Board in response to a comprehensive study of the court interpreter program by the Commission on Trial Court Performance and Accountability. With these revisions, the supreme court created a three-tier classification system for court interpreters: a certified court interpreter has achieved the highest level of expertise; a language-skilled interpreter has reached the same level of proficiency as a certified court interpreter, but in a language for which a state certification exam is not yet available; and a provisionally approved interpreter has passed the oral performance exam (though at a lesser qualifying prescribed level than is needed to achieve certification) and has satisfied the other general prerequisites but is not yet certified in a spoken language for which a state certification exam is available. In addition, the rule changes require that, after achieving the provisionally approved interpreter designation, one has to complete the process of becoming certified within two years. The rules also stipulate that applicants selected as employee interpreters—if they are not certified at the time of court employment—become certified within one year of being employed in an interpreter position. Finally, the amendments specify that certified court interpreter is the preferred designation when selecting court-appointed interpreters, arranging for contractual interpreter services, and making staff hiring decisions.

In March 2015, the court further modified the Court Interpreter Rules to require all court interpreters to register with the Office of the State Courts Administrator prior to providing interpreter services in any court or court-related proceeding. Registration is now considered the first step toward becoming a designated interpreter. In order to allow the registration process to go forward without unfairly penalizing interpreters who might have needed more time to schedule participation in orientation programs and required examinations, the supreme court also approved a graduated implementation of the registration requirement, which became effective October 1, 2015.

In amending the rules, the supreme court has several goals: to encourage court interpreters to become certified; to help judges select the most qualified interpreters available; and generally to elevate the quality of interpreter services in Florida’s courts. (This link goes to the amended Court Interpreter Rules.)
Since the amended rules took effect, the Court Interpreter Certification and Regulation Program staff have noticed a considerable upsurge in applications. Indeed, 108 applications were submitted between April 1, 2015, and September 24, 2015: 54 applications were for interpreter registration; 21 were for provisional approval; and 33 were for certification.

Over the course of the 2014–15 fiscal year, the judicial branch also made progress in expanding its inventory of approved continuing education programs. Among the requirements for maintaining state-level designation, court interpreters must earn a minimum of 16 hours of continuing interpreter education credits every two years. Continuing education was phased in on July 1, 2010, and, thus far, the board has approved applications for 102 continuing interpreter education programs. Initially, all the approved programs were offered by private entities. But, before long, several circuits began creating trainings to meet the specific needs of their court interpreters: in the last five years, the Seventh, Ninth, Thirteenth, Fifteenth, Seventeenth, and Nineteenth Judicial Circuits have designed and received approval for locally-developed education programs. In the 2014–15 fiscal year, the Ninth Circuit offered “Inside the Courts,” “Ethics and the Court Interpreter,” and “Criminal Prosecution: From Arrest to Sentencing”; the Thirteenth Circuit presented “Code of Ethics: The Interpreter’s Shield”; and the Seventeenth Circuit conducted “Motions in Criminal Trial Court, from Start to Finish.”

Finally, the branch continues to work on the language access priorities it identified in connection with the October 2012 National Language Access Summit. The Florida team that attended the summit proposed six recommendations for supreme court consideration: designate a language access advisory committee to make policy recommendations to the court; enhance remote interpreting services; institute a grievance complaint process; evaluate existing standards and best practices; conduct outreach on collaborating with other entities (universities, national testing organizations) to expand interpreter resources; and enhance judicial education. The court approved all six recommendations, and the Court Interpreter Board has already made great progress with the first three: the board requested, and was granted, expanded authority to serve as a language access advisory committee; it recently finalized a draft complaint process, which will be submitted to the supreme court for approval; and it has been working with other court committees to expand the use of remote interpreting technology (the branch has been piloting an advanced remote interpreting solution that enables six circuits to share their interpreting resources). Through initiatives like these, the branch presses on with its efforts to improve the quality and availability of language access services in Florida’s courts. [For more information about the Court Interpreter Certification and Regulation Program, take this link.]
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Enhancing Court Access and Services

Court Access for People with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which marked its twenty-fifth anniversary in July 2015, was established to ensure that people with disabilities have the same opportunities that are available to people without disabilities. Often called the most significant piece of federal legislation since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ADA protects people who have impairments that substantially limit major life activities, such as breathing, seeing, hearing, speaking, understanding, learning, walking, caring for themselves, performing manual tasks, and working.

According to the most recent census data, approximately one in five people in the US report having one or more disabilities. Moreover, since the nation’s population is aging, and since the risk of having impairments grows with age, the number of people with disabilities is likely to increase in the coming years. This is of special import in Florida, the state with the highest rate of residents who are 65 years or older (19.1 percent of the population). To provide “meaningful access to Florida’s courts for all people,” Long-Range Issue #4 encourages the judicial branch to continue its efforts to ensure that people with disabilities can effectively participate in court proceedings, programs, and services.

In April 2015, Chief Justice Labarga honored the historic signing of the ADA 25 years ago with a proclamation designating July 2015 as an opportunity to commemorate the anniversary within the Florida courts system. Several former chief justices also focused attention on the requirements of the federal law: in 1999, then Chief Justice Major B. Harding signed a proclamation designating the year 2000 as a time to pay tribute to the tenth anniversary of the ADA, and in 2010, then Chief Justice Charles T. Canady issued a proclamation to memorialize the twentieth anniversary of the law’s passage and dedicated a month to highlight compliance. In the 2015 proclamation, Chief Justice Labarga “reaffirm[s] the courts system’s commitment to full compliance with the Act,” and he “call[s] upon judicial officers and court staff members to renew their efforts to eliminate obstacles that prevent full inclusion of all Floridians in the State Courts System.” (Follow this link to access the press release and proclamation.)

The chief justice’s proclamation underscores the branch’s longstanding commitment to compliance with the ADA. For instance, the ADA requires that public entities with 50 or more employees assign at least one employee to coordinate ADA compliance—and Florida’s courts system has consistently exceeded this mandate: since 1990, each of Florida’s 20 circuits and five DCAs has had at least one ADA coordinator to facilitate compliance at the local level, and the branch has also had a statewide ADA coordinator to provide technical assistance to judicial officers and court employees regarding court compliance with the ADA.

Also of note is the branch’s endeavors to minimize the effects of physical barriers to Florida’s courts—an undertaking that then Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis vigorously highlighted in 2006, when he appointed a committee to oversee a multi-year, branch-wide court accessibility initiative. Members of the Court Accessibility Subcommittee developed a courts-specific survey instrument to identify architectural obstacles in public areas of court facilities, worked with chief judges to create a Court Accessibility Team in each circuit and appellate court, and provided regional training sessions to teach the teams how to survey and evaluate their court facilities. Thereafter, each team developed a transition plan that identified its court’s barriers, devised measures for addressing the problems, and determined who would be responsible for correcting the problems. Even when funding has been constrained at the state and local levels, Florida’s courts have continued to work steadily to eradicate architectural hurdles that thwart access for people with disabilities. Now that the economy is showing signs of strengthening and more resources are available for addressing courthouses’ ADA-related concerns, state and county lawmakers have earmarked funding for making needed improvements to existing structures and for replacing dilapidated ones. For fiscal year 2014 – 15, for instance, lawmakers provided funding for building system upgrades to make the Third DCA more
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accessible. They also provided appropriations for a new Fourth DCA courthouse and a new courthouse in Washington County; constructed in compliance with the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, these buildings will be readily accessible to and usable by people with disabilities.

In addition to its endeavors to reduce physical obstacles, the judicial branch is also committed to minimizing communication barriers: since 2007, the branch has worked to ensure that its electronic documents and web pages are accessible to people using assistive devices like screen readers.

Publicity about the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ADA has naturally heightened awareness of this civil rights law and provoked an interest in learning more about it and how best to comply with its requirements. Because of this enhanced interest, the statewide ADA coordinator, Ms Debbie Howells, has been called on to offer more trainings than usual lately: she designed several workshops for mediators, teaching them how to prepare for ADA situations, for instance, and she also conducted a training on the ADA for Florida’s trial court administrators.

Educational initiatives are regularly developed at the local level as well. For example, in fiscal year 2014 – 15, Ms April Copp, senior deputy court administrator with the Eighteenth Circuit, produced a useful, handy reference tool for judges and court personnel about the ADA and other civil rights laws. And with guidance from the branch’s statewide ADA coordinator, the Eighteenth Circuit also updated its assistive listening systems and revamped its website to make it more accessible to people with disabilities as well as to users accessing it through mobile devices.

As the head of Florida’s courts system, the chief justice has made improving court access a priority of his two-year term, and compliance with the ADA is one significant way of reducing barriers that inhibit Floridians’ access to their courts.

Emergency Preparedness

For court access to be a reality, the courthouse doors must be open, and the courts must be in working order. When courts have to close because of an emergency of any sort—whether of natural or human origin—the effect is that court access is hampered and justice is delayed.

The September 11 tragedy catalyzed the courts system’s development of branch-wide policies and procedures for anticipating and managing emergencies that can disrupt court operations: within a few months of the terrorist offensives, then Chief Justice Charles Wells established the Work Group on Emergency Preparedness and directed it to “develop a plan for the State Courts System to better respond to emergency situations.” He urged the workgroup to be guided by two policy goals: protect the health and safety of everyone inside the courts, and keep the courts open to ensure justice for the people.

After the implementation of the work group’s recommendations, each court identified its mission-essential functions; developed a preparedness plan that includes emergency and administrative procedures as well as a continuity of operations plan; and designated an emergency coordinating
officer, a court emergency management team (which is responsible for maintaining court operations in a disaster situation),
and a public information officer (who helps to coordinate emergency response activities and provides information to, and
answers questions from, the media and the public). The supreme court also established the United Supreme Court/Branch
Court Emergency Management Group to recommend policy for, prepare for, and respond to emergencies both in the
supreme court building and in state courts across Florida. In addition, to expedite responses to threats and emergencies
as well as to foster the coordination of resources, the branch established lines of communication with executive branch
agencies and with local and statewide emergency management and first responder agencies. The emergency preparedness
measures that Florida’s courts system began instituting after 9/11 have been nationally recognized as a model of teamwork
and intergovernmental collaboration.

Emergency management signifies being prepared both for nature-induced crises (tropical storms, hurricanes, tornadoes,
floods, pandemics, etc.) and for human-made calamities (oil spills, biohazards, extended information systems outages,
military or terrorist attack-related incidents, and the like). Generally, the emergencies that tend to buffet Florida are weather-
connected (indeed, the Sunshine State—which the National Oceanic
and Atmospheric Administration calls
the most hurricane-prone state in
the nation—has been pounded by 40
percent of the hurricanes that have hit
the US). Currently, Florida is coming
to the close of its tenth consecutive
season without a hurricane landfall.
And while no courts had to close in
response to damage from hurricanes
or tropical storms during the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, several courts did
face brief closures resulting from
power outages, water main breaks, or
termites.

After dexterously addressing a
courthouse emergency, court
emergency management team
members seize the opportunity to
review their continuity of operations
plan and make any necessary
adjustments to ensure that their court
is as prepared as possible to respond to crises, recover from them, and mitigate against their impacts. The United Supreme
Court/Branch Court Emergency Management Group regularly encourages each court to review its plan, conduct table-top
exercises that test its plan, and engage in drills (fire, emergency evacuation, and shelter in place drills) a few times each year.

In fact, this year, the Second Circuit staged one of the largest, full-scale emergency preparedness exercises of any
courthouse in Florida: a day-long active shooter security incident that involved both mass casualties and hostage scenarios.
Coordinated by the trial court marshal, Mr. Bill Wills, the incident was staged to transpire in multiple locations and on six
floors of the 10-story courthouse and included judges, court staff, bailiffs, and staff from the clerk of the circuit court’s
office, the public defender’s office, the state attorney’s office, and other tenants who perform work in the courthouse. All
told, 19 agencies worked collaboratively with courthouse personnel to design the drill and make it a success, among them,
the sheriff’s office, the police department, the fire department, the capitol police department, the Florida Department of
Law Enforcement, and the county emergency management, emergency medical services, and risk management offices.

The goal of the activity was to train court leadership and staff to react carefully and effectively during an unfolding active
shooter incident in the courthouse so as to protect the public and employees, ensure a safe forum for the redress of legal
issues, and provide for the orderly and safe administration of justice. And exercise planners worked hard to make the activity as useful and realistic as possible (to provide an element of realism, for example, “moulage”—that is, the application of mock injuries—was used on 39 of the exercise “victims”). Yet, despite the complexity and magnitude of the exercise, normal courthouse operations proceeded—indeed, 10 to 12 courtrooms continued operations throughout the incident. All told, 697 employees received training about active shooter prevention and about what to do if an active shooter actually gains entry into the courthouse. Since completing the exercise, the Second Circuit has been developing a five-year plan of testing, training, and exercising best practices for courthouse security operations.

To support emergency preparedness efforts in courts across the state, Steven Hall, the chief of OSCA’s General Services Unit and the branch’s statewide emergency coordinating officer, has instituted monthly conference calls for all the courts system’s emergency coordinating officers. While, unavoidably, hurricane-related topics are a frequent subject of these calls, Mr. Hall emphasizes the need to consider the greater range of hazards, risks, and issues of which the emergency coordinating officers should be aware; recent conference call topics included preparing and testing continuity of operations and pandemic plans; readying the courts and the people inside them for an outbreak of the Ebola virus or other infectious diseases; deploying emergency notification systems to most efficiently reach employees and stakeholders in crisis situations; and evaluating the most cost-effective options for replacing the courts system’s satellite phones.

He has also been responsible for updating and expanding the emergency preparedness resources available on the Florida courts intranet site. Here, judges and court personnel can learn about workplace preparedness and safety, loss prevention, home preparedness and safety, and emergency preparedness for people with disabilities, for older Americans, and for pet owners. Site visitors can also find templates for preparedness plans as well as links to each county’s emergency information portal and to a plethora of other helpful local, state, and national resources. Next, he plans to turn his attention to updating and enhancing the state courts system’s emergency preparedness internet site.

**Long-Range Issue #5: Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence**

*Regardless of the economic and political challenges, the branch must remain steadfast in its commitment to maintain and consistently build the public’s trust and confidence.*

The five issues shaping the long-range plan are regarded as equal in weight, comparable in significance—and inextricably interwoven. But Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence comes last of the five because its successful realization depends largely on the branch’s success in reaching toward the goals of the four issues that precede it. To promote the people’s trust and confidence in their courts system, in other words, the judicial branch must make pronounced progress in its efforts to Strengthen Governance and Independence, Improve the Administration of Justice, Support Competence and Quality, and Enhance Court Access and Services. As this report has illustrated, the branch continues to make advances in these areas.

Another way the branch works to earn the people’s trust and confidence is by striving to operate in accordance with the five fundamental values that inform the judicial branch vision: that “Justice in Florida will be accessible, fair, effective, responsive, and accountable.” The courts system remains committed to meaningfully exemplifying these values.
The judicial branch endeavors to be **accessible**: it recently established a Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice to address the unmet civil legal needs of poor and middle-class Floridians; it stays focused on reducing physical, communication, and language barriers that impede access to the courts; it is developing a communication plan designed to enhance public understanding of, and support open lines of communication with, the branch; it embraces new technologies that enable the electronic transmission of court records and that facilitate the public’s digital access to court information; and it regularly drills and updates its emergency management policies and procedures, which are devised to keep the courts open, even in a crisis (see Long-Range Issues #1, #2, and #4).

The judicial branch seeks to be **fair**: it offers a wealth of education and training programs to equip judges, quasi-judicial officers, and court personnel with the knowledge and skills that foster the impartial administration of justice; it is committed to initiatives that promote fairness and diversity awareness; and it endeavors to enable all people to participate fully, effectively, and with dignity in court proceedings (see Long-Range Issues #3 and #4).

The judicial branch aims to be **effective**: it is dedicated to establishing a stable, permanent funding source so that it can meet the needs of the individuals, families, and businesses coming through the courthouse doors; it executes strategies for improving the management of the courts system; it continues efforts to build a comprehensive electronic court structure to improve the efficiency of, and access to, the courts; it is committed to alternative dispute resolution processes that support efforts to handle cases efficiently and in a timely manner; it continues to develop measures for monitoring performance and managing resources; it becomes innovative court improvement practices, including the expansion of problem-solving dockets; and it offers high-quality education and training opportunities, which support the efforts of judges, quasi-judicial officers, and court personnel to capably carry out the challenging work of the courts (see Long-Range Issues #1, #2, and #3).

The judicial branch aspires to be **responsive**: it works steadfastly to eliminate impediments to court access (language barriers, communication hurdles, cultural and attitudinal biases, architectural obstructions, the “civil justice gap,” etc.); and it has a long history of extensive education and outreach initiatives that seek to sustain fruitful, two-way communication, both with those outside the courts system as well as those within it (see Long-Range Issues #1, #2, and #3).

And the judicial branch strives to be **accountable**: it conceives and introduces cutting-edge mechanisms for monitoring and measuring court performance; and it implements pioneering and quantifiable family court initiatives and problem-solving dockets, which have been shown to produce positive results while saving taxpayer dollars (see Long-Range Issues #1 and #2).

Yet a third way the branch seeks to merit the public’s trust and confidence is through creating opportunities for the people of Florida to learn about their courts. Studies have consistently demonstrated that when people have a greater understanding of and knowledge about the American justice system and the role of the courts within it, their confidence in and support for the courts is heightened. In developing educational opportunities for people of all ages, the branch provides Floridians with forums for learning about the role, functions, and accomplishments of their courts—and it also helps to foster a more engaged, active, and conscientious citizenry. The accounts below highlight some of the many initiatives the branch has designed to provide Floridians with positive, meaningful interactions with the courts.

### Education and Outreach Initiatives

#### Judicial Campaign Conduct Forums

The Judicial Campaign Conduct Forums, first instituted in 1998, are typically offered in the spring of election years for circuits in which a contested judicial election is taking place. In these 90-minutes sessions, judicial candidates learn about the requirements of Canon 7 of the *Code of Judicial Conduct*, which governs political conduct by judges and judicial candidates. The forums focus on the value of integrity and professionalism among candidates for judicial office, the impact of campaign conduct on public trust and confidence in the justice system, and the chilling consequences of any breaches to the code.

The forums are coordinated by the supreme court, the trial court chief judges, the Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee, and the Board of Governors of The Florida Bar. In addition to judicial candidates, the forums are open to campaign managers and their staff, local political party chairs, the presidents of local bar associations, the media, and the public.
Annual Reporters Workshop
For 26 years, the supreme court has been hosting an annual Reporters Workshop, a two-day event designed to teach the basics of legal reporting to journalists who are new to the legal/courts “beat.” Presented by The Florida Bar Media and Communications Law Committee and subsidized by The Florida Bar Foundation, the workshop is open to newspaper, radio news, TV news, and internet news services reporters who have been nominated to participate by their editors. Sessions are led by justices, judges, attorneys, professors, and seasoned reporters.

The September 2014 workshop included sessions on effective techniques of reporting high-profile cases, public records and how to get the records journalists need, libel law and defamation, lawyer regulation, merit retention, juvenile justice in Florida, amending Florida’s constitution, and journalism in the world of social media. Because the public still gets most of its information about the justice system from traditional news sources, the branch recognizes the importance of playing a proactive role in deepening news reporters’ understanding of the courts system; this workshop provides reporters with a very helpful introduction to covering justice system issues.

Justice Teaching Initiative
Founded by then Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis in 2006 and coordinated by the Florida Law-Related Education Association, Justice Teaching is a law-related education initiative that aims to partner a legal professional with every elementary, middle, and high school in the state. The goal of the initiative is to promote an understanding of Florida’s justice system and laws, develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and demonstrate the effective interaction of Florida’s courts within the constitutional structure.

Currently, more than 4,000 lawyers and judges have been trained to serve as resources for Justice Teaching, and all of the state’s public schools—and more than 400 of its private schools—have Justice Teaching volunteers. After participating in a Justice Teaching training session, volunteers have access to a bounty of tested interactive strategies for involving students in lively exchanges about the justice system and how it affects their lives. [Take this link to the Justice Teaching website.]

Justice Teaching Institute
The Justice Teaching Institute—initially conceived in response to a national study documenting the public’s lack of, and need for, court-related information—was first offered in 1997, when then Chief Justice Gerald Kogan envisioned it as part of the Florida Supreme Court’s Sesquicentennial Celebration. Since then, each year, the institute selects between 20 and 25 secondary school teachers from across the state to participate in a comprehensive, five-day education program on the fundamentals of the judicial branch. The program is sponsored and hosted by the supreme court, funded by The Florida Bar Foundation, and coordinated by the Florida Law-Related Education Association.

Taught primarily by the seven justices, two “mentor judges” (in spring 2015, Judge Kelly McKibbon, Eighteenth Circuit, and Judge Karen Cole, Fourth Circuit) and Ms Annette Boyd Pitts, executive director of the Florida Law-Related Education
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Association, the institute introduces the teachers to the structure and functions of the state courts system, the state versus the federal courts systems, the criminal court process, the Florida constitution, the case study method, accessing legal resources, the oral argument process, the value of a fair and impartial judiciary, the Code of Judicial Conduct, and the constitutional issues underlying an actual case that is about to be argued before the court. The highlight of the program is the teachers’ own mock oral argument on the very case for which the justices themselves are preparing.

When teachers return to their classrooms, many of them develop a courts unit for their students, and others facilitate training programs for the teachers at their school. The teachers, whose enthusiasm is truly electric, have educated and inspired generations of young people about the history, roles, and consequence of the third branch. The institute is one of the courts system’s most promising efforts to introduce school children to the vital role courts play in society. (For more information about the Justice Teaching Institute, follow this link.)

Visiting the Courts: Oral Arguments and Education Tours and Programs

Every circuit and appellate court in Florida offers a dynamic array of programs and activities that inform the public about the courts system—endeavors like courthouse tours, citizen guides, Justice Teaching and other school outreach efforts, teen courts, Law Day and Constitution Day activities, moot court competitions, Take Your Child to Work Day, Girls State
and Boys State activities, “meet your judge” and “inside the courts” programs, jury appreciation events, adoption events, speakers bureaus, public opinion surveys, citizen advisory committees, and media outreach efforts. These activities are devised to educate people from all walks of life about the judicial branch, bolster court-community relationships, and enhance people’s trust and confidence in their justice system. (This link goes to a compilation of court-community relationship activities by circuit and DCA.)

In addition, visitors to the state capital can take advantage of a variety of options for learning about the history and purpose of Florida’s highest court and the fundamentals of Florida’s courts system.

One of the most compelling ways to become familiar with the inner workings of the supreme court is to attend oral arguments—a “conversation” between the justices and attorneys, during which the attorneys clarify the legal reasons for their position and answer questions posed by the justices. Oral arguments are held once a month, generally during the first full week of each month, from September through June. For most cases, arguments last approximately 40 minutes (20 minutes each side), and argument sessions typically comprise four cases. Visitors are welcome to observe oral arguments (the courtroom holds up to 165 visitors), and no appointment is necessary. (For information about oral argument and the oral argument schedule, follow this link.) Those who cannot attend oral arguments or who are interested in seeing archived ones (going back to 1997) can view them online via WFSU’s Gavel to Gavel. (Take this link to Gavel to Gavel.) Also available online is information about high-profile supreme court cases. (This link goes to information about high-profile cases and other high-profile matters.)

The Florida Supreme Court also offers tours and educational programs for student groups (from fourth graders through college students) and for citizen groups of all ages. Several different tour options are available. Groups of six or more visitors who are at least high-school age can take the 45-minute Educational Tour, a guided tour that brings the history of the court alive with fascinating facts about the building and its inhabitants past and present. An alternative for smaller groups or those with less time is the Building Tour, which is designed for all age groups: this fast, concise walking tour through the rotunda, portrait gallery, courtroom, and library offers visitors a brief introduction to the supreme court, focusing on the courthouse, the justices, and tidbits of court history. And the third option is the self-guided tour, which is ideal for individuals, small groups, and those who prefer to go at their own pace: equipped with informational brochures, these tour-goers learn about the public areas of the building (courtroom, library, rare book room, lower rotunda, portrait gallery, and Lawyer’s Lounge).

Two different educational activities are available to student groups. The Education Program, for fourth graders through college students, includes both a tour of the
building and a talk that takes place in the supreme court courtroom, focusing on the judicial branch, Florida’s courts system, the differences between trial and appellate courts, and the role of the justices and how they are appointed and retained. The other education program is the highly-popular Mock Oral Argument Experience: students spend the first part of this 90-minute program learning about the judicial branch and Florida’s courts system; then, led by a staff attorney or trained volunteer, the students, playing the parts of justices, attorneys, the clerk, and the marshal, act out an oral argument on an age-appropriate hypothetical case (the court offers 19 cases from which to choose). This activity is designed for fifth graders all the way up through college students.

All told, in the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, the court led 116 education tours and guided 38 student groups through the Mock Oral Argument Experience. Between them, the two programs reached 6,958 participants.

Finally, student groups from Leon County can participate in the Journey Through Justice Program, which works in conjunction with the Courtroom to Courtroom Program offered by the Leon County Teen Court in the Second Judicial Circuit. Students gain a comprehensive understanding of the courts system and Florida’s third branch through participating both in a mock trial, which uses role-plays to introduce them to the various positions in a trial courtroom, and a mock oral argument, which builds critical thinking skills. (For more information about these education programs, take this link.)

Florida Supreme Court Library and Archives
The Florida Supreme Court Library, established in 1845, is the oldest of Florida’s state-supported libraries. Although it originally was intended for use by the supreme court and the attorneys practicing before it, it now serves the entire state courts system. The library also responds to calls for assistance from other law libraries and from law firms in the state and around the nation. The public can also explore the library and utilize its resources: people come to do legal or historical research, and school, family, and adult groups visit as well, eager to learn about the treasures in the rare book room and to admire the archival rarities on display in the reading room.

Included in the library’s print collection are historical Florida primary legal resources dating back to the state’s territorial period as well as numerous treatises and other legal reference materials; the library has an extensive collection of historical statute law of the United Kingdom, for instance. The library is also designated a selective federal depository library for legal materials (the US is the largest publisher in the world, and through its Federal Depository Library Program, the US Government Publishing Office distributes certain classes of government documents free of cost to designated

After Chief Justice Jorge Labarga gave a tour of the supreme court building to a group of Florida House members, he invited them to join him in chambers, where he introduced them to some of the other justices. Here, Justice Charles T. Canady (on left) talks with Representative Eric Eisnaugle (Orlando) and Representative Jay Trumbull (Panama City).
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libraries throughout the US and its territories; in turn, these federal depository libraries must offer free, public access to these collections. (To visit the library’s website, follow this link.)

The library also harbors the supreme court archives, which contain primary documents of Florida Supreme Court history related to the court and its justices. In 1982, the supreme court librarian at the time had the notion of engaging the assistance of some of the dignitaries of the legal community to seek out, collect, preserve, and make publicly available the important historical documents of the members of Florida’s highest court. His idea galvanized the creation of the Florida Supreme Court Historical Society; together, the librarian and the historical society began the process of building the collection—and the archives came into being.

The archives continue to thrive, thanks to the abiding partnership between the historical society and the library. The collection now includes papers of 26 justices and comprises more than 1,000 boxes of records, including justices’ administrative papers, professional correspondence, texts of speeches, notes from their work on court committees, personal papers, and opinion files. The collection also includes the work of a number of court commissions, the 1966 Constitution Revision Commission papers, and papers related to the revision of section 14 to Article V of the Florida Constitution, commonly referred to as Revision 7 (a 1998 constitutional amendment that required the state to assume responsibility for funding the state courts system). (Follow this link to discover what materials are housed in the archives.)

After their mock oral argument, Boys State representatives visited the supreme court library; here, the supreme court archivist, Mr. Erik Robinson, shows them De La Política, a Spanish volume printed in 1597 and the oldest law book in the library’s collection, saying that, in 2014, Chief Justice Labarga used this book in conjunction with an appeal involving eminent domain.

Children of supreme court and OSCA employees participate in a mock oral argument at the 2015 Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day at the supreme court.
During the 2014 – 15 fiscal year, the supreme court archivist continued inventorying the papers of former Justice James Alderman, which were donated in 1985 but sealed until 2010, and he also conducted a preliminary inventory of the papers of the Racial and Ethnic Bias Study Commission (1989 – 91). The archives also received a box of former Justice Alan Sundberg’s speeches, donated by his widow; other donations included additional papers related to Revision 7, the papers of the Florida Innocence Commission (2010 – 12), and a plethora of court-related photographs.

Finally, as part of the *Evolution of Justice in Florida* project, the archivist prepared a new rotunda exhibit on the Antebellum Statehood Period of Florida History, from 1845 to 1861. The display includes the original minute book of the yearly supreme court sessions held in Marianna, a document signed by Probate Judge James Broome in 1848 (who went on to become Florida’s third governor), a leather-bound volume of the *Laws of Florida* passed between 1846 and 1855, and the first volume of *Florida Reports*, published in 1847. Conceived in 2002 by then Chief Justice Harry Anstead and since sustained by Justice Barbara J. Pariente, this *Evolution of Justice* project was designed to “educate the public about the history of our state’s judiciary and to strengthen confidence in Florida’s Courts System.”

**Court Publications**

To familiarize people with the judicial branch and to enhance communication between the courts and other justice system entities, the legislature, and the executive branch, OSCA’s Publications Unit, under the direction of the supreme court, produces the *Florida State Courts Annual Report* each fall. ([This link goes to the annual reports.](#)) In addition, in the spring, summer, and winter, the Publications Unit publishes the *Full Court Press*, the official newsletter of the state courts system, whose aim is to share information about local and statewide court-based initiatives and programs, to promote communication among Florida’s state courts, and to serve as a kind of “meeting place” for all the members of the state courts family, both immediate and extended. ([Take this link to the newsletters.](#))
Florida’s Court Structure

Florida’s court system consists of the following entities: two appellate level courts (the supreme court and five district courts of appeal) and two trial level courts (20 circuit courts and 67 county courts). The chief justice, who serves a two-year term, presides as the chief administrative officer of the judicial branch.

On July 1, 1972, the Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA) was created with initial emphasis on developing a uniform case reporting system in order to provide information about activities of the judiciary. Additional responsibilities include preparing the operating budget for the judicial branch, projecting the need for new judges, and serving as the liaison between the court system and the auxiliary agencies of the court, national court research and planning agencies, the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the public, business community, and media.

### Appellate Courts

**Supreme Court**
- Seven justices, six-year terms
- Sits in Tallahassee
- Five justices constitute a quorum

**District Courts of Appeal**
- 64 judges, six-year terms
- Five districts:
  - 1st District: Tallahassee, 15 judges
  - 2nd District: Lakeland, 16 judges
  - 3rd District: Miami, 10 judges
  - 4th District: West Palm Beach, 12 judges
  - 5th District: Daytona Beach, 11 judges
- Cases generally reviewed by three-judge panels

### Trial Courts

**Circuit Courts**
- 599 judges, six-year terms
- 20 judicial circuits
- Number of judges in each circuit based on caseload
- Judges preside individually, not on panels

**County Courts**
- 322 judges, six-year terms
- At least one judge in each of the 67 counties
- Judges preside individually, not on panels
Florida’s Court Structure

Supreme Court of Florida

The supreme court is the highest court in Florida. To constitute a quorum to conduct business, five of the seven justices must be present, and four justices must agree on a decision in each case.

Mandatory jurisdiction includes death penalty cases, district court decisions declaring a state statute or provision of the state constitution invalid, bond validations, rules of court procedure, and statewide agency actions relating to public utilities. The court also has exclusive authority to regulate the admission and discipline of lawyers in Florida as well as the authority to discipline and remove judges.

District Courts of Appeal

The majority of trial court decisions that are appealed are reviewed by three-judge panels of the district courts of appeal (DCAs). In each district court, a chief judge, who is selected by the body of district court judges, is responsible for the administrative duties of the court.

The district courts decide most appeals from circuit court cases and many administrative law appeals from actions by the executive branch. In addition, the district courts of appeal must review county court decisions invalidating a provision of Florida’s constitution or statutes, and they may review an order or judgment of a county court that is certified by the county court to be of great public importance.

Circuit Courts

The majority of jury trials in Florida take place before circuit court judges. The circuit courts are referred to as the courts of general jurisdiction. Circuit courts hear all criminal and civil matters not within the jurisdiction of county courts, including family law, juvenile delinquency and dependency, mental health, probate, guardianship, and civil matters over $15,000. They also hear some appeals from county court rulings and from administrative action if provided by general law. Finally, they have the power to issue extraordinary writs necessary to the complete exercise of their jurisdiction.

County Courts

Each of Florida’s 67 counties has at least one county court judge. The number of judges in each county court varies with the population and caseload of the county. County courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, which is established by statute. The county courts are sometimes referred to as “the people’s courts” because a large part of their work involves citizen disputes such as violations of municipal and county ordinances, traffic offenses, landlord-tenant disputes, misdemeanor criminal matters, and monetary disputes up to and including $15,000. In addition, county court judges may hear simplified dissolution of marriage cases.
Office of the State Courts Administrator

The Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA) was created in 1972 to serve the chief justice in carrying out his or her responsibilities as the chief administrative officer of the judicial branch. OSCA was established to provide professional court management and administration for the state’s judicial branch—basically, the non-adjudicatory services and functions necessary for the smooth operation of the branch, which includes the Supreme Court of Florida, the five district courts of appeal, the 20 circuit courts, and the 67 county courts.

OSCA prepares the judicial branch’s budget requests to the legislature, monitors legislation, and serves as a point of contact for legislators and their staff regarding issues related to the state courts system. In addition, OSCA coordinates a host of educational programs designed to ensure that judges and court employees have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to serve and perform at the highest professional levels.

Among other duties, OSCA also collects and analyzes statistical information relevant to court operations; implements administrative and legislative initiatives for family, dependency, and delinquency court cases; develops long-range and operational plans; offers statewide mediation training and certification through the Dispute Resolution Center; evaluates the qualifications of court interpreters; coordinates and produces administrative and judicial education publications; and provides technical support for the trial and appellate courts, including support for the state-funded computer infrastructure of Florida’s courts system. For more information about OSCA, visit the Florida State Courts website at http://www.flcourts.org/.

Trial Court Administrators

Each of the 20 circuits in Florida has a trial court administrator, who supports the chief judge in his or her constitutional role as the administrative supervisor of the circuit and county courts. The office of the trial court administrator provides professional staff support to ensure effective and efficient court operations.

Trial court administrators have multiple responsibilities. They manage judicial operations such as courtroom scheduling, facilities management, caseflow policy, ADA policy, statistical analysis, inter-branch and intergovernmental relations, technology planning, jury oversight, public information, and emergency planning. They also oversee court business operations, including personnel, planning and budgeting, finance and accounting, purchasing, property and records, and staff training.

Moreover, trial court administrators manage and provide support for essential court resources including court reporting, court interpreters, expert witnesses, staff attorneys, magistrates and hearing officers, mediation, and case management. For links to the homepages of Florida’s circuit courts, go to http://www.flcourts.org/florida-courts/trial-courts-circuit.stml

Marshals of the Supreme Court and the District Courts of Appeal

The supreme court and each of the five district courts of appeal have a marshal—a constitutional officer under Article V of the Florida Constitution. The DCA marshals’ responsibilities are similar to those of the trial court administrators: the operational budget, purchasing, court facilities and grounds, contracts, personnel, and security. The supreme court marshal is responsible for the security of court property, justices, and employees; the management of the buildings and grounds; and administrative, logistical, and operational support of the supreme court. In addition, the supreme court marshal has the power to execute the process of the court throughout the state. For links to the homepages of Florida’s DCAs, go to http://www.flcourts.org/florida-courts/district-court-appeal.stml

State Courts Administrator Patricia “PK” Jameson.
State Appellate Districts, Circuits, and Counties

The **1st Appellate District** comprises the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 8th, & 14th Circuits
1st: Escambia, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton
2nd: Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Wakulla
3rd: Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor
4th: Clay, Duval, Nassau
8th: Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, Union
14th: Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Washington

The **2nd Appellate District** comprises the 6th, 10th, 12th, 13th, & 20th Circuits
6th: Pasco, Pinellas,
10th: Hardee, Highlands, Polk
12th: DeSoto, Manatee, Sarasota
13th: Hillsborough
20th: Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry, Lee

The **3rd Appellate District** comprises the 11th & 16th Circuits
11th: Miami-Dade
16th: Monroe

The **4th Appellate District** comprises the 15th, 17th, & 19th Circuits
15th: Palm Beach
17th: Broward
19th: Indian River, Okeechobee, St. Lucie, Martin

The **5th Appellate District** comprises the 5th, 7th, 9th, & 18th Circuits
5th: Citrus, Hernando, Lake, Marion, Sumter
7th: Flagler, Putnam, St. Johns, Volusia
9th: Orange, Osceola
18th: Brevard, Seminole
Judicial Certification

The supreme court has used a weighted caseload system to evaluate the need for new trial court judgeships since 1999, and, for DCA judges, since 2006. The weighted caseload system analyzes Florida's caseload statistics according to complexity. Cases that are typically complex, such as capital murder cases, receive a higher weight, while cases that are generally less complex, such as civil traffic cases, receive a lower weight. These weights are then applied to case filing statistics to determine the need for additional judgeships.

The need for additional judgeships remains high for several reasons: an absence of funding for previously certified judgeships, overall increases in judicial workload, and fewer support staff. If judicial workload continues to exceed capacity and the judicial need deficit is not addressed, likely consequences may be case processing delays, less time devoted to dispositions, and potentially diminished access to the courts.

In a December 2014 opinion, the Florida Supreme Court certified the need for 35 additional judges: three circuit judges, and 32 county court judges. However, the Florida Legislature did not approve funding for any new judgeships this year (take this link to the opinion).

### Judicial Certification Table

**District Court of Appeal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Year</th>
<th>Requested</th>
<th>Certified</th>
<th>Authorized</th>
<th>% Authorized (of those certified)</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>-1</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<td>2015</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>64</td>
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**Circuit**

<table>
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<th>Authorized</th>
<th>% Authorized (of those certified)</th>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>599</td>
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</table>

**County**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Year</th>
<th>Requested</th>
<th>Certified</th>
<th>Authorized</th>
<th>% Authorized (of those certified)</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2014 – 2015 Fiscal Year Appropriations
(For an accessible version of the FY 2014 – 2015 and the FY 2015 – 2016 appropriations, please follow this link)

Total: $77,022,232,003
Note: This total includes those issues that were funded in the General Appropriations Act, HB 5001, less vetoes.

2015 – 2016 Fiscal Year Appropriations

Total: $78,293,581,182
This total includes those issues that were funded in the General Appropriations Act, SB 2500A, less vetoes.
State Courts System Appropriations

**Justice System Appropriations**

**2014 – 2015 Fiscal Year**

(For an accessible version of the FY 2014 – 2015 and the FY 2015 – 2016 appropriations, please follow this link)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Courts System</td>
<td>$501,556,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice Administration Executive Direction</td>
<td>$93,801,837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Program</td>
<td>$43,395,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Attorneys</td>
<td>$424,965,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Defenders Judicial Circuit</td>
<td>$207,568,866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Defenders Appellate</td>
<td>$15,136,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital Collateral Regional Counsel</td>
<td>$8,928,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsels</td>
<td>$41,480,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,336,834,148</strong></td>
</tr>
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State Courts System Total: $501,556,824

This total includes those issues that were funded in the General Appropriations Act, HB 5001, less vetoes. [Note: this figure includes $24.2 million for pass through/legislative (member) project funding not sought in the judicial branch’s legislative budget request; $23.6 million in nonrecurring funds; and $33.3 million for legislatively-approved supplemental appropriations related to fiscal year 2013 – 14 increased costs in employee benefits.]

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**Justice System Appropriations**

**2015 – 2016 Fiscal Year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Courts System</td>
<td>$516,347,016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice Administration Executive Direction</td>
<td>$92,018,319</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Program</td>
<td>$43,552,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Attorneys</td>
<td>$437,814,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Public Defenders Appellate</td>
<td>$16,220,063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital Collateral Regional Counsel</td>
<td>$9,851,894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsels</td>
<td>$42,441,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,374,942,970</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

State Courts System Total: $516,347,016

This total includes those issues that were funded in the General Appropriations Act, SB 2500A, less vetoes. [Note: this figure includes $13.9 million for pass through/legislative (member) project funding not sought in the judicial branch’s legislative budget request; $17.4 million in nonrecurring funds; and $6.2 million for legislatively-approved supplemental appropriations related to FY 2014-15 increased costs in employee-related benefits and expenses.]
Filings, Florida’s Trial Courts
FY 2004 – 05 to 2013 – 14

(For an accessible version of these filings, follow this link.)

County Courts

Circuit Courts
Filings, Florida’s Appellate Courts
FY 2004 – 05 to 2013 – 14
(For an accessible version of these filings, follow this link.)

District Courts

Supreme Court

For caseload statistics for the Florida Supreme Court’s annual filings and dispositions for 2000 - 2014, please follow this link
### District Court of Appeal Filings by Case Category
#### Notice of Appeal and Petition FY 2013 – 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DCA</th>
<th>Case Category</th>
<th>Total Filings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>7,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Criminal</td>
<td>9,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Criminal Post Conviction*</td>
<td>4,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Probate/Guardianship</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Workers’ Compensation</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>24,948</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Criminal post conviction filings include notice of appeal only.

### Trial Court Filings by Circuit and Division
#### FY 2013 – 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circuit</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Total Filings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Adult Criminal</td>
<td>176,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>198,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Family Court*</td>
<td>281,168</td>
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<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Probate</td>
<td>114,046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>County Adult Criminal</td>
<td>669,554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>County Civil**</td>
<td>2,161,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3,602,144</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Family court filings include domestic relations, juvenile delinquency, juvenile dependency, and termination of parental rights.

** These data do not include all civil traffic infractions reported to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles; they represent only those civil traffic infraction filings involving a judge or hearing officer.
## Court Filings by Circuit and Division

**FY 2013 – 14**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circuit</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Total Filings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adult Criminal</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>5,647</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Court*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>County Adult Criminal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>County Civil**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Adult Criminal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>4,459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>County Civil**</td>
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* Family court filings include domestic relations, juvenile delinquency, juvenile dependency, and termination of parental rights.

** These data do not include all civil traffic infractions reported to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles; they represent only those civil traffic infraction filings involving a judge or hearing officer.
### Trial Court Filings by Circuit, County, and Division
#### FY 2013 – 14

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* Family court filings include domestic relations, juvenile delinquency, juvenile dependency, and termination of parental rights.

** These data do not include all civil traffic infractions reported to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles; they represent only those civil traffic infraction filings involving a judge or hearing officer.
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<td>* Family court filings include domestic relations, juvenile delinquency, juvenile dependency, and termination of parental rights.</td>
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<td>** These data do not include all civil traffic infractions reported to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles; they represent only those civil traffic infraction filings involving a judge or hearing officer.</td>
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** These data do not include all civil traffic infractions reported to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles; they represent only those civil traffic infraction filings involving a judge or hearing officer.
FLORIDA SUPREME COURT  
Chief Justice JORGE LABARGA  (850) 413-8371  
Clerk John A. Tomasinio  (850) 922-5468  
Marshal Silvester Dawson  (850) 922-6204  
State Courts Administrator PK Jameson  (850) 922-5081  
Website http://www.floridasupremecourt.org  

DISTRICT COURTS OF APPEAL  
1st DCA  
Chief Judge L. CLAYTON ROBERTS  (850) 487-1000  
Clerk Jon S. Wheeler  (850) 717-8100  
Marshal J. Daniel McCarthy  (850) 717-8130  
Website http://www.1dca.org  

2nd DCA  
Chief Judge CRAIG C. VILLANTI  (863) 499-2290  
Clerk Mary Beth Kuenzel  (863) 802-6429  
Marshal Jo Haynes  (863) 802-6400  
Website http://www.2dca.org  

3rd DCA  
Chief Judge RICHARD J. SUAREZ  (305) 229-3200  
Clerk Mary Cay Blanks  (305) 229-3200  
Marshal Veronica Antonoff  (305) 229-3200  
Website http://www.3dca.flcourts.org  

4th DCA  
Chief Judge CORY J. CIKLIN  (561) 242-2063  
Clerk Lonn Weissblum  (561) 242-2000  
Marshal Daniel DiGiacomo  (561) 242-2000  
Website http://www.4dca.org  

5th DCA  
Chief Judge C. ALAN LAWSON  (386) 947-1506  
Clerk Joanne P. Simmons  (386) 947-1557  
Marshal Charles Crawford  (386) 947-1544  
Website http://www.5dca.org  

CIRCUIT COURTS  
1st Judicial Circuit  
Escambia, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, and Walton counties  
Chief Judge LINDA L. NOBLES  (850) 595-4459  
Court Administrator Robin Wright  (850) 595-4400  
Website http://www.firstjudicialcircuit.org  

2nd Judicial Circuit  
Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, and Wakulla counties  
Chief Judge JONATHAN SJOSTROM  (850) 577-4321  
Court Administrator Grant Slayden  (850) 577-4422  
Website http://www.leoncountyfl.gov/2ndCircuit/  

3rd Judicial Circuit  
Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, and Taylor counties  
Chief Judge GREGORY S. PARKER  (850) 838-3520  
Court Administrator Sondra Lanier  (386) 758-2163  
Website http://www.jud3.flcourts.org  

4th Judicial Circuit  
Clay, Duval, and Nassau counties  
Chief Judge MARK MAHON  (904) 255-1230  
Court Administrator Joseph G. Stelma, Jr.  (904) 255-1155  
Website http://www.coi.net/Departments/Fourth+Judicial+Circuit/Court/default.htm  

5th Judicial Circuit  
Hernando, Lake, Marion, Citrus, and Sumter counties  
Chief Judge DON F. BRIGGS  (352) 742-4224  
Court Administrator Jon Lin  (352) 401-6701  
Website http://www.circuit5.org  

6th Judicial Circuit  
Pasco and Pinellas counties  
Chief Judge ANTHONY RONDOLINO  (727) 582-7272  
Court Administrator Gay Inkeep  (727) 582-7511  
Website http://www.jud6.org  

7th Judicial Circuit  
Flagler, Putnam, St. Johns, and Volusia counties  
Chief Judge TERENCE R. PERKINS  (386) 239-7792  
Court Administrator Mark Weinberg  (386) 257-6097  
Website http://www.circuit7.org  

8th Judicial Circuit  
Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Union counties  
Chief Judge ROBERT ROUNDTREE, JR.  (352) 374-3644  
Court Administrator Paul Silverman  (352) 374-3638  
Website http://www.circuit8.org  

9th Judicial Circuit  
Orange and Osceola counties  
Chief Judge FREDERICK J. LAUTEN  (407) 836-2009  
Court Administrator Matthew Benefiel  (407) 836-2051  
Website http://www.ninthcircuit.org/  

10th Judicial Circuit  
Hardee, Highlands, and Polk counties  
Chief Judge DONALD G. JACOBSEN  (863) 534-4649  
Court Administrator Nick Sudzina  (863) 534-4686  
Website http://www.jud10.flcourts.org/  

11th Judicial Circuit  
Miami-Dade County  
Chief Judge BERTILA SOTO  (305) 349-5720  
Court Administrator Sandra Lonergan  (305) 349-7000  
Website http://www.jud11.flcourts.org/  

12th Judicial Circuit  
DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties  
Chief Judge CHARLES E. WILLIAMS  (941) 861-7942  
Court Administrator Walt Smith  (941) 861-7800  
Website http://www.jud12.flcourts.org/  

13th Judicial Circuit  
Hillsborough County  
Chief Judge RONALD N. FICARROTTA  (813) 272-6797  
Court Administrator Gina Justice  (813) 272-5367  
Website http://www.fj13.org/
14th Judicial Circuit
Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, and Washington counties
Chief Judge ELIJAH SMILEY (850) 767-3341
Court Administrator Jan Shadburn (850) 814-6849
Website http://www.jud14.flcourts.org

15th Judicial Circuit
Palm Beach County
Chief Judge JEFFREY COLBATH (561) 355-7845
Court Administrator Barbara L. Dawicke (561) 355-1872
Website http://15thcircuit.co.palm-beach.fl.us/

16th Judicial Circuit
Monroe County
Chief Judge MARK H. JONES (305) 292-3422
Court Administrator Holly Elomina (305) 295-3644
Website http://www.keyscourts.net

17th Judicial Circuit
Broward County
Chief Judge PETER M. WEINSTEIN (954) 831-5506
Court Administrator Kathleen R. Pugh (954) 831-7741
Website http://www.17th.flcourts.org

18th Judicial Circuit
Brevard and Seminole counties
Chief Judge JOHN D. GALLUZZO (407) 665-4299
Court Administrator Mark Van Bever (321) 633-2171
Website http://www.flcourts18.org

19th Judicial Circuit
Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie counties
Chief Judge ELIZABETH A. METZGER (772) 288-5560
Court Administrator Tom Genung (772) 807-4370
Website http://www.circuit19.org

20th Judicial Circuit
Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry, and Lee counties
Chief Judge MICHAEL T. MCHUGH (239) 533-2775
Court Administrator Scott A. Wilsker (239) 533-1712
Website http://www.ca.cjis20.org/home/main/homepage.asp

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Community & Intergov. Relations Director
Sarah Naf (850) 922-5692
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Martha Martin (850) 922-5079
Court Improvement Chief
Rose Patterson (850) 414-1507
Court Services Chief
Greg Youchock (850) 922-5094
Dispute Resolution Center Chief
Janice Fleischer (850) 921-2910
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Andrew Johns (850) 487-9999

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http://www.flcourts.org
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Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1900
For more information, call (850) 922-5081
or visit www.flcourts.org