

COMMISSION SURVEY ANALYSIS FOR COURT STAFF SUMMARY SURVEY

N=84

1. Are there court services or administrative activities currently performed at the county level that could be performed either regionally, centrally, or electronically to improve the efficiency or cost-effectiveness of court operations?

Categorized Responses

Adjudicative: 15

Finance: 4

Case Administration: 12

Education: 2

General Court Services: 8

Jury Services: 4

Managerial: 40

Other: 2

Technology: 6

Summary of Responses

Adjudicative:

- Assistant judges are not needed (x9)
- Stalking complaints should be processed in family court.
- Probate Court could be preformed through Family Court ie: guardianships/adoptions.(x2)
- The Probate Judge could preside over the small claims matters.
- Small claims filings could be regionalized or centralized such as judicial bureau with regional hearings and could be efiled.
- Probate Judges should be eliminated and probate court could be absorbed by the Family court

Case Administration:

- Electronic filing would also streamline the sharing of documents (x6)
- Allowance of electronic filings by attorneys only
- Regional arraignments are time consuming for the courts (not working properly)
- OCS filings for child support and UIFSA cases could be filed electronically and would save alot of time and especially postage
- Allow all fines to be paid online
- Send notices/letters by first class mail instead of cert. restricted
- Criminal Record Checks submitted and performed in one location for the entire State of Vermont
-

General Court Services:

- General customer service questions answered on a daily basis by phone could be routed through a centralized office made up of current court staff members (x3)
- Another Pilot Project could be implemented to assist plaintiffs who are in situations such as this (landlord tenant) by providing them cut-rate legal fees and assistance to speed up the process
- Regional GAL volunteer coordinators- we need one in each of the 4 quadrants of the state
- Small claims forms could be put on-line for download
- Install phone answering systems in high volume courts to screen for appropriate calls

- Refer litigants who call for court forms (mostly family court) to the Vermont Judiciary web site.

Managerial:

- Combine Bennington and Manchester Probate Court in one location (x2)
- The separation of superior and district courts is archaic and immensely wasteful.
- One central filing system is needed in each jurisdiction, with one staff maintaining the records and processes(x2)
- Centralizing the clerks' offices for each county, so that there was a single clerk of court for all courts within a county, would provide savings
- I feel that the county government should be left as a separate entity as it is now.(x7)
- Take a hard look at mid-level mgmt (Court managers)
- There may be [court] locations that could be eliminated or consolidated
- Combining courts regionally.
- Consolidate the smaller courts in each county, one probate court per county (x3)
- Passports could be done regionally (x3)
- The superior courts should be consolidated with family and district courts
- Steps need to be taken to eliminate {pay difference superior clerks/ ass clerks family & district court clerks} this discrepancy.
- Regionally - data collection for periodic reports -- case management statistics, financial reports, judges' cases under advisement
- Regionalize case managers positions
- Hire more staff
- I think we could eliminate doing passports
- Courthouses throughout the state that accommodate superior, district and family courts do not necessitate two court managers for purposes of scheduling
- The probate judge could be the administrator of the court rather than asst. judges
- The handling of election results could be handled just by the Secretary of State's Office
- Consolidating counties for civil matters
- Superior Court (since it is viewed as a County Court) could absorb the Probate Court matters and this would consolidate resources; staff, buildings, judge's and courtrooms, office supplies.
- Superior court should have an employee in their office to do their court recordings instead of using a district court employee
- Probate matters also could be centralized, such as DMV orders, name changes, vital records, small estates.
- Combine Family and District Court in Washington County
- Regionalizing court management may or may not be cost effective but should be considered
- Eliminate the Compliance Officer that was hired for the Judicial Bureau
- Court supplies could be bought for the courts together
- Unify the entire court system

Technology:

- An electronic docketing system would greatly improve the efficiency of docket maintenance.(x2)
- A new case management system would be a great asset (Superior Court)
- All courts should be equipped with scanners
- A new computer system would be the best way to improve the efficiency or cost-effectiveness

- Using the new VCASE system with all arraignments being electronically filed will save alot of time

Finance:

- Collection of all outstanding fines and surcharges by following through and sending them to the department of taxes to be collected
- All of the accounting/payroll functions paid for by the county should be centralized and tasks done by payroll in Montpelier
- Consolidate bank accounts
- Regionally/ Centrally - vision/deposits; tax referrals

Education:

- Make Judicial trainings web based
- Have regional cope/pro se education classes.

Jury Services:

- Jury entity data could be entered regionally
- Jury payments could be done centrally
- Juror pool creation/notification, records, payments,
- The jury qualification process, summoning and payment of jurors could be done centrally using technology.

Other:

- County government is an unnecessary and expensive accoutrement
- Court managers on too many committees

2. Is there technology that could be introduced into the court system that would make judicial operations more cost-effective or improve access to the court system, while at the same time maintaining the quality of justice services?

Categorized Reponses

Adjudicative:

Finance: 7

Case Administration: 1

Education: 5

General Court Services: 21

Jury Services:

Managerial: 10

Other

Technology: 55

Summary of Responses

Adjudicative:

Case Administration:

- Digital recording of hearings should be in all the courtrooms.

General Court Services:

- Computer access to public at court sites (x4)
- Additional staff to help public download and complete forms and help public with use of computer
- Provide "self-service" terminals for litigants who come in and have general questions about court processes, procedures and filing.
- Properly placed judicial phone numbers in the telephone directories

- Links from external web pages to the judiciary's and vice versa (for public access to information)
- The ordering [of court records] could even be done centrally at CAO, as access to the electronic recordings could be available to persons there.
- Allowing online requests for documents: certified copies, copies in general etc. Website for access to forms and instructions for filing to the general public. (x7)
- Better explanation on Judiciary website of what forms people need to file for what requests
- Simple Standardized Forms for pro se litigants especially in eviction cases
- Keep services available through customer service, hard copy forms and other needs.
- Litigants and agencies should be able to do criminal record checks through the internet and be able to pay that fee via their credit cards over the internet as well.
- I believe on furlough days, we should still take tel. calls (pymts) from the public

Managerial:

- Discontinue the Vermont Key Digest series.
- Expand the scope of our (very narrow) Westlaw account and drastically reducing the amount of hard-copy book subscriptions we receive –electronic research (x2)
- Improving access[to the case management system] after hours
- Office of Child Support should be able to query family court cases on their own computers
- Telephone conferences for clerk's meetings and web seminars, etc (x2)
- Suspend travel and housing for conferences and use technology (video/internet) to exchange ideas in the short term
- Hire more staff
- Replacing an actual person on any level with a fax, email, voice mail, etc., only adds to the frustration, in my opinion; and in the long run, serves no purpose, and may cost the state even more.

Technology:

- The computers used in the Chittenden County clerk's office are very old- new hardware needed and Microsoft Access-based program (x3)
- A more efficient and user friendly database could be introduced to make judicial operations more cost-effective
- Scanners, a new docketing/case management system (x7)
- [Researching] automated systems out there which improve operations
- Wireless internet access at courthouses
- Data exchanges (electronic) with agencies with whom we share information;(x3)
- All courts should have automated telephone systems
- VCASE would make judicial operations more cost-effective and improve access to the court system(x6)
- Electronic filing is fine but not for all the people in the Kingdom
- All Courts [should] be on the State System sharing information. i.e. Family & Probate Courts (x2)
- E-filing/ allowing electronic/email filings: creating new online form fillable documents to reduce errors/incompleteness and enhance efficiency.(x10)
- Arraignments (includes inmate hearings) VIA webcam (video conferencing) from which ever jail the person is incarcerated in therefore eliminating the need for transports for lodgings. Faxing, etc. (x8)
- Electronic service of certified mail through the email system, electronically sending attorneys hearing notices, and receiving motions and responses via email (x2)

- We could conserve on time by not having to return calls that were already answer by them getting through.(Judicial Bureau)
- Meetings, seminars, trainings, etc. [should be] done telephonically MOST of the time
- The Courts should be able to access national criminal information
- Increase the digital courtroom recording equipment around the State and allow the court staff to copy the discs for attorneys or litigants when requests are made for copies.
- Having phones that can accommodate more than one phone participant for case manager conferences and in all of the court rooms
- Probate Court [needs]a case management system like the other courts - it would improve efficiency and serve to unify practice, require less staff (x2)
- We don't see a need for any new technology
- A user friendly Windows based "VTADS"

Finance:

- we should be able to accept credit or debit cards for all filing fee and fines therein eliminating the need for the docket clerk in each court to take the time to process all the money for deposit (x2)
- Accept payments via credit card online(x5)

Education:

- Offering the pro se class online
- More "advertisement" of the Judicial Home Page (x2)
- Standardized and clear training, whether in the technology realm or other, offers immediate improvement in productivity
- [Install] video clips with FAQs

Jury Services:

3. What can be done to allow more flexibility in the use of judicial resources (people facilities, dollars), particularly as workloads and funding levels increase and decrease?

Categorized Reponses

Adjudicative: 10

Finance: 3

Case Administration: 5

Education: 2

General Court Services: 3

Jury Services

Managerial: 70

Other: 8

Technology: 4

Summary of Responses

Adjudicative

- Side judges could be eliminated (x2)
- Side judges could be REQUIRED to do sm clms cases or simple divorces etc (x2)
- Have Magistrates hear cases five days a week, (they each have one findings day a week) they could also hear parental rights motions or do abuse hearings (x3)
- [Eliminate] the Magistrates "findings" day. This day could be used to help by decreasing their backlog, help out with Family Court hearings, hear traffic tickets or even small claims.
- Utilize retired judges at less cost and as needed

- Assuring judicial accountability and productivity is a key factor [in becoming more efficient]

Case Administration:

- Shift points of data entry to ease/share the workload in high volume dockets/courts.
- Eliminate recording of Judgments and Foreclosures in the County Clerk's offices.
- Stalking/Sexual Assault cases should have a nominal filing fee.
- Charge a fee for extended hearing time when parties don't show or a stip is filed too late to schedule another case. (Traffic Court charges for hearings).
- Require treatment courts to be post plea

General Court Services:

- [Allow] defendants to access their own information on line [similar to] the DMV. Such as docket numbers and amounts due.
- Eliminate smaller courts and combine them with bigger courts. Probate courts should be housed in with family/district courts as well as superior courts, to include small claims court
- [Allow] access small claims forms online.

Managerial:

- More efficient if Judge and staff would be in one location
- [We] need additional full time clerk, as well as part time clerk
- Voluntary furlough to staff who may have depleted vacation or sick time due to family or individual obligations (x4)
- Job sharing could be a way to allow more flexibility.(x4)
- Rotating judges every year creates havoc with cases that span over multiple terms.
- It is time to examine the 4 day work week for government (x4)
- It is too much to just try to comprehend and be fluent in one docket (no cross training)
- Take a look at case managers. They are over paid
- Workloads should be examined monthly and personnel adjusted accordingly ie floater personnel hired [for ebb and flow] (x7)
- Use of Superior Court Judges in District and Family Courts and court recorders working in Superior court would follow the judge; court recorders/clerks assigned to the judicial bureau should be stationed in one court and able to cover the courts in the immediate vicinity
- Temporary positions should be eliminated and permanent part time employees should be asked if they would go full time. (x4)
- Cut down on clerk's meetings
- If probate courts were merged with superior/family court the probate staff could become part of these courts and [clerks} could be cross trained.
- Cross training for all staff (x11)
- Setting up the courts regionally will eliminate some funds, for example Essex County Court has 2 Court Managers
- Have pre-set "quiet time" as needed for staff members to keep or catch up on tasks that can be done more efficiently without interruption; take advantage of employees' individual strengths in determining work assignments
- All docket clerks should be trained in courtroom recording (x3)
- Some sort of flextime system could be instituted for court workers, as long as Court hours were not compromised (x4)
- Hire more staff. Acknowledge that the employees you have are valuable and are over worked and under paid.

- Consolidate or Close courts altogether (i.e. Grand Isle) that are not used to capacity daily (x8)
- One court manager and one deputy per court [county] (x3)
- Put a freeze on reclasses.
- Use Family Court Case Managers regionally like the Magistrate.
- Reduce family court case manager position to .5 fte or combine with other duties
- Conduct evaluation and analysis of court processes and programs. Can they be consolidated? Can they be outsourced more cost effectively? (x3)
- Make staff be accountable for their time

Technology:

- If case files were electronic, or if there was a very easy way to make them electronic, then it would be much easier to transmit files to other locations around the state that might have relatively lower workloads, thereby increasing efficiency.(x2)
- The new VCASE system will allow more flexibility in staff moving from court to court/county to county.
- A central computing system that allows people to log-in to their regular desktop setting from anywhere at anytime.

Finance:

- We should only pay mileage to people in which their job requires them to travel-i. e. judicial bureau officers.
- Combining probate courts throughout the state; eliminating side judges; hiring a B&G "czar" to oversee the maintenance budget statewide
- Consolidate finance departments to reduce confusion by users and communication within financial sectors.

Education

- Judicial trainings if not web based should be in house
- Recognize and promote use of staff expertise with in the judiciary through staff to staff trainings.

Jury Services

Other:

- More than half our courthouse is unused, but is heated and cooled The extra room could be cordoned off for judicial-related activities,
- Rent out the upper floors of the court house in Burlington
- Make our court facilities as energy-efficient as is cost-effective
- a performance evaluation should be given to the court manager and docket clerks to evaluate contracted counsel
- The weighted case load study was an ineffective tool to assess court staff
- Reduce all sheriff overtime for court coverage.
- Develop criteria around transports to reduce number
- There is no reason for lights to be left on at night/weekends/holidays.

4. Are there ways in which the types of cases heard in our various courts (superior, district, family, environmental, probate, judicial bureau) could be reallocated in a way that would increase the effectiveness of judicial operations or improve court efficiency?

Categorized Responses

Adjudicative: 27

Finance:

Case Administration: 3

Education:

General Court Services

Jury Services

Managerial: 39

Other: 5

Technology:

Summary of Response

Adjudicative:

- Do away with the assistant judge positions.
- I think that assistant judges can be trained to preside over uncontested divorce, small claims, traffic court, and uncontested hearings
- Juvenile clerk/assistant judge should be able to hold uncontested permanency hearings
- Have retired judges [acting judges] come in to take on extra work as needed (x2)
- Stalking cases should be combined with family court (relief from abuse) [also] start charging a fee.
- Family courts handle adoptions in juvenile cases would improve court efficiency (x2)
- I think it is important to maintain the separate Environmental Court.
- Environmental court cases could be returned to Superior Court (x4)
- Presiding judge could hear small claims cases in Superior Court vs. acting judge
- Adoption and legal guardianship cases could be handled at Family Court (x4)
- Trusts and estates would fit nicely into superior court and adoptions, guardianships and vital records belong in family court (x2)
- [The] judiciary could operate with far fewer probate judges...they should be appointed
- A change in the law can be proposed that allows all parts of the case [Boundary or ROW] to be considered in Environmental Court
- One full time hearing officer (an attorney) for each judicial unit assigned to the Judicial Bureau would provide the court with consistency - One court officer assigned to each hearing officer
- Stalking/Sexual Assault cases [can] be handled in the District Courts not Superior Courts.
- Transfer adoptions and minor guardianships to Probate (x2)
- Environmental and judicial bureau judges could hear some other cases to alleviate the bottleneaking in Family and District Courts perhaps even in small claims court

Case Administration:

- After hours RFA should be directed to law enforcement agencies.
- [There is] inefficiency in the fact that the superior, district, and family courts each exercise some appellate function in certain cases.

- Look to consolidate hearings in family/probate court for same parties in same disputes; inefficient to have probate/small claims appeals heard by Superior court judges.

General Court Services:

Managerial:

- A permanent set of judges and distinct legislative rubric--could be combined for each county and given a single pool of judges, with those judges splitting all of the dockets as volume of filings requires
- The probate and superior courts could be combined (x5)
- A central clerk's office for each county
- Merging of courts within counties would improve court efficiency and effectiveness of judicial operations
- Close and or consolidate [courts] (x7)
- Not in favor of combining or closing any courts (x3)
- Regional courts. We have 14 counties we could put 4 courts in VT 2 in the northern end 1 in the middle of the state and 1 at the bottom, [similar to] the federal court- not every county needs a courthouse
- Expand court hours
- Have "rocket docket" days for cases to be set-for example, the RFA docket has one day,
- Increasing juvenile hearing days.
- Random Lottery Judge Rotation to hear TPR juvenile cases
- Review all assistant clerks' duties and tasks in each court and re-allocate tasks and duties so that it is evenly spread among other assistant clerks.
- Regional trial centers for lengthy, complex trials and be able to assign judicial officers to the trial centers based on the interest, strengths, and capacity to maintain continuity; have flexibility in assigning judges to such trial centers to 6-month or longer terms.
- Study the needs of the probate litigant and the work of the probate court to determine if/what efficiencies can be created
- Hire more staff
- Consolidate criminal and judicial bureau
- Consolidate superior and environmental
- Consolidate family and probate.
- Consolidate judges and staff (x2)
- Have the court officer from the judicial bureau cover only a couple of courts, i.e. one CO cover Rutland and Middlebury to cut down on travel expenses [additionally they could] help out in the District or Family Court office as needed
- Create criteria around scheduling and use of courts
- Evaluate the ability of judges to rove to high volume courts -one day a week to help process cases.
- Integrate like court processes together and consider lower level administrative staff relieving administrative duties from higher level staff with more responsibilities
- It might make sense to think about additional specialty courts - A centrally located court in Montpelier or Rutland, for example, can be reached in less than two hours from anywhere else in the state.
- Have a full day of hearings of all kinds, not 1/2 day and having the court closing with staff still working does not seem very efficient
- Unify the current court system

Technology

Finance

Education:

Jury Services

Other:

- In this courthouse, two chambers are unused year-round.
- We need to remember that we are here to serve the local public.
- We have a court officer from the traffic bureau that is [underutilized]
- I do not think that anyone working outside of my court, could determine what would be best for us.(x2)

5. Please suggest other ideas that would enhance the efficient and effective delivery of judicial services to Vermonters.

Categorized Responses

Adjudicative: 8

Finance: 5

Case Administration: 19

Education: 3

General Court Services: 10

Jury Services

Managerial: 30

Other: 6

Technology: 9

Summary of Responses

Adjudicative:

- Eliminate Assistant [Side] Judges (x6)
- Judicial court officers should be regional, and they should be able to perform other duties in their down time.
- One Probate court per county

Case Administration

- Decriminalize minor offenses such as DLS & small marijuana
- Explore a special docket for DUI offenses.
- Atty's need to settle cases BEFORE jury draw & not be allowed to settle when the jurors are already present.
- Contract counsel should be addressed for more efficiency with scheduling issues.
- Do away with Informa Pauperis Applications and have a straight fee for motions filed in Family Court (x2)
- Sliding fee for new divorce/parentage complaints.
- Communication specialists are not needed if litigants have attorneys.
- Centralizing Record Checks in Criminal Court, to be handled through an online service and paid for online as well
- Have a committee review all requirements for certified mailing of pleadings; eliminate the certified requirement whenever reasonable to do so
- There [should] be one court handling guardianships/custody issues.

- Stop having Judicial Bureau Court Officers criss-cross the state
- Consolidate Case Managers so they travel with magistrates.
- Examine the need for Deputy Court clerks/managers, Operation Managers
- I believe that there should be a minimal filing fee for parentage, divorce, and post judgments for litigants who fall under the poverty guidelines
- Require mediation for all cases going to trial.
- Require OCS to accommodate the Court's schedule as opposed to the Court accommodating OCS' schedule.
- Increase accountability and expectation of state and defense counsel preparation for court proceedings.
- Increase pro bono service would also be helpful.

General Court Services:

- Offer free or paid legal clinics to pro se litigants-once a week, a couple of times a month.
- Offer form help/general process question clinics (staffed by court staff)- 1 or 2 hours a week) to assist people to fill out court forms and that have general process questions/
- Allowing the court to have volunteered college interns-with interests in the judiciary or majoring in criminal justice/education/human services, etc. to be screened by the judiciary- to help in small administrative tasks-filing, labeling etc.
- [Provide] a court liaison that gathers and distributes helpful resource pamphlets... kept in the "public area" at each courthouse, so that people can utilize area resources and services they may not know about - pre approved by CAO or court manager
- Public Records requests to be handled by Public Records.
- Creating a guardian ad litem list for domestic cases, in addition to continuing juvenile guardian lists
- Offer form 'packets' online (example-Parentage,Divorce, etc).which include ALL FORMS needed for particular filings (x2)
- More training and oversight by managers in regards to clerks in order to improve customer service.
- Money may be saved in the area of transporting for the regional arraignments, but the other parties involved are now spending more time getting the paperwork ready & follow up after the arraignment.

Managerial:

- We should be able to submit time cards over email or via some electronic process.
- Reduce operating costs by limiting operating hrs, [reduce the cost of some] mid-level mgmt & elected, untrained legal officials, tighten cost accounting procedures
- Assess specialty charges for increased cost of utility, paper, postage, extra services & research projects.
- The court houses should all be "greened" as a method of saving money.
- Look at docket clerks performance evaluations and [keep] the docket clerks that work hard and get rid of the docket clerks who don't pull their weight
- Wait to see how many [employees] take the buy-out and then there isn't enough savings there, then the whole system should close for 1 day a month and not have any one work or get paid for that day.
- Allow more local control. Allow [Court] Manager's to make decisions based on the needs of the business.
- No more added furlough days
- Statistics should be handled centrally, through the computer.

- Establishing a list of attorneys who will volunteer time if a case needs attorneys for children.
- Have one court manager for Family, District and Superior Courts in their perspective county
- 1/2 day closings and furlough days should fall upon the same days and times statewide (furlough days should be on a Mon or Fri to allow some people to obtain part time work to make up the lost pay). All court staff should participate in furlough days.
- Hold all employees responsible for [poor] performance/ behavior.
- Get rid of temps
- Having superior incorporated into family and district
- Unify all the courts under the Supreme Court (x2)
- County Clerks should have to have their time off okayed by someone and there should be a limit in the amount of time they can take off i.e. vacation.
- Turnover might be reduced if staff were reasonably paid for the strenuous mental and emotional conditions which they work under every day, and the knowledge base they must build
- Streamline CAO. Not court staff. Or at least share the burden.
- If the State does not take over the entire Judicial process, including Superior Courts, then leave the counties to their own devices and regionalize the State courts appropriately.
- We are below our bare-bones needs already at our court. We need more staff to have efficient and effective delivery of judicial services
- Close part-time courts in Grand Isle and Essex
- Use State employees rather than Sheriff for security
- We should have more control over our contracts with BGS and with non-state-owned buildings so that we can engage in cost-saving measures such as decreasing electricity use in our buildings.
- Consider moving to a four-day work week (x3)
- Cross training over District, Family & Superior courts to provide customer service at counter & on phone
- Hire more staff

Technology:

- Provide an online resource geared more towards the general public
- I believe the new computer system will be efficient and effective delivery of judicial services.
- Have a better call system.
- The process of how things are currently handled is adequate. I do not want to see electronic filings until I truly understand how they work
- Install phone answering systems in larger courts
- On line credit card payments that would automatically be credited to the correct court and case.
- The Court needs a more user friendly phone directory service and messaging system.
- Teleconferences, video conferences, e-filing are all much more efficient than in-person hearings or filings - to decrease travel
- Electronic submission of files to the court from the States Attorney's office and electronic submission of holding paperwork to the correctional facilities instead of mailing or faxing.

Finance:

- Guardian ad litem should not get paid mileage.
- All small accounting duties such as Vision to be handled by the finance people at CAO

- Eliminate mileage reimbursement.(x3)

Education:

- Continue with efforts at educating the public about the courts; court access service centers to provide people with information about court processes, etc.; outreach to increase public awareness to schools, civic groups
- ADVERTISE THE COURT CLOSINGS through the media
- It would be a service to the public for all the courts in a county to get together for a "seminar" on explaining what the judiciary is all about and what is expected of it.

Jury Services

Other

- Research the wasted space in the Chittenden County Superior Court building
- We really need to be more user friendly to our litigants especially in Family Court
- Acknowledge that the employees you have are over worked and under paid and that they are valuable employees (x2)
- There needs to be more accountability. Even judges should be watched as there is a lot of waste in the judiciary.
- [Need] equal treatment by the county of the state's employees