

Court Staff Focus Group  
National Life 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Conf Rm #1 PM  
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Facilitator: John Douglas  
Note taker: Arlene Hanson

John Douglas asked people to introduce themselves and offer any topics that they hoped would be addressed during this discussion.

Topics:

- Side judges are they needed now; do they earn their keep. While everyone was not in agreement to remove side judges, they did agree that we should have all law trained judges. Many thought that we should restructure positions.
- 4 day work week
- One person wanted a bigger buyout for her retirement (double).
- If you take over Superior Court staff where will the money come to pay for this increased staffing?
- Judicial Bureau is like a dumping zone – most people don't know what we do. We don't want to be minimized.
- Sheriff's Department is running courts when they don't have the manpower to do transports or deliver warrants, etc.
- What will happen to the difference in pay scales if the courts absorb the Superior Court county employees? Some county employees receive more and some receive less than state employees – how will you make it equitable for everyone?
- The county budgets are supported by a lot of out of state people. Won't absorbing county employees mean more out of Vermonters pocketbooks?

- 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?**
  - a. Can small claims, magistrate and/or traffic court matters be heard centrally or regionally and improve the efficiency of court operations?**
  - b. Can all Judiciary services be centralized into one court location per county and maintain or improve court operations?**

Most agreed that centralization of the jury pool would work, but they weren't sure that it would gain the courts that much as it wasn't that time consuming. Some didn't want to lose that local service feeling.

Fine or Fee Collector for regions? They didn't seem to think this idea would bring in the money people might expect, and it would not be enough to cover the salary needed.

They didn't want the hearings for the Judicial Bureau to be centralized.

They were against centralization of small claims. They spoke about a 5 to 6 month back log from filing to hearing in Chittenden. Filings increased 50% when they raised the maximum amount. It was mentioned that side judges use up a lot of law clerk time.

Some of the group were in favor of the removal of the county line as venue, but they thought it would take public outreach and public education to have it succeed. One person mentioned that in the past, all of Essex County cases were heard in Caledonia.

Directory services redesign– they thought that a change of the listing in the phone book might be good, but not sure that they still won't get calls for other courts, etc.

There needs to be public access to the schedule for hearings. Some people mentioned it was already on-line.

They all agreed there should be a centralized location for record checks.

Many agreed that one court manager per county for all the courts in county. The concern was that if all courts were not in the same building about how this might work and whether it would be efficient. They preferred one manager per building.

- 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?**
  - a. If the Judiciary invests in the equipment so that notices/informations, divorce complaints, parentage complaints, juvenile petitions, etc. are filed electronically will that, in your opinion, improve access and make the courts more efficient?**
  - b. Will easier access to the Judicial computer system allow working from other locations (home/another court) improve judicial operations?**

They were not in favor of electronic notices, etc because they have litigants that can't fill out hand written forms. It would take more time to explain. They don't believe it would work or save anything.

How about for attorneys? They believe that it will work for attorneys, and it will save time.

We need to be able to take debit and credit cards at all courts.

They agreed that all courts should have digital recording.

They agreed that video arraignments should be done if the equipment works properly. They also endorsed using phone conferences for status hearings.

They thought that the phone system throughout the state needs to be revamped. They thought that voicemail should be removed from the main phone line; it wastes time. Someone suggested that it would be better to implement a holding queue like DMV.

Some liked the idea of a toll free 800 number for the courts.

Cross training of staff would be good. Some people were already cross trained; it depends upon the court.

Floater? They thought this was a good idea. They felt that people would volunteer to do this. It is a great way to learn and see how other courts operate. However, they thought for this concept to work that you would need to standardize processes throughout state.

Making temps or part-timers full-time? Didn't have an opinion on this question.

- 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?**
  - a. What would be the effect of making all Court Managers and Court Staff all state employees?**
  - b. What would be the effect of eliminating side judges and hiring law trained judges with the savings?**
  - c. How much of an impact would the cross training of all staff have on workloads, etc.?**
  - d. Can and should we "float" judges along with staff to handle peak workloads as they occur?**

They were unanimous in favor of a 4 day work week comprising four ten hour days. This option will save money because it will cut cost of deputies, electricity and it will also allow employees to plan for appointments on those days, less sick time. Also they believe it will help litigants by offering extended hours that are after work for many people. They would prefer the day be Monday or Friday because it will combine from the weekend being lower heat, etc. – not as much savings if you're doing it middle of the week. Another idea was to stagger the hours so some people would come in earlier and some people stay later. They mentioned that for emergency or weekend services, a protocol already exists, so could be used on day closed.

Consolidating any courts -- One person thought that the Court would do what it wanted as far as closing courthouses and didn't really care what staff thinks. Others thought that accessibility was an issue. They really didn't particularly like the idea of regions.

They agreed that the ability to pay fines anywhere was a good idea. Some liked the idea of money collection being centralized.

- 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?**
  - a. What would be the impact of uniting Probate into Family Court?**
  - b. Could the Environmental Court be absorbed into the Superior Court?**
  - c. Would it be feasible/cost effective to: Have Magistrates hear child support contempt cases; move civil suspensions to Judicial Bureau; and eliminate de novo appeals hearings in Superior Court?**

Probate guardianships and adoptions being moved to Family Court was approved by most, provided that Family Court had increased staffing to deal with these additions.

They were unanimous in their support of magistrates' jurisdiction being expanded to hear uncontested child support contempt cases.

De Novo appeals – eliminate.

One judge, one case – They thought that this was a nightmare scenario unless you had a way to provide a case file that could follow the judge – an electronic case file might work, but they can't see that happening anytime soon.

Having a good family/juvenile judge remain in family court? They did not like this idea; they believe that it would cause burn out.