

# Electronic Court Records

KING COUNTY, WASHINGTON

## County Courts Cut Paper and Improve Process

AS COUNTERINTUITIVE as it might seem, supporters of King County's controversial new paperless system for filing and keeping Superior Court case records knew they were on solid ground when the system experienced a catastrophic crash. That's because during the five weeks in 2005 that the system was down, only a handful of users pushed for going back to the old-style, paper-driven system. Most were just anxious to know when the new system would be back on-line.

The benefits of moving from paper to electronic court files is hard to overestimate, say the system's supporters. The limits of paper-based records systems (which still predominate nationally) are formidable. Paper files are available only during regular business hours, and retrieving them requires a trip to the clerk's office. Finding paper records can take hours—even days—and when they are located, only one party can view a file or document at a time. Paper files can be lost, altered, stolen, and destroyed. And then there is storage: In King County's case, paper files covered 7,500 square feet of storage space and were stacked seven tiers high.

Key to the change was the King County Department of Judicial Administration's decision to treat electronic files (created either by scanning papers or producing them originally on a computer) as "original records" once they were filed with the clerk.

A solid master plan and the inclusion of all possible users—judges, prosecutors, private attorneys, public defenders, court commissioners, and others—in the development of the system was critical to a successful switchover, which began in 2002.

Today, users can access records immediately, remotely, and at any hour. Multiple users can view the same document simultaneously. Meanwhile, the system includes a



secure backup (during the crash of 2005, users could still access electronic documents at select sites) and multiple safeguards to ensure that only authorized persons have access to relevant files.

While the new system has dramatically improved efficiency and reduced costs, the most positive consequence may be on justice itself, contends King County Superior Court Judge Mary Yu. "I now can instantaneously view all relevant records from the bench," says Yu. "The sad reality in the past is that judges were sometimes put in the position where they had to make decisions without the full record. It's a judge's nightmare after a case is finished to have to say to someone, 'I didn't know [that fact].'"

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