

help to promote the plan, making themselves available to present informational sessions about it and to offer practical implementation strategies at court committee meetings, court conferences, and other court-related gatherings.

Heralding the publication of the plan, Chief Justice Labarga called it “faithful to the fundamental role courts play in our society and our government.” He also emphasized that the plan “serves as an essential warning of the changing circumstances that have already begun to confront courts and will become even more significant over the next several years.” But while serving as a cautionary note, the long-range plan will also act as a ballast—for, as the branch navigates these changing circumstances, the plan will be firmly in place to “assist the Supreme Court and the Chief Justice as they provide leadership and direction to the branch.”

The Judicial Branch Promulgates Its Revised Court Communication Plan

At the same time the Judicial Management Council was revising the branch’s long-range plan (see preceding article), it was considering strategies for advancing the communication-related goals that the plan was readying to announce. Crafted with input from judges, court public information officers and other court staff, and the press, the recently released branch-wide communication plan, *Delivering Our Message: Court Communication Plan for the Judicial Branch of Florida 2016*, aims to help the courts build relationships with a variety of partners, enhance public understanding of and support for the branch, speak clearly and purposefully about the branch, support open lines of communication, and communicate effectively using coordinated, strategic efforts. Implemented over four years, “The plan will serve as a guide for the entire branch statewide,” Chief Justice Labarga announced.



photo courtesy of 2nd Circuit

Judge Nina Ashenafi-Richardson, Leon County, chairs the Judicial Management Council’s Education and Outreach Workgroup, which was responsible for drafting the branch’s new communication plan, *Delivering Our Message: Court Communication Plan for the Judicial Branch of Florida 2016*.

Delivering Our Message is the court system’s second branch-wide communication plan. Its first, published in 2000, concentrated on external communication, particularly communication with the public: its priorities were to educate the public about the role and functions of the branch, provide information to help the public navigate the judicial system, and establish mechanisms to receive public input regarding court operations.

Then in 2012, after the supreme court reconstituted the Judicial Management Council, then Chief Justice Polston, who chaired the council, established an Education and Outreach Workgroup to focus on issues related to effective communication, public trust and confidence, and the use of clear, unified messages within and outside the branch. Updating the communication plan became the workgroup’s first project. Designed to be a user-friendly resource for the judges and court personnel who will be implementing it, *Delivering Our Message* identifies four high priority strategic areas that the branch must address in order to “create, strengthen, and preserve support for the Florida court system”: *Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence*; *Speaking with One Voice – Key Court Messages*; *Improving Communication Methods*; and *Strengthening Internal Communication*.

While the old and new plans intersect in many ways, *Delivering Our Message* differs from its predecessor in a number of significant areas. Most materially, although both plans highlight the need to enhance external communication, the new plan also accentuates the importance of improving internal communication efforts. Other focal points of the new plan include the need to establish meaningful relationships with key audiences and to speak with one voice. And

because communications have changed so dramatically in the 16 years separating the two plans, the new plan also urges full utilization of the latest technological tools to improve communication methods: for instance,

recognizing that “new media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are transforming the way people seek out information and understand the world,” the current plan encourages consideration of these communication tools as “opportunities for courts to promote openness and accountability,” to “encourage conversation between the courts, journalists, and citizens,” and “to listen to public concerns.”

Everyone who works in the courts will have a part in implementing the plan, not just the court public information officers. The support of all judges and court personnel will be especially helpful in reaching the goal of improving internal communications. For instance, everyone can contribute to the effort to improve information-sharing: regular staff meetings, document sharing on intranet sites or shared network drives, feedback mechanisms for judges and court personnel to express ideas or concerns, and ceremonies to recognize employee excellence and achievements are all compelling information-sharing opportunities. These kinds of opportunities can “encourage multi-directional communication, increase employee engagement and productivity, and foster a spirit of unity, commitment, and cooperation” among the people who work in a court community.

In addition, the two plans represent different kinds of roadmaps for growth. The first communication plan called itself a strategic plan:

it identified what needed to be done but did not propose specific projects and tasks for achieving those ends. *Delivering Our Message*, on the other hand, is more of an implementation plan, rich with practical tasks, projects, strategies, and “Try This” suggestions in which court-based individuals, units, groups, or committees may engage to reach the plan objectives (the plan clarifies that each court has the discretion to determine how to incorporate the plan’s goals and strategies, based on local needs and resources). As an implementation plan, *Delivering Our Message* (like the new long-range plan) also outlines procedures for institutionalizing the plan and for regularly monitoring progress toward achieving its goals. ([Take this link to read the communication plan.](#))

To bring the plan to fruition, the Florida court public information officers (PIOs) will play a major role (the supreme court has had a PIO since 1996, and since 2003, the chief judge at each trial court and DCA has designated a court staff member to perform these duties). Indeed, Chief Justice Labarga has charged the PIOs with putting the plan into effect, and, with their guidance, Mr. Craig Waters and the Supreme Court Public Information Office will manage the implementation of the plan. This past March, 43 court personnel from around the state (representing the trial and appellate courts, the supreme court, OSCA, and The Florida Bar) participated in a rigorous workshop to learn about their responsibilities in implementing the plan and to prepare themselves for this task. Conducted by the National Center for State Courts, the two-and-a-half-day Court Community Communication Workshop provided opportunities for in-depth discussion and the sharing of ideas and unique insights from around the state on a variety of topics outlined in the plan, including public and media relations, community education and outreach programs, the changing media landscape, communication planning, access to public records, website content, and social media for court communications.

According to Ms Tricia Knox, senior court operations consultant with OSCA’s Strategic Planning Unit and



BC Schwartz

Judge Olin W. Shinholser, Tenth Circuit, member of the Judicial Management Council’s Education and Outreach Workgroup, talks with the branch’s chief judges about the four high priority strategic areas identified in *Delivering Our Message*.

lead staff to the Education and Outreach Workgroup, “workshop takeaways” include the acknowledgement that courts and court processes must be understandable; websites are the most effective communication tools; and courts must demonstrate responsiveness by listening to public concerns. Participants left the workshop saying that they are newly inspired to strengthen their commitment to outreach to the public and to develop effective public information programs, including the development of helpful publications and website content.

Ms Knox also pointed out that everyone who works in the courts will have a part in implementing the plan, not just the PIOs. The support of all judges and court personnel will be especially helpful in reaching the goal of improving internal communications. For instance, everyone can contribute to the effort to improve information-sharing: regular staff meetings, document sharing on intranet sites or shared network drives, feedback mechanisms for judges and court personnel to express ideas or concerns, and ceremonies to recognize employee excellence and achievements are all compelling information-sharing opportunities. These kinds of opportunities can “encourage multi-directional communication, increase employee engagement and productivity, and foster a spirit of unity, commitment, and cooperation” among the people who work in a court community. In addition, these simple-to-implement strategies “can boost morale, decrease turnover, and increase employee performance and customer satisfaction,” she added. But she emphasized that the plan offers suggestions, not prescriptions, for strengthening internal and external communication: local courts are “encouraged to develop new and creative solutions that work best for them.”

Calling the implementation of the plan “one of the major legacies of my administration,” Chief Justice Labarga welcomed the release of *Delivering Our Message*, heralding it as “another chapter in our rich history of access and transparency.”

Court Initiatives

Fifteenth Circuit Receives SJI Grant to Work on Improving Its Magistrate Processes



photo courtesy of 15th Circuit

The support and input of Chief Judge Jeffrey Colbath, Fifteenth Circuit, have been crucial to the process of making improvements to the magistrates’ operations.

Florida’s judicial branch is often referred to as a trailblazer. In 1988, for instance, it established what has become the most comprehensive court-connected mediation program in the country; in 1989, the circuit court in Miami-Dade conceptualized and implemented the world’s first drug court; the emergency preparedness measures the branch developed post-9/11 have been nationally recognized as a model of teamwork and intergovernmental collaboration; its commitment to building a total, top-to-bottom e-filing system is regarded as remarkable; and it has received national acclaim for its innovative judicial education and civics education programs and for its initiatives to help people with mental illnesses who are in the criminal justice system or at risk of incarceration.

But judicial branch ingenuity and proactivity are also evident at the local level: indeed, one can find examples of visionary practices in circuits and DCAs all across the state. Some compelling illustrations can be found at the Fifteenth Circuit, which has a history of implementing innovative programs and processes to ensure that cases are decided fairly and move through the system without unnecessary delay. The Fifteenth operates four drug courts (family, juvenile, civil, and adult), instituted a specialty mental health division to process