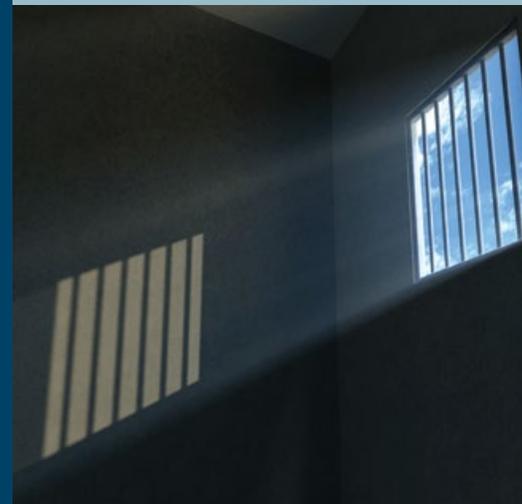


2016

Trends in State Courts

Special Focus on Family Law and Court Communications



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Opening Courts to the Public



Should I Tweet That? Court Communications in the 21st Century

Hon. Jorge Labarga

Chief Justice,
Florida Supreme Court

Hon. Nina Ashenafi Richardson

Judge,
Leon County, Florida

Tricia Knox

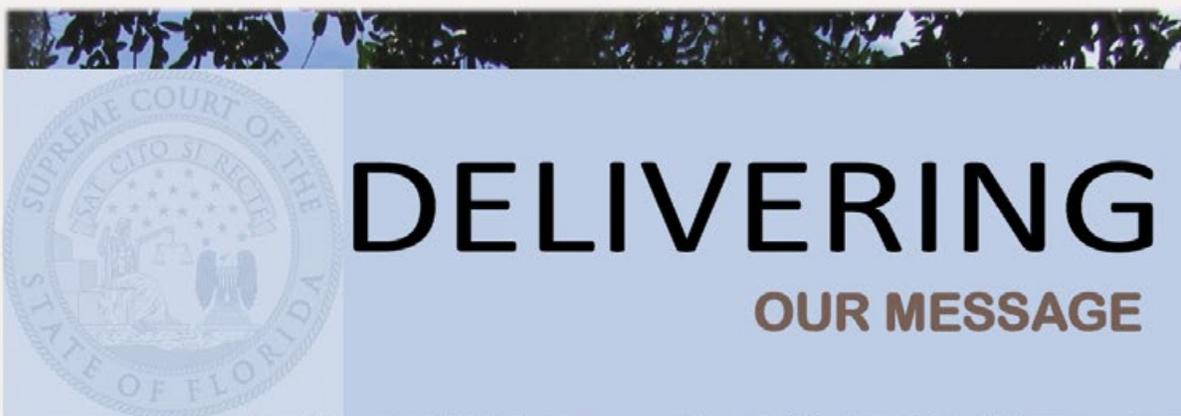
Senior Court Operations Consultant,
Florida Office of the State Courts Administrator

We live in an age that values transparency—where being open is critical to holding on to and increasing public trust in our branch. If courts are not involved in telling their own important and compelling stories, then the message conveyed may not be accurate, positive, or helpful.

It is not breaking news that changes in the way people connect and communicate are constantly occurring. Courts must deal effectively every day with the impacts of today's information revolution to meet evolving public expectations. Managing court communications in the always-connected information age of the 21st century requires extensive knowledge and practical understanding of a broad range of media, communications principles, and emerging technologies, which are increasingly playing central roles in the public dialogue. They also provide exciting opportunities for courts to respond in creative and innovative

ways to ensure courts are open, accessible, and understandable to everyone.

Today, court communications extend to the Web, social media, mobile apps, videos, and print publications, to name a few. The Florida Supreme Court is seizing the opportunity to meet the needs of the public and promote transparency for the purpose of supporting trust and confidence. Florida has developed a statewide comprehensive communication plan to guide courts when coordinating and organizing communication activities necessary to the administration of justice.



DELIVERING

OUR MESSAGE

COURT COMMUNICATION PLAN for the Judicial Branch of Florida January 2016



MISSION:

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.

Florida’s 2016 *Court Communication Plan for the Judicial Branch of Florida: Delivering Our Message* sets the framework to improve the public’s perception of courts through education and outreach, relationship building, and consistent messaging. The plan represents Florida’s commitment to improving public understanding of and support for the judicial branch through improved communication efforts. One example of this long-standing commitment dates back 16 years to the first communication plan for Florida’s judicial branch.

Continuing this commitment, Florida’s 2016-2021 Long-Range Strategic Plan Issue 3: Improve Understanding of the Judicial Process addresses judicial branch communication improvements. The 2016 *Communication Plan* supports this long-range issue by detailing four key issues: enhancing public trust and confidence; speaking with one voice and using key court messages; improving communication methods; and strengthening internal communication. The plan includes goals, strategies and activities, examples of ideas and “Try This” suggestion boxes, an implementation schedule, a checklist to track achievements, and suggested designees responsible for goal and strategy development. This detailed communication plan is the first of its kind for Florida.

Issue 1: Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence

Try This: Outreach to Local Reporters (Strategy I.1.B.5)	
Local Workshop	Courthouse Tour
Lunch ‘n Learn	Q & A Session

The 2016 *Communication Plan*’s foremost objective is to cultivate trust and confidence in Florida’s court system. The plan addresses this in many ways, including:

- building relationships with key audiences (the public, court users, the media, state lawmakers, justice system partners, teachers, civic organizations, and the business community);
- increasing public awareness about court services and performance;
- providing information to court users to ensure understanding of court processes and services;
- involving the public to improve court processes;
- educating the public about the judicial branch by improving outreach efforts; and
- training judges and court staff in media relations.

Local Education and Outreach Program Examples (Strategy I.5.A & B)	
2nd Circuit	Classroom to Courtroom
9th Circuit	Inside the Courts
11th Circuit	Local Justice Teaching Institute

Developing meaningful relationships with key audiences to build support for the judicial branch is imperative. As the first goal of the first issue, this age-old communication principle is front and center and is essential to any healthy communication dynamic. Court leaders in Florida are keenly aware that cultivating relationships can lead to trustworthy partnerships. These supportive relationships are not only important to daily work but vital during emergencies and times of crisis. Florida’s *Communication Plan* offers strategies to build relationships with a wide range of audiences.

Surveys conducted in preparation of the long-range strategic plan revealed that the judicial branch must educate the public about how courts work. Providing opportunities for students, teachers, and citizens to learn the role and responsibilities of courts is essential to develop an informed citizenry. While some courts in Florida have made significant strides in local education efforts, many courts lack resources to implement education and outreach programs. The plan addresses the need for a coordinated, strategic education and outreach effort to support all courts in Florida by developing templates for successful programs that can be modified and easily adapted by any court. Enhancing understanding of the purposes, roles, and responsibilities of the judicial branch through education and outreach is a goal of Florida’s 2016-2021 long-range plan.

**Issue 2: Speaking with One Voice:
KEY Court Messages**

A critical element of effective communication is the development and dissemination of messages when communicating with others. Whether communications are addressing routine court matters or special crises, it is important that Florida courts speak with one voice delivering the same message from Pensacola in northwest Florida to Key West, the southernmost point in the state.

To understand this concept, Jay Aquilanti, creative director for the Walt Disney Company, worked with the Florida Judicial Management Council (JMC) to underscore the importance of image, organizational identity, and public perception. His message was clear: If we coordinate our messages, if we are consistent with our messages, we establish a positive presence that strengthens perceptions about the judicial branch.

KEY Court Messages	
Message 1	Utilize existing county-owned space for justice system operations; reduce dependence on leased space.
Message 2	The court system is stongly committed to ensuring fairness and access to all people in a timely and responsive manner.
Message 3	One of the foundations of a democracy is a judicial system that operates in an environment where judges remain objective, unbiased, and impartial.
Message 4	The Florida judicial branch is strongly committed to accountability; courts are working to ensure that they are good stewards of public resources.
Message 5	Judges and court employees are committed to the branch’s mission and vision.

Strategy II.2.A of the *Communication Plan* states, “All official court communication should incorporate KEY Court Messages as appropriate. KEY Court Messages will be used when writing press releases, media advisories, responses to the public, comments to the media, talking points, speeches, presentations, brochures, quotes, blogs, op-eds, educational and public outreach materials, social media messages, web content, and all other official court communication.”

Using KEY court messages consistently across the state in all official court communications is imperative. Delivering the same message across all platforms increases trust and confidence in our courts.

Issue 3: Improving Communication Methods

The 2016-2021 long-range planning surveys discovered another important finding—courts must do a better job telling their story. Some media outlets today are only interested in judicial scandals or chasing the next trial of the century, and the media of yesterday that provided fair and balanced reporting has shrunk. As a result, courts must communicate directly to the people about the role and purpose of the third branch of government. Today, courts can use a broad range of communication tools to reach citizens and deliver the message that the American court system resolves disputes, fairly and justly, and that judges are performing significant work every day at every level to carry out the principles of the Constitution established by our Founding Fathers. Courts must do the best job possible to communicate to the people about how important our judiciary is.

Garret Graff, former editor of *Politico* magazine and author of “Courts Are Conversations: An Argument for Increased Engagement by Court Leaders” (Harvard Executive Session for State Court Leaders in the 21st Century, 2008-2011), addressed the JMC via Skype and encouraged members to think of court communication as a two-way street. He stressed that courts should not be afraid of new communication tools, particularly social media. As he asserts in his article, “As a new generation arrives with different expectations for conversations and interactions, courts face a fundamental challenge: How do they listen better to a public now used to conversing in different ways, on different platforms, and with different tools?”

Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other new media tools can be used to disseminate relevant information and enhance the public’s understanding and perception of courts. Florida’s *Communication Plan* calls for the use of communications technology and social media to the extent appropriate in judicial settings. Using social media as a communication tool affords courts the opportunity to convey important information beyond newsworthy events, such as judicial appointments or retirements.

Courts now have the ability to reach audiences and connect with people seeking other types of court information such as high-profile-case announcements, court performance and statistics, judicial achievements, new court services, education and outreach events, and job announcements. Social media presents unique ways to offer the public an inside look at the courts from a different perspective.

The Florida Supreme Court was among the first courts to use social media when it established its Twitter feed in 2009. A 2015 Pew Research Center study found that Twitter and Facebook users now use these social-media platforms as a source of news about issues and events outside the realm of friends and family. Using social-media platforms for community and outreach events and government information is continuing to rise.

Additionally, it is important that communication by all courts be consistent not only with its message but also in the manner information is communicated. Ensuring that all courts are using the same methods, following the same guidelines, and providing the same information are goals in Florida's *Communication Plan*. This consistency is designed to improve understanding and reduce misperceptions about the judicial system, which often stem from a lack of necessary information. Providing consistent Web information, for example, supports transparency, reduces confusion and frustration, and builds public support for the judicial branch.

Issue 4: Improving Internal Communication

While much of Florida's *Communication Plan* focuses on improving external communication, the JMC recognized the need to improve internal communication efforts. Strengthening internal communication is essential for an engaged workforce.

The ability and willingness to exchange information is vital in our work environment. Improving ways to share information can encourage multidirectional communication, increase employee engagement and productivity, and foster a spirit of unity, commitment, and cooperation. The plan assists courts by offering simple and practical ideas to support and strengthen the internal communication process while encouraging local courts to develop new and creative solutions that work best for them. Solutions include holding regular staff meetings, promoting document sharing on intranet sites or shared network drives, developing feedback mechanisms for judges and court personnel to express ideas or concerns, and recognizing employee excellence and achievements. While simple, these strategies can boost morale, decrease turnover, and increase employee performance and customer satisfaction.

Developing a Useful Plan

To ensure that the *Communication Plan* is not doomed to sit on a bookshelf and collect dust, the JMC actively sought input from appellate, circuit, and county judges; judicial assistants; trial court administrators; marshals; public information officers; and other court personnel. Many important suggestions were offered and incorporated into the plan, including providing an implementation checklist, adding detailed strategies and examples of goals, and developing social-media guidelines and communication templates. As a result of this “bottom-up” approach, judges and court personnel have a viable and useful document that strikes an appropriate balance between producing a high-level plan giving little direction and one that is too directive or dictating from the top down. The plan allows each court the discretion to determine how to incorporate the goals and strategies based on local needs and resources.

Providing Direction

Assigning the *Communication Plan* to an existing office will provide the accountability and stability needed to ensure success. The Florida Supreme Court Public Information Office has the responsibility of directing and sustaining the plan, providing guidance or answers to court personnel when help is needed. This office can effectively manage the plan and coordinate the development of statewide goals and strategies utilizing the knowledge of court personnel throughout the state. Over the next few years, work will include developing guidelines for various social-media platforms, creating communication templates for a variety of situations, identifying minimum content for court websites, producing statewide educational materials and prototypes for programs, and more.

It is up to judges and court leaders to deliver the court’s message and show citizens that our branch of government has value in the everyday life of every citizen.

Florida is in a unique position thanks to its Florida Court Public Information Officers (FCPIO) organization, which first met in 2005. Court personnel in positions tasked with public information duties are members of the FCPIO and represent all trial and appellate courts throughout Florida. The Florida Supreme Court Public Information Office will work with FCPIO members to advance plan goals that have statewide impact. This partnership will also provide valuable implementation assistance and support at the local level.

Achieving Justice

As judges and court leaders, we understand the importance of achieving justice. We must concern ourselves that the people and communities we serve routinely see that courts are truly achieving justice. It rests in the principle of law we are familiar with, “Not only must justice be done; it must also be seen to be done.” We must effectively communicate with the public to ensure that all customers of our court system and all audiences for court communications understand on a daily basis the importance of the judicial branch and the determined efforts we make to achieve justice. Courts today have a responsibility to tell their story and to do it in a powerful and compelling way. It is up to judges and court leaders to deliver the court’s message and show citizens that our branch of government has value in the everyday life of every citizen.

National Center for State Courts

