

Fulfilling the Public's Trust

Sixth in a series of articles about the public service standards essential to attaining excellent customer service in the Clerk's Office (October, 2002).

Integrity

There are two important aspects of integrity in the Clerk's Office. Integrity is both the *honest, steadfast adherence to the judiciary's Code of Conduct* and *the performance of thorough, accurate, and complete work*. Work done with integrity increases public trust and confidence in our office because such work furthers the goal of achieving the fair and impartial resolution of the disputes brought before the court.

Integrity cannot be achieved without compliance with the Code of Conduct.¹ Very few, if any, other institutions (public or private) have the high level of ethical expectations we have in the courts—this is one of the things which makes working in the Clerk's Office special. The Code of Conduct has five requirements (Canons): to uphold the integrity and independence of the judiciary; to avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in all activities; to adhere to appropriate standards in performing duties; to avoid the risk of conflict with official duties from outside activities and to comply with disclosure requirements; and to refrain from inappropriate political activity. In order for the court to earn and retain the respect and support of litigants and the public, we must continuously strive to strictly uphold the Code of Conduct. Because in the eyes of the beholder, perception is reality, we must not simply adhere to these requirements in fact, but also preserve the appearance of propriety at all times.

Beyond meeting the ethical standards of the Code of Conduct, integrity means our work needs to be thorough, accurate, and complete. Such work must be consistent with the duties and obligations required by relevant law, procedural and administrative rules, and policies. Are notices of court orders and judgments properly sent to all parties? Are the court's fiscal responsibilities in the areas of budget, fees, and trustee payments comprehensive and performed accurately? Are the court's docket and case files complete? Examples abound from every duty we perform. In addition, integrity refers not only to the lawfulness of court actions, but also to the results of those actions. The court's performance, and thus integrity, are diminished when the docket that parties and judges rely upon for their work is out of date, vendors and trustees are not paid promptly, judgments are not timely sent and appeal rights are compromised, etc.

Further, American judicial process is based largely on the English common law system, whereby the precedent of prior court decisions is used to decide new cases that have similar facts and legal issues. Without the integrity of a sound court record that the Clerk's Office primarily controls (case files, dockets, hearing/trial transcripts, etc.), the common law system is severely damaged. Simply put, our work is critical to the proper functioning of the American judicial system.

Integrity is the basis for several of our other public service standards: competency, judicial independence, effective communication, quality, and fair and impartial justice. The degree to which each and every staff member performs duties with integrity profoundly affects everyone whom the Clerk's Office serves, both inside and outside of the court. Integrity, then, is fundamental to our providing excellent customer service and fulfilling the public's trust in us as public servants.

¹ The Code of Conduct is contained in the Employee Manual in Section 3.