

## *Fulfilling the Public's Trust*

Eighth in a series of articles about the public service standards essential to attaining excellent customer service in the Clerk's Office (January, 2003).

### Accessibility

An accessible court and clerk's office are a cornerstone of excellent customer service. If we are to achieve equal justice for all, we must have equal access for all. Openness and ease of use create a more equitable environment for everyone we serve. Three key areas define accessibility:

- *Geographic/physical.* Minimizing the distance to court facilities increases accessibility for customers. Additionally, once people arrive at the court, court security and emergency preparedness have a direct effect on accessibility—maintaining a safe environment enhances public trust, and keeping the court open in an emergency situation affords users unbroken access. The design of our facilities also has a direct effect on whether customers can freely participate in court functions. Therefore, designs to accommodate the sight- or hearing-impaired, people with mobility problems, or other disabled people are important. How electronic systems, such as telephone and web sites, operate can either enhance or bar access as well. Whether records are properly preserved, are accurate, and are open for review affects customer access to court information. Similarly, the degree to which court proceedings are open to the public is a key factor.
- *Procedural.* The common phrase, “justice delayed is justice denied,” emphasizes the necessity for streamlined procedures. How quickly we serve our customers, be it at the front counter, on the phone, or in the time it takes to go from filing to final judgment, is a critical accessibility factor. Whether our forms, rules, and procedures are simple to understand and use greatly determines whether the public can effectively take part in our court's functions. For example, is the language understandable? Complex procedures result in more time and effort being expended by everyone, including attorneys, resulting in greater costs and barring some people from even participating. Last, the level of courtesy and responsiveness to the needs of our customers affects how accessible we are.
- *Economic.* Making costs to use the court reasonably affordable is critical to give people access to justice. Costs can take the form of filing fees, copy costs, travel expenses, and time taken from work. As we have seen above, court procedures affect attorney costs. The ability to hire an attorney is a major issue for litigants, directly affecting the rate of *pro se* filings. Since *pro se* parties have many difficulties in accessing justice, attorney costs is a significant problem.

Poor performance in these key areas causes ignorance about and fear of the court, and erects outright barriers to use of the court and clerk's office by litigants, lawyers, other court participants, and the public at large. When we fail to maximize accessibility, often the hardest hit are those people who most need the court's services. For these reasons we must recognize that accessibility is affected by almost everything we do. Thus, we must constantly review current operations and design changes to maximize accessibility in all areas, be they facilities, computer systems, forms, records, rules, calendaring, noticing, or our treatment of those whom we serve each day.

Accessibility, then, is fundamental to our providing excellent customer service and fulfilling the public's trust in us as public servants.