

Fulfilling the Public's Trust

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

Accountability

Like all governmental institutions, our court is accountable for its performance to the public we serve. What is accountability? It is being responsible for the fulfillment of our obligations – liable for being called to account for our actions in the discharge of our duties. The work we do to fulfill the public's high expectations in the delivery of justice is the key to public trust and confidence in the courts. If the public gets the kind of prompt, accurate, accessible, cost-effective, and fair service we declare as our mission, public trust and confidence will be high and the judiciary's absolutely critical role in our democratic society will be enhanced.

How are we held accountable?

- *By our customers:* People who come into direct contact with the court, such as debtors, attorneys, other case participants, government agencies, vendors, etc., all personally evaluate their experiences. Recognizing this, we encourage feedback and regularly communicate with many of our customers. We also take prompt action on complaints, comments, and suggestions.
- *By the public and the media:* Since most members of the public do not have regular contact with the court, the media play a critical role in holding us accountable. The media act as observers, evaluators, and reporters of what we do, providing information to the public. Thus we must work with the media to strive for quality reporting.
- *By ourselves:* We hold ourselves responsible for the performance of the duties entrusted to us by all citizens. We have affirmed our obligation to well and faithfully discharge our duties. We acknowledge that obligation by prominently publishing our mission and values so that the public and our customers know what we expect of ourselves. In order to achieve service excellence, we identify key group and individual performance standards and measure how we meet those standards. We also strive to be an accountable organization as a whole – one which has disciplined work processes, is highly efficient, has and meets clear goals for quality and productivity, and takes responsibility for its actions.
- *By other governmental institutions and processes:* The court is held accountable through many other mechanisms. They include laws, rules, and administrative oversight by the Circuit Council, the Judicial Conference of the United States and the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. The court is also held accountable via legislative oversight, which is most evident in the budget review and approval process. Judges are subject to several further special means of accountability: their selection process (whether by appointment or election); length of tenure; judicial complaint and discipline systems; and appellate review of decisions.

Accountability is a complex value that affects all areas of the court's activities. To earn the public's trust and confidence, we must do our best to meet the public's expectations by providing the highest level of service. Great service is not always easy, with competing values and heavy workloads confronting us every day. It is essential, though, to satisfy the public's need for accountability. This satisfaction engenders public trust and support for the judiciary as a strong and effective branch of our government, critical to the success of our democratic system. Accountability, then, is fundamental to our providing excellent customer service and fulfilling the public's trust in us as public servants.