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Benton County court goes digital

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Benton County Circuit Court judges will no longer sift through a mountain of paperwork to find a particular motion from a certain case. Court staff won't waste time tracking down files and routing them to the appropriate desk.

And soon, the public will have more online options in the court system and better access to records.

The Benton County Courthouse transitioned into the 21st century on Saturday as a new records-management system went online, leaving behind paper files and an outdated computer program from the mid-1980s.

About 45 staff members from the courthouse, the Oregon Judicial Department and Tyler Technologies — the new program's vendor — gathered in a courtroom Saturday morning for announcements and a few inspirational words before they rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

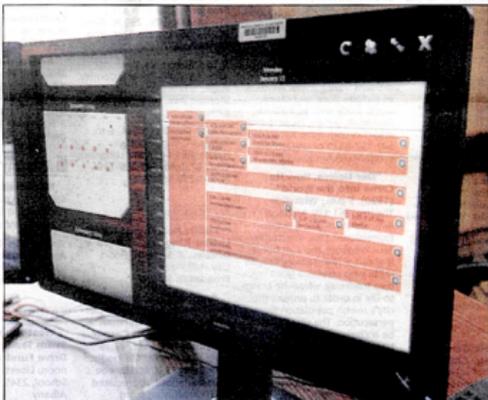
"I know this has been a long, long road, but here we are!" trial court administrator Linda Hukari said, addressing the crew, which has been training and preparing for months to transition to Odyssey.

To be ready to use Odyssey in court on Monday, clerks entered in cases and documents into the new program that had come in on Thursday and Friday — after the old system, Oregon Judicial Information Network, was shut off.

OJIN contains a database of criminal, civil, family and probate court case information, such as hearing dates and motions filed, but unlike Odyssey, it's incapable of electronically storing documents.

Until Saturday's transition, all documents filed with the court were printed and placed into a physical file that was stored on shelves in the courthouse when they weren't in use.

The transition is a phase in the Oregon Judicial Department's five-year plan to create a modern and uniform Oregon eCourts system across all districts in the state. On Saturday, Benton and Polk counties joined eight other counties, including Linn County, that have switched to Odyssey. Remaining state courts are slated to make the transition by June 2016, according to Bryant Baehr, chief information officer for the Oregon Judicial Department.



Odyssey, a new record-management system, up and running on the computer of Circuit Court Judge David Connell on Saturday. The previous system, OJIN, had been used by the Oregon court system since they began digitizing records in 1986.

By the end of the year, Baehr said, citizens will be able to conduct state court business online, like filing for divorce or filing a small claims case.

Eventually, when all districts transition to Odyssey, court documents from any trial or appellate court in Oregon will be accessible by visiting a courthouse computer or by buying a subscription and logging in from any computer online.

An outdated program

Like a car built in the 1970s, OJIN has stood the test of time, Baehr said, but the vintage vehicle doesn't meet emissions standards and you "wouldn't outfit it with a navigation system."

Likewise, OJIN — which has a platform

based on a programming language first developed in 1959 — doesn't support the online access that the public expects, and it's so out-of-date that it's difficult to find programmers who know how to fix it.

"You're taking a platform that is very sturdy, but it just didn't have the expanding capabilities that we'd like, and it's getting really, really hard to fix it," Baehr said.

OJIN was the first computerized records-management program that Oregon courts have used. Unlike its modern brethren with point-and-click options and drop-down menus, it runs on a series of codes that court staff has mastered and judges abhor.

"OJIN was so archaic," Benton County Circuit Court Judge Locke Williams explained, "and the codes you had to know —

none of us (judges) knew those codes. About half the time I would have to call my judicial assistant and ask her to look up a case."

Conversely, Carol Chilcote, a probate and civil records clerk since 1988, has lived and breathed the program for more than 25 years.

"I could do it my sleep," she said. "I have little codes floating in my head everywhere." Odyssey is more upfront work for clerks — scanning in documents and entering in information through multiple windows — but she can see the long-term benefit.

For one, Odyssey consolidated and standardized codes that court staff use across the state, making it easier to navigate the system and to interpret court cases filed in other districts.

"My understanding is that OJIN had like 9,000 codes and now Odyssey has like 900," Chilcote said. "Some of them are new and a lot of them have been consolidated — because a lot of them had been duplicated or were not being used very much."

Say goodbye to paper

All Benton County Circuit Court case information stored in OJIN has moved to Odyssey. And from here on out, all documents from new and pending cases will be digitized.

"Once it's scanned, the paper will be shredded and the electronic form will be considered the official court copy," Judge Williams said. "The old days of asking for the file and not being able to locate it — or (being told) it's in the judge's chambers and we'll call you back when you can get your copy — are gone!"

Tyler Technologies staff helped Judges David Connell, Matt Donohue and Williams set up their benches on Saturday with new computer programs and monitors.

Starting Monday, they won't handle another paper file. All documents that — figuratively — come across their desks will be accessible on their computers.

"For me, this is like having a stack of files," Williams said, pointing to a monitor at his bench.

Though the Oregon eCourts system is moving toward statewide digital recording and digital filing, documents will still be printed out so that parties in a case have a physical copy, Williams said.