Judicial branch awarded $3.52 million state grant for pandemic-related expenses

TOPEKA—The Kansas judicial branch will use a $3.52 million grant to pay for pandemic-related expenses and help courts shift to more online and remote services.

"The pandemic challenged our courts to reimagine how we serve the people of Kansas," said Chief Justice Marla Luckert. "We have embraced new ways of operating and are making greater use of technology to provide more service online and remotely. The immediate focus was health protection, but the results are increased transparency and more efficient and user-friendly courts."

The State Finance Council approved the grant from federal coronavirus relief funds on September 17, following a recommendation from the governor's Strengthening People and Revitalizing Kansas (SPARK) Task Force.

Grant money will pay for immediate needs, such as personal protective equipment and additional technology. The money also will be used to expand online services, making it easier for people to apply for a marriage license or watch a virtual court proceeding.

Court operations

The largest portion of the grant—$3.35 million—will help courts comply with public health guidelines during the pandemic.

The grant will pay for:

- plexiglass shields, masks, hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes, and cleaner to protect court users and staff in court offices and courtrooms;
- additional equipment to expand our capacity for virtual court hearings that provide easy public and media access to court proceedings; and
- temporary funding for five information technology employees through December 2020 to help courts with immediate and expanding needs for videoconferencing, internet streaming, and audiovisual equipment.

Specialty courts

For the several judicial districts that operate specialty courts—including drug, behavioral or mental health, truancy, and veteran's treatment court—regular, frequent contact is needed to address underlying reasons a person becomes involved in the criminal justice system.

Grant funding will allow these courts to purchase smartphones and tablets for continuous, reliable access to remote meetings between specialty court team members and court participants. Consistent contact makes it more likely participants will remain in their treatment programs and communities, meeting two primary objectives of these specialty courts.

Online marriage license portal

A new marriage license portal will allow a couple to apply online for a license. The applicants will be able to use digital signatures, upload required documents, and pay the marriage license fee.

Before the pandemic, a couple seeking a marriage license would appear in person at a courthouse to swear an oath and submit

information and identification to court staff. When the pandemic forced courts to limit in-person service, courts found a temporary solution for processing applications using encrypted email. The portal will replace that temporary solution.

Text notification system

During the pandemic, courts have had to reschedule court hearings to manage the number of people in a courthouse at one time. The text notification system will allow courts to quickly communicate changes to court participants who ask for the alerts. Messages could include information about newly scheduled hearings, reminders of hearing dates, and payment notifications. It will be automated through the centralized case management system currently being installed.

Similar text notification systems used in other state court systems have reduced failure to appear rates and the need to reschedule missed hearings.

Virtual court directory

An online virtual court directory will provide a central location for anyone to access a virtual court proceeding open to the public. The portal will list judges by judicial district and provide links to livestreamed court proceedings and dockets.

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