Judicial branch awarded $1.6 million grant to help ensure Kansans' access to justice

TOPEKA—The Kansas judicial branch was awarded $1.6 million from the state's Federal Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Funding Program to help pay for technology improvements that will provide broader digital access to justice and allow courts to conduct more operations remotely.

The grant will help pay for:

- remote technology equipment and software, including mobile hot spots, cell phones and service plans, laptop and tablet computers, computer accessories, webcams, printers, and software;
- videoconferencing and virtual private network licenses;
- a new web portal to allow people to seek protection orders without visiting a courthouse;
- public access computer terminals to allow self-represented litigants access to virtual court proceedings; and
- a centralized email system to allow the secure transmission of court-related documents, data, and messages.

"The grant comes at a critical time, and it will help us accelerate modernizing Kansas courts," said Chief Justice Marla Luckert. "We've been working to digitize and centralize case processing the last several years, often with limited resources. Despite our progress, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly showed us how much more needs to be done."

The judicial branch mandates electronic filing for attorneys and is implementing a statewide **centralized case management system** that will be used by all state courts. But until recently nearly all court proceedings and services still required in-person meetings.

The pandemic forced courts to respond quickly. The immediate challenge was shifting to virtual court proceedings and equipping court staff to work remotely. Lack of technology was one challenge. Judges and court staff also had to develop new remote processes that met statutory and constitutional requirements and then help attorneys, parties, and the public adapt to them.

Court resources vary widely among the state's 105 counties. The state pays for judicial branch salaries, but operating costs of district courts fall to individual counties. Some county governments robustly support court technology infrastructure, but others do not have the resources to do so. In addition, more than half of the state's courts serve rural areas, where reliable internet service is sometimes unavailable.

Some courts were able to adapt to the new challenges more quickly because they had the resources. Others need additional support, which the grant funding provides in part.

Remote technology equipment and software

District courts require technology and software to process cases remotely and for most or all district court staff to telework. The grant will help courts pay for computers, cell phones, mobile hot spots, and other technology and software needs.

Branch-wide Zoom license and VPN access

The Office of Judicial Administration negotiated a statewide enterprise license option with Zoom for court videoconferencing. It will provide a Zoom account for every judge and each courthouse. It also covers virtual private network (VPN) licenses that allow teleworking personnel to access the judicial network.

Web portal to file for protective orders

The pandemic emphasized the judicial branch's dependence on paper-based, in-person processes for some court users and some case types, such as requests for orders of protection from abuse, stalking, sexual assault, or human trafficking.

The grant will help pay to create a scalable, accessible, and mobile-friendly web portal where a person seeking a protection order is guided through an online interview and the answers are used to populate forms a judge will review before granting an order.

People who need these orders will no longer have to visit the courthouse in person to file the required paperwork, a process that places these vulnerable individuals at risk.

Courthouse computer terminals for self-represented litigants

Grant money will allow courts to place computer terminals in courthouses or other public facilities and dedicate them to self-represented litigants who do not have equipment or internet access to appear for remote proceedings.

Centralized email service

A centralized email service for all judicial branch personnel will allow the secure transmission of court-related documents, data, and communications between district courts and centralized judicial staff in the Office of Judicial Administration.

Other funding resources

The state grant money will enhance other funding sources the judicial branch is using to modernize court services. The Kansas Supreme Court and the Office of Judicial Administration recently devoted about $750,000 in Court Improvement Program grant funds and fee funds to help district courts upgrade technology. However, that funding is insufficient to meet all district court needs.

The judicial branch continues to pursue other grant funding opportunities to strengthen digital access to justice and remote operations.

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