

E-filing to expand to DeSoto, Harrison, Holmes, Yazoo Chancery Courts

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Chancery Courts in DeSoto, Harrison, Holmes and Yazoo counties are expected to be next to test electronic filing of court documents.

The Mississippi Supreme Court in a May 26 order signed by Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. authorized expansion of the Mississippi Electronic Courts (MEC) pilot project to the Chancery Courts of DeSoto, Harrison, Holmes and Yazoo counties. Madison, Scott and Warren counties were the original tests sites.

Chief Justice Waller said, "The expansion of the pilot program is the next logical step in the development of an e-filing system that can be used on a statewide basis."

The pilot project so far has focused on civil case applications. The May 26 order also authorized MEC to develop and test the criminal component of the e-filing system. Testing of a criminal records e-filing model is expected to begin in the Circuit Courts of Madison and Warren counties.

The electronic filing system allows attorneys to file documents or read court records via the Internet 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Members of the public may view electronic documents via the Internet.

The Supreme Court in a separate order signed May 26 addressed public access to records via MEC. The court set a \$10 annual registration and renewal fee. MEC will charge 20 cents per page to view electronic court records in participating jurisdictions. Fees are effective July 1.

Subscriber fees will be retained by MEC to help fund system operation. Page viewing fees will be split between clerks' offices and MEC.

Public Access to Mississippi Electronic Courts (PAMEC) is similar to the federal court records subscriber-based access portal known as PACER. PAMEC at the end of May had 2,533 registered users, including 1,703 attorneys and 830 non-attorneys, according to MEC Project Director Calvin Ransfer.

Registration and other details about MEC are available at this link: <http://www.mssc.state.ms.us/mec/mec.html>

The MEC e-filing system is modeled on the one used in the federal courts. The Mississippi Supreme Court in June 2007 entered into an agreement with the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts to study the feasibility of adapting the federal trial court case management and electronic filing system for use in state courts.

Chancery Courts in Madison, Warren and Scott counties already require attorneys to file documents electronically. Circuit Courts of Madison and Warren counties and the County Court of Madison County also utilize e-filing in civil cases.

While a timetable has not been announced, evaluations are expected to begin soon of the needs of the Chancery Courts of DeSoto, Harrison, Holmes and Yazoo counties and their readiness to use electronic filing. Chancery Clerk's filing systems are a mix of high-tech and old fashioned in those counties. Chancery records in Holmes and Yazoo counties are paper

files. DeSoto and Harrison counties use digital imaging, scanning paper files into an electronic database.

Harrison County on its own, independent of the MEC program, is nearing completion of a system which can provide electronic viewing of Chancery Court records via the Internet, said Chancery Clerk John McAdams.

Chancery Courts in DeSoto and Harrison counties were added to the pilot to expand the geographic reach of the program, and to make e-filing available in areas with heavy case loads and large numbers of attorneys, according to Ransfer and MEC Counsel Clint Pentecost.

Fast growing DeSoto County saw 3,569 cases filed in Chancery Court in 2010. Harrison County had 6,039 cases filed in 2010, according to the Administrative Office of Courts.

In Harrison County, which has two judicial districts and two courthouses, "logistically, it will save lawyers time," McAdams said. "Obviously it's more convenient. It's something that will benefit all the parties, the judges, the staff, attorneys and clerks."

The move from a vendor provided electronic records system to the MEC system will produce a savings for the county, McAdams said.

Participation in the MEC program will add e-filing capability to Harrison County's digital records system. Harrison County purchased a digital imaging system in 2004. Chancery records dating to 1998 have been scanned as digital images in the Second Judicial District, and the First Judicial District's digital records go back to 2003, McAdams said. Under the existing system, the clerk's staff scans the paper files into a digital database.

"It obviously reduces manpower and hours of chasing the paper," McAdams said of the county's current electronic records system.

DeSoto County Chancery Clerk W. E. "Sluggo" Davis said he has been interested in technological innovations since he became clerk in 1988. He has been waiting eagerly to join the pilot project.

"I appreciate getting to be part of this program. Don't tell me why we can't do something. Just tell me how we can make it happen," Davis said.

Senior Chancery Judge Percy Lynchard Jr. sees attorneys from Grenada, Oxford, Tupelo and Memphis representing clients in court in Hernando. "I can see a lot of miles saved, a lot of time and clients' dollars saved by e-filing," Judge Lynchard said.

Holmes and Yazoo counties are part of the 11th Chancery District, as is Madison County. Adding Holmes and Yazoo counties to the pilot will allow MEC to test potential efficiency of using the system in a multi-county district. Chancellors Janace Harvey-Goree and Cynthia Brewer already operate paperless in Madison Chancery Court.

Judge Goree, senior chancellor, said, "The thing that is attractive to me is that I can access my files 24-7. I can dispense with matters 24-7."

She recalled a recent case involving the arrest of a person who had walked away from court-ordered treatment. She was called at 8 p.m. with a request for an order to allow the man to be detained. She was able to electronically access the court file and sign an order from her house. She looks forward to being able to expand that capability to Holmes and Yazoo counties.

Holmes County Chancery Clerk Dorothy Jean Smith is eager to incorporate the technology. She recently installed scanners to image documents. She expects her staff to begin training later this month.

Smith expects to maintain a dual system until further order of the court, keeping paper files and electronic images. She looks forward to being able to operate paperless in the future. Records have outgrown available space, with old files stored off site. There's a delay when old records must be retrieved from a different building.

"Because we are small, we just don't have the space, and it doesn't make sense to build a building to hold paper," Smith said.

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