

Public access to Mississippi Electronic Courts system begins Aug. 27

August 24, 2009

Public access to electronically filed court documents in Madison County Chancery Court becomes available Aug. 27.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Mississippi Electronic Courts (MEC) system is scheduled for 10 a.m. Aug. 27 in the En Banc Courtroom at the Gartin Justice Building, 450 High Street in Jackson. Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr., Madison County Chancery Court officials and MEC staff will demonstrate the electronic filing and case management system and answer questions.

The media is invited. The MEC demonstration will be webcast live on the State of Mississippi Judiciary website, www.mssc.state.ms.us.

Madison County Chancery Court began accepting electronic filings of court documents July 22 in the first live operation of the MEC pilot project.

Work is expected to begin soon to adapt the e-filing system for use in Chancery Courts in Scott and Warren counties, said MEC Project Manager Calvin Ransfer.

Work is also expected to begin soon to adapt the case management system for use in circuit courts, with Madison County Circuit Court scheduled as the first circuit court to test the MEC system.

The Mississippi Electronic Courts electronic filing and case management system is modeled on the system used by federal district courts. The system will allow attorneys to file pleadings and retrieve documents via the Internet, and make court records more accessible to the public. Public access to documents will be similar to that in the federal PACER system. It is hoped that the system can be offered to all the chancery, circuit and county courts in the state in the future.

Chief Justice Waller, who has led the project development since its inception in 2004, said the e-filing system will improve efficiency. "We are optimistic that this system will allow seamless access by attorneys and the public across the different jurisdictions of our state," he said.

Chief Justice Waller said that improved public access will improve public confidence in the judiciary. "When the public can see what we are doing in our courts, there is greater confidence in the judiciary," he said.

Attorneys will have the capability to file documents 24 hours a day, seven days a week via the internet-based system. Documents are automatically docketed as part of the filing process and are immediately available electronically through user accounts. The system will provide quicker and cheaper delivery of documents and allow for easier tracking of case activity. Less space will be needed for records storage by court clerks and attorneys.

Madison County Chancery Clerk Arthur Johnston and his staff have worked with MEC staff to adapt, test and revise the system.

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Johnston said, "From my perspective as clerk of the court, the biggest benefit will be improved efficiency. MEC will allow our judges much greater access to, and control over, their dockets. It gives them the ability to rule and enter judgments more quickly – and ultimately dispose of cases more timely."

Johnston said that lawyers "will gain instant access to all pleadings in a case as well as the ability to know immediately when an adverse action has been filed against their clients.

"The most important benefit, though, may very well be for litigants and the general public," Johnston said. "MEC brings vastly improved access to case materials, so much so that a trip to the courthouse to receive court documents, in most cases, will become unnecessary once the system is in full use."

Electronic filing of court documents has been voluntary for attorneys in the Madison County Chancery Court since July 22. Mandatory electronic filing goes into effect in Madison County Chancery Court on Sept. 15 for all new cases and for pleadings filed in cases commenced on or after May 15, 2008, according to an order entered by Chancery Judges Janace Harvey-Goree and Cynthia Brewer. The chancellors may direct that e-filing be used in other, older active cases.

The initiation of lawsuits will continue to be done via traditional paper filings, said Clint Pentecost, counsel for the MEC project. The paperwork will be scanned into an electronic document in the office of the clerk. Subsequent documents will be filed electronically.

Attorneys who wish to utilize e-filing must register and set up an account. Any member of the public who wishes to view an electronically filed court document via the Internet will be required to set up a user account in the Public Access Mississippi Electronic Case Management system, PAMEC. Online registration is available at the MEC web site, <http://www.mssc.state.ms.us/mec/mec.html>. One-time registration will cover any Mississippi trial court which utilizes e-filing.

No fees will be charged to view documents during the pilot program. A page viewing charge is expected to be adopted at a later date. The amount of fees has not yet been set.

The Supreme Court in May 2007 entered an agreement with the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts to study feasibility of adapting the federal trial court electronic filing system and related PACER public access system for use in state courts. Development of the state e-filing and case management system has been accomplished with the assistance and support of the office of the Madison County Chancery Clerk, the Mississippi Department of Information Technology Services (ITS) and the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts.

The Madison County Chancery Clerk's office in May 2008 began testing a modified version of the Case Management/ Electronic Case Filing system used in federal courts.

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Chancery Court was chosen as a starting point, since chancery documents are very different from anything which would be filed in a federal court.

Chief Justice Waller said, “The Chancery Court was the hard piece of the project because there is no parallel in the federal trial courts.”

More information, including answers to frequently asked questions, registration, and Administrative Procedures, may be found at the MEC web site, <http://www.mssc.state.ms.us/mec/mec.html>.

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