

Courts in Tate, Yalobusha and Panola counties begin e-filing

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Courts in Tate, Yalobusha and Panola counties are joining the statewide electronic filing system, Mississippi Electronic Courts.

Tate County Circuit Court began accepting voluntary electronic filing of court documents on July 22, and e-filing will become mandatory on Aug. 17. The Chancery Court of Tate County is already fully electronic, having started mandatory e-filing June 1.

Yalobusha County Chancery Court began accepting voluntary e-filing on July 15, and e-filing will become mandatory on Aug. 17.

Panola County Chancery Court will join MEC with voluntary e-filing beginning Aug. 3, and e-filing will become mandatory on Sept. 8.

With the addition of Yalobusha and Panola County Chancery Courts, the MEC system will be utilized in all six counties of the Third Chancery District. Chancery Courts in DeSoto, Grenada, Montgomery and Tate counties already use electronic filing. Geographically, the Third Chancery District is the largest court district in the state to implement e-filing in all counties. The district stretches about 100 miles, from Winona to Hernando. It also has the second highest volume of cases filed among the state's 20 Chancery Court districts, according to 2014 data collected by the Administrative Office of Courts.

"This represents another milestone in the judiciary's utilization of technology not only to increase efficiency in the operation of our courts, but also to improve access by attorneys and citizens," said Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr., who has spearheaded implementation of electronic filing. "I look forward to a time when all of our trial courts will utilize MEC's uniform e-filing system. A litigant should have access to all courts of our state with one log-in, one password and one set of rules."

Tate County Circuit Court is the second Circuit Court in north Mississippi to utilize e-filing. Clay County Circuit Court has used e-filing for the past two years.

Senior Circuit Judge Robert P. Chamberlin said, "We are very excited about the implementation of MEC in Tate County. We will hopefully be able to expand the implementation throughout the Seventeenth Circuit Court District over the next year or so. I believe this technology will greatly increase our efficiency."

A total of 31 trial courts use the MEC e-filing system. The MEC program, under the supervision of the Mississippi Supreme Court, is utilized in 19 counties.

Other e-filing trial courts include the Chancery Courts in Holmes, Lauderdale, Leake, Lowndes, Oktibbeha, Wayne, Webster and Yazoo counties; Chancery and Circuit Courts of Clay County; and all trial courts – Chancery, Circuit and County Courts – in Madison, Harrison, Hinds, Rankin and Warren counties. The Mississippi Supreme Court and Court of Appeals also utilize e-filing.

Courts realize maximum e-filing efficiency when an entire district utilizes the same technology. Electronic access to court records allows judges and court staff to have quick access to records from courts all over the district. E-filing of court records allows judges and attorneys to file and view documents 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from any computer.

The Third and Eleventh Chancery Districts are the only multi-county court districts in the state to utilize the MEC system across the entire district. The Eleventh Chancery includes Madison, Holmes, Leake and Yazoo counties.

Senior Chancery Judge Percy Lynchard is eager to have electronic access to documents in

all six counties of the Third Chancery District. He reviews his next day's docket and case files from home. Electronic access allows him not only to read the records and prepare for hearings, but also lets him know if there's something which needs to be addressed immediately.

"It's going to be a real pleasure because you won't have to worry about taking court files anywhere," Judge Lynchard said. "All you will need is one laptop, as opposed to 30 files."

E-filing means less paperwork for clerks and staff. For instance, daily data reports will be generated automatically, replacing voluminous data reports that some clerks submit manually to the Administrative Office of Courts, said MEC Director Lisa Counts.

E-filing is more efficient for attorneys and their staffs, Counts said. The rush to the courthouse to meet a 5 p.m. paper filing deadline is replaced by electronic filing from the attorney's computer, and is considered timely up until midnight unless a judge sets a different deadline. And when a judge schedules a hearing at a location other than the courthouse where the case is filed – common practice in multi-county districts – having electronic records eliminates the need for an attorney or courier to drive to the courthouse where the case is filed, check out the file and take it to the hearing in another county.

The MEC staff is working to implement electronic filing systems in other areas of the state.

MEC Project Director Catherine Horton said, "The emphasis is to complete districts, but also to begin implementation for the many courts that have requested to utilize MEC. This will give MEC a presence in numerous other districts."

Noxubee County Chancery Court has begun to train clerk's office staff in operations of the MEC system in anticipating of implementing e-filing soon. E-filing already is used in four of the six counties in the Fourteenth Chancery District: Clay, Lowndes, Oktibeha and Webster County Chancery Courts.

Training for clerk staff is scheduled in August for chancery clerks' offices in Clarke and Stone counties. Hancock County Chancery Court is expected to begin work to implement e-filing in the fall. Implementation in those counties would complete district-wide MEC systems for the Eighth and Twelfth Chancery Districts.

MEC staff will give a demonstration of e-filing capabilities for officials in Washington County Chancery Court on Aug. 10. Sharkey County Chancery Court officials discussed MEC and watched the e-filing demonstration July 17. Issaquena County Chancery Court officials also are interested. Washington, Sharkey and Issaquena counties currently use paper filing systems in their Chancery Courts, Horton said.

The MEC system is adapted from the electronic filing system used in federal district courts. MEC technology and training are provided free to counties. The only cost to local courts is computer hardware and Internet access.

The public has easier access to court records via MEC. However, some public files, such as those in divorce cases, are not accessible via the Internet to anyone other than attorneys directly involved in the litigation. Those public files may be viewed in the office of the Chancery Clerk.

The cost to view documents via the Internet includes an annual \$10 registration and renewal fee and a viewing fee of 20 cents per page. Register at this link: <https://www.pamecapps.mec.ms.gov/onlinereg/>.

The link to the trial court portal is at <http://courts.ms.gov/mec/mec.html>. User questions may be directed to the MEC Helpdesk at helpdesk@mec.ms.gov.

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