

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Priorities and Strategies for Maine's Judicial Branch

2015-2017

The priorities and strategies of this strategic plan are designed to support and advance the mission of Maine's Judicial Branch.

Judicial Branch Mission

To administer justice by providing a safe, accessible, efficient and impartial system of dispute resolution that serves the public interest, protects individual rights and instills respect for the law.

The following priorities and strategies are not intended to reflect every anticipated action of the Judicial Branch in the next three years, but are established to set priorities for use of resources and to guide the expenditure of time and funding for this period.

Strategic Priority 1:

Access to Justice

Strategic Priority 2:

Effective & Efficient Delivery of Justice

Strategic Priority 3:

Public Trust & Confidence

Strategic Priority 1: Access to Justice

A justice system that is safe, accessible, affordable, and understandable.

Issue

Ensuring access to justice for all citizens is an enduring concern for Maine's Judicial Branch. Indeed, it is an increasingly challenging goal as courthouse safety and access concerns persist, as society's needs become more complex, as greater numbers of litigants are unrepresented, and as funding for the courts and their responsibilities remains limited. The Access to Justice Priority for 2015-2017 focuses on the issues of courthouse safety and physical access; informed participation in court proceedings by all litigants, including those who are unrepresented; and the needs of linguistic minorities.

Strategies

- Continue the expansion of entry screening to 100% of courthouses.
- Survey court facilities to identify those that do not meet mobility access standards and prepare a capital improvement plan.
- Review and revise court procedures to eliminate unnecessary appearances, and reduce costs and expenses, so that litigants may more readily obtain legal representation at reasonable fees.
- Support the Justice Action Group and Maine State Bar Association in their efforts to increase pro bono lawyer assistance for unrepresented litigants including a plan for:
 - Pro and low bono assistance in family cases.
 - Legislative and IOLTA support/funding for law school tuition waivers or loan forgiveness for students and lawyers committing to work in underserved Maine communities following graduation and bar passage.
- Expand language access by improving services through national and regional collaborations, surveying courts to determine unmet language access needs; prepare a proposal and seek legislative funding if necessary.

Strategic Priority 2: Effective & Efficient Delivery of Justice

Providing a prompt, responsive, and effective system of dispute resolution.

Issue

Central to Maine's Judicial Branch mission is the prompt and efficient resolution of the nearly 250,000 new cases that are brought to its courts each year.

These cases involve individuals and businesses seeking dispute resolution, children and vulnerable adults in need of protection, and state and local governments fulfilling their responsibilities to effectuate and enforce state and local laws. The sheer number of cases and the increasing complexity of their issues demand efficient and effective case processing.

This strategic priority focuses on implementing new technology to improve service to court users and the public; increasing judicial resources to provide prompt court access in priority cases; improving the processing of criminal, family, and regulatory matters to reduce delays and costs to the parties; and reforming the criminal pretrial justice system to reduce incarceration costs, improve outcomes, and decrease risk to public safety.

Strategies

- Issue an RFP, select a vendor, and develop a statewide implementation plan for a new digital case management and e-Filing system.
- Work with the Governor and Legislature to increase the number of judges and support staff available for prompt resolution of cases.
- By July 1, 2015, complete the statewide implementation of the Unified Criminal Docket, replacing the current two-tier system with a single, more efficient process for criminal proceedings.
- Develop a plan to expand objective risk assessment and protocols in pretrial detention assessments, including a reinvigorated focus on domestic violence prevention.
- Contingent on increased judicial resources:
 - Design and launch a pilot initiative for expediting child-related proceedings.
 - Design and create pilot for more rapid judicial review of state and local administrative decisions.

Strategic Priority 3: Public Trust, Confidence & Impartiality

A justice system that engenders public trust and confidence through impartial decision-making and accountability for the use of public resources.

Issue

Unlike the Legislative and Executive Branches, the Judicial Branch has neither the power of the purse nor the sword. The only real source of its power is the respect of the people.

Public trust and confidence in the judiciary is a critical aspect of the rule of law and the enforcement of judicial decisions. In addition, lack of such trust and confidence may affect funding decisions and result in a limitation on the public's access to justice. State and national surveys of public attitudes indicate that the work of courts is poorly understood and that significant percentages of the public have concerns about the timeliness and cost of bringing a case to court and about fairness of treatment concerning diversity.

The Maine Judicial Branch must continually evaluate its performance, strive to improve its efficiency and service, and work to enhance the public's understanding of its operations and the vital role it plays in our democracy. The focuses of this strategic priority are the implementation of new technology that will provide management information essential for performance evaluation and transparency, reform of family law process, and enhanced public communication.

Strategies

- Improve data reliability and collection. Design and develop plans for regular and ad hoc management information reports to be produced by the new case management system to improve data reliability and collection.
- Study and implement improvements to family law procedures including better identification of cases in which the children would benefit from a guardian ad litem, more efficient use of time, and enhanced training and quality reviews.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive and coordinated Judicial Branch communications and outreach plan to promote greater public understanding

of judicial process, improve citizens' ability to make effective use of judicial resources, and improve civic education and understanding of the judicial system and the challenges courts face.

- Design, test, and implement an evaluation procedure to obtain regular and detailed feedback from litigants, attorneys, and other stakeholders.