

Chief's Column – August 2024
The Honorable Lisa T. Munyon
Chief Judge
Ninth Judicial Circuit Court

Accessing Justice at the Ground Level

The Ninth has a long history of leveraging technology to improve the administration of justice. We've led the way with Virtual Remote Interpreting, creating one of the nation's most sophisticated on demand simultaneous remote interpreting systems. Couple that with our digital evidence presentation and video conferencing systems and you get a fully integrated technological courtroom that streamlines hearings, improving access to justice. But for all our focus on technology *in* the courtroom, we failed to fully utilize it *on the way to* the courtroom.

Nearly 8,000 people walk through the doors of the Orange County Courthouse on an average day. Of that number, only a fraction is here for a hearing. The majority come looking for services provided by the Clerk of Court. Others are looking to talk to someone in the State Attorney or the Public Defender's office. Then there are those who inadvertently come here looking for Orange County or State services that are provided at other locations. Regardless of why people are here, they face the same challenge once they pass through security: figuring out how to get to where they need to go.

Enter wayfinding.

Historically, wayfinding at the courthouse was strictly analog. Volunteers manned the information booth in the rotunda and signage was scattered about the building. People were left to navigate this huge tower with minimal guidance or assistance. Our first foray into utilizing technology for wayfinding didn't occur until 2016 when we installed digital docket boards flanking the information booth. Vertical screens display the daily docket while the touch enabled horizontal screens display navigational information.

After establishing a digital wayfinding system, we shifted our focus back to the courtroom and kept it there. Of course, COVID had a hand in determining that focus, but only to the extent that it dictated what technology we brought in. However, while COVID spurred the development of virtual technology, revolutionizing access to justice, it also gutted our volunteer program, hindering access at the ground level.

This concurrence of enhanced and diminished access to justice proved just as problematic as you might expect. We spent decades exploring every technological avenue and implementing every viable option to improve the courtroom experience, only to realize that these advancements are irrelevant if people don't know how to get to there. Having grossly underestimated the role wayfinding plays in accessing justice, we needed to switch our focus from the courtroom to the rotunda. We needed to build access from the ground up.

Building a wayfinding system that can support everyone walking into the courthouse is no small task. It isn't as simple as just telling someone where to go for a passport, what courtroom their hearing is in, or that the tax collector's office is in another building. The people are as diverse as the reasons that brought them here. Some are residents, others visitors. Some are overwhelmed and frightened, others angry and contentious. Some have limited English proficiencies, reading abilities, or comprehension capabilities. Our wayfinding system needs to serve everybody—no matter who they are, what type of assistance they need, or whether their business is with the court, the county, or our constitutional officers. Fortunately, we had the framework in place—it just needed an upgrade.

Staffing the information booth became our first priority. Rather than rebuild the volunteer program, we hired our first *court user liaison*. The position's sole responsibility is to serve everyone who walks into the courthouse and that service goes beyond providing directional information. The liaison is the first point of contact for many, informing their impression of our courts. During these interactions, people feel heard and valued. And if they are here for a proceeding, they often feel a bit more comfortable knowing that their access to justice is our priority.

Recognizing that one person can't serve the thousands who come to the courthouse, it was paramount to invest in technology. Starting with the existing touch screens, we launched a fully interactive navigational wayfinding app in June. The user-friendly interface—available in English and Spanish—allows users to search the daily docket, look up services, or access the FAQ. Acknowledging that any navigational system is only as good as the information entered, we chose software that allows for updates in real time. No matter whether someone prefers to use technology or speak with the liaison, we've built a wayfinding system that can truly serve everyone.

We've come a long way utilizing technology on the way to the courtroom. And we've come a long way prioritizing accessing justice at the ground level. As of my writing, we're preparing to test free-standing touch screen kiosks. It's my hope that, when you read this, we'll be preparing to install those kiosks in the rotunda. The next time you are at the Orange County Courthouse, check out our digital navigation wayfinding system. Let us know what you think. And be sure to stop by and say hi to our court user liaison.