

Early Lessons Learned in Communications

A Pandemic Resource from CCJ-COSCA

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced courts to make rapid-fire and constant decisions that required immediate messaging and distribution to a variety of audiences. The pandemic exposed strengths, weaknesses, and challenges in court communication systems. This document summarizes the most noted methods that worked well and identifies areas in which communication systems need improvement.

The RRT Communications Workgroup conducted a survey of the Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA) and the Conference of State Court Public Information Officers (CCPIO) in late May of 2020. Seventy-three court professionals responded. Survey responses provided the basis for this document.

As the crisis continued, the Communications Workgroup developed a second survey at the end of the summer to gather additional information about communications and funding-related activities and needs. That survey was disseminated in September 2020 to members of COSCA and the Conference of Court Public Information Officers (CCPIO).

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

Continuity of Operations Plans (COOP) are valuable, but they must be updated at least annually to include the latest technology available and to review/identify what positions make up the COOP team.

Social media. Courts that had established and approved social media policies fared better. Social media proved to be a valuable and necessary communication tool to reach all audiences in all jurisdictions. Courts that did not have an existing social media policy said that was a disadvantage.

Court audiences. In a crisis, courts have a variety of audiences that need immediate information and often different messaging. Courts should identify their most effective mode of communication to reach each audience.

- Internal audiences: Judges and court staff. Most internal communications were issued by a chief justice or state court administrator multiple times a month.
- External audiences: Attorneys, litigants, witnesses, jurors, and the public
- Intergovernmental representatives: Governor's office and legislative branch, law enforcement, corrections, social services agencies, and more. Contact information for intergovernmental and interagency representatives is usually maintained by the court administrator or manager. Courts use a variety of channels to communicate with the bar about court operations.

Mobile-friendly websites reach more people and increase access to court communications.

Most effective and common modes of communication:

- Court website. Mobile-friendly websites reach more people and increase access to courts
- Social media
- Statewide emergency text notification system
- Email blast capability. Crucial to have reliable, updated email distribution lists.
- Video channels/videoconferencing

ON COOPs AND SOCIAL MEDIA

COOPs. Courts that have COOPs in place found them useful. But many courts with existing COOPs found the need to develop new or additional plans for the pandemic, explaining existing COOPs did not:

- address the array of issues brought on by a rapidly changing environment
- include all courts in the state
- have current technology advances needed for remote work and court operations
- address the need for increased bandwidth when all government employees are working remotely
- include plan for protecting employee privacy when court phones are rerouted to employee's personal phone
- include some necessary positions/employees on the COOP team
- include public health and safety measures, such as cleaning buildings, social distancing, need for personal protective equipment
- include emergency contact persons within the Executive and Legislative branches

Recommendation: Update the COOP annually in the following areas: technology, email distribution lists, COOP team members.

SOCIAL MEDIA. Courts identified the lack of a social media policy as an unanticipated obstacle to successful crisis communications. Among the courts that did not have a social media policy in place before the pandemic, the majority said they are currently in the process of developing such policies. One court reported creating a new position to manage social media.

The benefits of having an established social media policy and plans, include:

- Staff already trained on appropriate use of social media
- Court has an established social media presence and following that will immediately receive and help disseminate information
- The most common social media platforms used by courts are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Recommendation. Courts should have an approved social media policy and an established social media presence before a crisis.

Most common social media platforms used by courts are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

LOOKING BACK: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Successes

- Websites that featured information about the court's pandemic response on a dedicated page
- Website with alert capability to notify users about developing court news
- Established relationships with local media
- Teleworking policy already in place with available and appropriate equipment
- Capability to send mass emails and text messages to establish distribution lists
- Collaborations between jurisdictions to produce a unified message
- Good leveraging of local partnerships, already in place, such as with the county's or city's health department

Most respondents reported receiving reimbursements from federal and state coronavirus relief funds for pandemic-related expenditures. Most reimbursements covered technology expenditures associated with providing remote court services during the pandemic, such as computer equipment. Only one court reported receiving reimbursement for personal protective equipment expenditures.

Most respondents indicated that they were pursuing additional grants or external funding from state and federal agencies for pandemic-related expenditures.

Challenges

- Speaking with one voice to deliver a consistent, coordinated message to internal and external audiences
- Out-of-date email databases
- Lack of a court social media policy or presence, or not permitting the use of social media
- Inadequate technology and equipment to support teleworking
- Inadequate staff training on use of videoconferencing software and other remote systems
- Lack emergency contact persons in other branches and agencies

LOOKING AHEAD

The top three communication priorities identified by respondents in the next six months are:

- *Access to court services*: Share information about how the general public may access court services (e.g., view public court proceedings, file documents) and/or other legal resources.
- *Public health and safety measures*: Better educate the general public about measures the court has taken to address public health and safety concerns.
- *Jury trials*: Communicate what courts are doing to resume jury trials, including what potential jurors need to know.

Many respondents indicated that additional guidance, tools, and other resources would be helpful in addressing the above communications priorities, including:

- General [communications guidance](#) such as best practices, templates, guidelines, tools
- Examples of [court orders](#) media plans, public service announcements, and other sample communications or informational materials used in other states (particularly non-unified court systems)