

Early Lessons Learned in Communications

A Pandemic Resource from CCJ-COSCA

August 17, 2020 | Version 1



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.

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
- 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

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

Email distribution lists. Reliable, updated email distribution lists are critical to getting the court's messages out on a timely basis and to the appropriate people.

Most effective and common modes of communication:

- Court website
- Email
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Statewide emergency text notification system
- Email blast capability
- 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. 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

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

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