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Courthouse sees tech upgrades as part of statewide push

Will Vraspir wvraspir@hastingstribune.com

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A courtroom in Adams County is shown Aug. 17, following technology upgrades to the camera and audio systems made across the state as part of a courtroom technology upgrade project by the Nebraska Judicial Branch.

Will Vraspir/Tribune

The Adams County Courthouse has joined courtrooms throughout Nebraska in undergoing technology upgrades designed to make courts more efficient.

In the county courtrooms, most of the upgrades are behind the scenes, but County Judge Michael Burns said the new equipment will provide better sound and clarity for recordings. Software changes will bring the systems in line with those used in other parts of the state.

“Anything we can do to make the system better and as customer-friendly as we can,” he said.

The updates are part of a statewide initiative through the Nebraska Judicial Branch courtroom technology upgrade project.

The project aims to increase consistency between trial courts statewide in the audio-visual systems available during court. All courts will have the best quality audio amplification and capture of the court record to ensure all court participants and observers can hear proceedings.

Tech updates also will ensure all have cameras and displays that facilitate fully remote and hybrid hearings as well as the technology necessary to manage and present digital evidence.

In October 2022, Cedar County became the first in which installers from CTI Technology upgraded audio-visual equipment. Through the end of 2022 and into 2023, more and more of the state’s nearly 200 trial court courtrooms have seen their systems updated.

Courtrooms in Adams County were updated in August.

Burns praised CTI Technology for keeping to a schedule that allowed court to continue with as little disruption as possible.

“They’ve really done a nice job of making the implementation as least intrusive as possible,” Burns said. “They were very responsive and receptive to feedback.”

On the county court side, much of the components were in place from previous investments by the county.

Adams County was first of the district’s nine counties to have some of these upgrades, which Burns attributed to the late County Judge Michael Offner. Burns said Offner spearheaded the addition of television screens in the courtroom and created a PowerPoint presentation for the rights advisement to provide defendants another way to process the information.

“He was a catalyst and ahead of his time,” Burns said.

In the district courtroom, an added benefit is the use of larger video screens and devices for presenting evidence to juries during trials.

District Judge Morgan Farquhar said the upgrade’s primary benefit is to have functional audio and video for remote court hearings and remote appearances.

“Having reliable and effective remote appearances saves time and money for the parties and allows for more flexible scheduling, which in turn can advance cases more quickly,” he said.

With a large number of attorneys being appointed at county expense, remote hearings can save in travel costs to the county.

While remote appearances will never replace live court, Farquhar said, many status hearings and more mundane tasks can be handled through remote hearings. He sets aside a day each week to conduct remote hearings for the counties for which he is primarily responsible — Adams, Clay, Webster and Nuckolls.

“Remote hearings allow us to process cases more quickly and with less expense to the parties,” he said. “This results in more court time for the hearings and tasks that require it.”