

Upgrading Courtroom Technology

by Justice William Cassel and Jennifer Rasmussen

Support for the trial court system in Nebraska has always been a partnership of state and county governments. The Supreme Court has always appreciated the commitment of local county boards to this shared responsibility, especially when it came to courtrooms. Historically, the courts have relied heavily upon the counties to allocate budget dollars to maintain these courtrooms, including purchase of audio/visual systems. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic only served to underscore just how important technology is to the operations of our modern court system.

In 2021, the Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation (AOCPP) began an initiative under the direction of the Supreme Court to assist the counties with ensuring courthouses and judicial centers across Nebraska have audio/visual capabilities that will carry them into the next decade and beyond. The AOCPP is allocating up to \$5 million in funds to

help bring all county and district courts across the state to a similar level of technological capacity.

The vendor selected through the Request for Proposal process is Conference Technologies, Inc. (CTI). This company has over 25 years of experience in providing A/V installations in courtrooms and has completed work in more than 3,000 state, federal, municipal, tribal, and military courtrooms.

The AOCPP sponsored upgrades will follow National Center for State Courts best practice guidelines and are intended to achieve three principal goals:

1. Audio in the courtroom is optimized through placement of microphones in key zones which is re-broadcast over a speaker amplification system. This is to ensure all participants and observers can equally hear proceedings and that a best quality audio record can be captured when necessary.

Justice William B. Cassel



Judge William B. Cassel, of O'Neill, NE, is one of the 7 members of the Nebraska Supreme Court. He was appointed in April 2012, after having served for 8 years as a judge of the Nebraska Court of Appeals, and for 12 years as a general jurisdiction trial judge on the district court in north-central Nebraska. Judge Cassel has been widely recognized as a leader

in the use of technology as a lawyer and judge, and has chaired the Nebraska Supreme Court's Committee on Technology since 2004.

Jennifer Rasmussen



Jennifer Rasmussen has spent the last 15 years in application software development for government services and IT operations. Jennifer has been the Deputy Administrator for Information Technology with the State of Nebraska since 2013. As the head of the Administrative Office of Courts and Probation IT Division, she manages Judicial Branch technology at both the state and county levels, overseeing the


statewide case management system (JUSTICE), and administering other technology projects for court and probation offices.

TECH CORNER

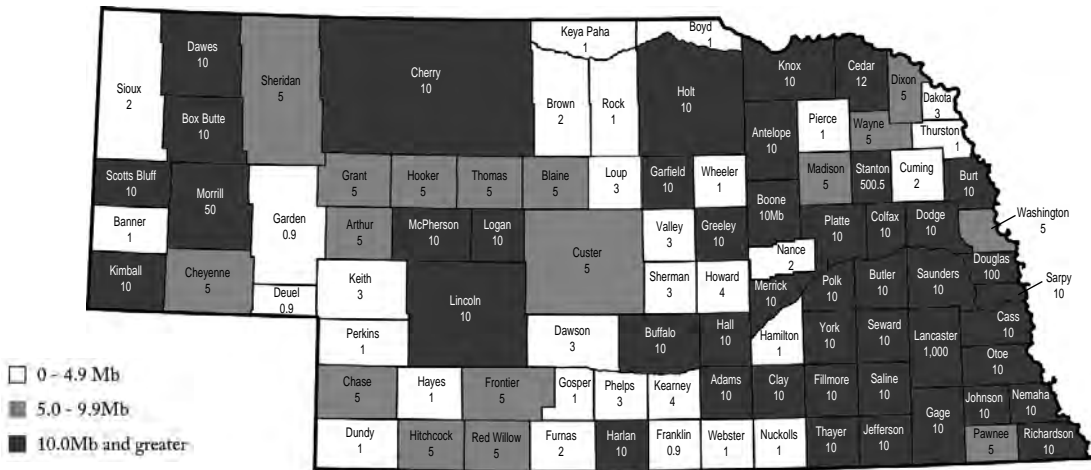
2. Multi-camera views of courtroom proceedings provide for best possible remote appearance/hybrid hearings.
3. Sufficient number and placement of display TV/monitors are installed for hybrid hearings as well as display of electronic exhibits.

Starting in the fall of 2021 and continuing into spring 2022, a CTI representative is completing on-site visits county by county to talk with local judges, court staff, and other stakeholders to create an individualized plan to replace or enhance any existing technology installed in courtrooms to get to the best-practice standard. Installations will begin in summer of 2022 and be completed by July 2023.

Another area where the Supreme Court is focused on trying to improve the trial courts' ability to leverage technology is broadband access. The judicial branch is a co-sponsor with the

state Department of Motor Vehicles in bringing a state network connection to every courthouse. In order to accomplish this, the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) puts out a request for bid to all local Internet Service Providers (ISP) requesting a connection of a certain speed or higher. ISP's can then respond with their bandwidth service availability and cost per month. Contracts are regularly re-bid and upgrades requested in a continuous process of improvement. This is evidenced by a comparison of maps from the years 2018 and 2021. In 2018, a great majority of counties had very limited bandwidth (5MB or less) with 10 MB being on the high end. Many of these were shared DSL connections and didn't guarantee the full amount of that bandwidth capacity to the court. In 2021, we see a much improved picture with only a handful of counties still remaining in that limited category and all of the service to the courthouses now on dedicated fiber connections. 

County Courthouses Bandwidth 2018



County Courthouses Bandwidth 2021

