

ROOKER REPORT

VOL. 1, NO. 1

CIRCUIT-PROBATE

FEB. 26, 1993

Dear Reader;

Welcome to the introductory issue of a planned monthly newsletter designed to inform the judicial branch of how business is being conducted at the administrative level.

It will attempt to provide information regarding changes, improvements and problems encountered by the circuit court clerk's office as it carries out its assignment of serving the courts under its jurisdiction.

Our aim is to provide information pertinent to the overall operations of the civil court system and to open up channels of communication that would promote improvements in all phases of clerical efficiency.

There will be two separate newsletters each month--one addressing issues involving the circuit and probate courts and the other for matters regarding civil and traffic litigation in the general sessions courts. While no specific date has yet been established for publication, we will attempt to make the newsletters available around the middle of each month, beginning regularly in March.

The mid-month release date will enable our various departments to compile reports on all phases of their particular operations and to make available for publication the latest statistics of interest to the judicial branch.

For example, we not only will advise you of improvements and plans for coping with future problem areas, we will report on the growth or decline of caseloads in specific categories. Ideally, this information will assist you in planning your agendas and provide an overview of our collective achievements in administering judicial services.

In this introductory installment, we share some of the changes that have been effected within our various departments during the past year and analyze (through comparison) how those changes are working. We also match up annual caseload figures and expound on new services designed to improve customer relations.

Our first report begins on the following page.

Happy reading.

--George L. Rooker

BENCH EFFORTS BRING RECORD SUPPORT PAYMENTS

CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS HIT AN ALL-TIME HIGH IN 1992, THANKS PRIMARILY TO STRONGER ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS BY THE COURTS. A TOTAL OF \$11,468,501 WAS PAID THROUGH THE CLERK'S OFFICE--ALMOST A MILLION-DOLLAR INCREASE OVER THE PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR.

BEFORE TAKING TIME TO DIGEST THAT RECORD TOTAL, REFLECT BACK A MERE FIVE YEARS TO 1987 WHEN ONLY \$7 MILLION WAS DISTRIBUTED TO CUSTODIAL PARENTS THROUGH COURT-ORDERED PAYMENT DEFINITION... QUITE AN INCREASE FOR SUCH A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME. AND WHILE NEW CASES HAVE PRODUCED A NATURAL GROWTH TREND, THE CHIEF CONTRIBUTOR--WITHOUT QUESTION--HAS BEEN A MORE SERIOUS POSITION BY THE COURTS IN DEALING WITH NON-PAYING PARENTS.

UNDER THE THREAT OF GOING TO JAIL, MORE DELINQUENT PARENTS ARE MEETING THEIR PAYMENT OBLIGATIONS, AND ARE DOING SO THROUGH COURT-ORDERED WAGE ASSIGNMENT. THAT'S WHERE THE CLERK'S OFFICE ENTERS THE PICTURE AS THE OFFICIAL KEEPER OF RECORDS AND DISTRIBUTOR OF PAYMENTS. APTLY, AS MORE WAGE ASSIGNMENTS ARE ORDERED BY THE COURTS, OUR WORKLOAD DEMAND BECOMES MORE INTENSE. IRONICALLY, WE HAVE MET THE CHALLENGE WITHOUT INCREASING OUR WORK FORCE. PERHAPS THE TERM "HUMAN WORK FORCE" WOULD BE MORE APPROPRIATE. FOR WE CERTAINLY CAN'T DISCOUNT THE PRESENCE OF OUR COMPUTER SYSTEM, WHICH TURNED THREE YEARS OLD LAST NOV. 28.

THE SECRET TO OBTAINING COMPUTER SUCCESS, OF COURSE, IS THROUGH PROPER PROGRAMMING. IN THAT RESPECT, WE TAKE THE BOWS FOR DESIGNING A SYSTEM THAT MEETS SUPPORT PAYMENT DEMANDS AND GIVES US THE FLEXIBILITY TO STAY CURRENT IN RECORD POSTING.

STATISTICALLY, BETWEEN 5,000 AND 6,500 INDIVIDUAL CASES ARE IN THE COMPUTER'S MEMORY BANK. THIS TRANSLATED TO 89,167 PAYMENTS DURING THE PAST YEAR--ABOUT 5,000 MORE THAN THE PREVIOUS YEAR. AT A MONTHLY RATE, WE ISSUED 7,581 CHECKS TOTTALLING \$955,708--UP 420 AND \$80,000 RESPECTIVELY.

WE CAN ONLY SPECULATE AS TO WHAT LIES AHEAD IN THIS AREA. IT SHOULD BECOME MORE CLEAR WHEN THE ISSUE OF COLLECTIONS IS FINALLY RESOLVED IN THE WAKE OF SURRENDER BY THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY GENERAL.

...ELECTRONIC PHONE SYSTEM STAYING BUSY

WHEN A CUSTODIAL PARENT WANTS TO KNOW THE STATUS OF HIS OR HER CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS, FINDING OUT IS AS SIMPLE AS DIALING THE PHONE. IT HAS BEEN THAT WAY SINCE OCTOBER 1991 WHEN WE INSTITUTED THE V.I.P.S. (VOICE INTERACTIVE PHONE SYSTEM) TO PROVIDE AUTOMATICALLY THE ANSWERS TO MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS REGARDING SUPPORT PAYMENTS. THE OVERWHELMING RESPONSE PROVES THAT WE MADE A WISE DECISION.

DURING THE SYSTEM'S FIRST FULL YEAR OF SERVICE, A TOTAL OF 98,557 CALLS WERE RECORDED. HAD THE V.I.P.S. NOT BEEN IN SERVICE, OUR CLERKS WOULD HAVE BEEN REQUIRED TO ANSWER 344 MORE PHONE CALLS EACH WORKING DAY, OR AN ADDITIONAL 45 CALLS PER HOUR. YOU CAN DRAW YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE PROGRAM'S BENEFITS. THE SYSTEM FEATURES TWO LINES THAT ARE OPEN 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, 365 DAYS A YEAR. BASIC INFORMATION INCLUDES THE DATE OF LAST PAYMENT, ARREARAGE AMOUNTS AND SUCH WAGE ASSIGNMENT DATA AS WHEN PAYMENT WAS RECEIVED BY OUR OFFICE AND WHEN IT WILL BE DISBURSED TO THE RECIPIENT.

(PLEASE TURN PAGE)

GUARDIANS GETTING WORD ON NEW REGULATIONS

OUR PROBATE OFFICE HAS BEGUN MAILING NOTICES TO ATTORNEYS AND CLIENTS IN CASES INVOLVING GUARDIANSHIPS AND CONSERVATORSHIPS, ADVISING THEM OF NEW LAWS THAT WENT INTO EFFECT ON JAN. 1. PREVELENT AMONG STATUTORY CHANGES ENACTED AFTER LENGTHY REVISIONAL REVIEW WERE THREE NEW ACCOUNTING REQUIREMENTS:

- 1)THE CONSERVATOR MUST FILE A STATEMENT OF PHYSICAL OR MENTAL CONDITION OF THE DISABLED PERSON AS A PART OF THE ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CLERK;
- 2)THE CORPORATE SURETY MUST ALSO FILE AN ANNUAL STATEMENT THAT THE BOND IS IN FORCE FOR THE FOLLOWING YEAR IN THOSE CASES WHERE BOND HAD BEEN REQUIRED INITIALLY, AND
- 3)A PROPOSED PROPERTY MANAGEMENT PLAN MUST NOW BE SUBMITTED IN EACH CASE AND RESUBMITTED WHEN REVISIONS ARE MADE.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN "GUARDIANSHIP" AND "CONSERVATORSHIP" HAS BEEN GIVEN NEW DEFINITION UNDER THE NEW LAW. A CONSERVATORSHIP NOW APPLIES ONLY TO THOSE PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR A WARD WHO HAS TURNED 18 YEARS OF AGE AND IS EITHER PHYSICALLY OR MENTALLY DISABLED. GUARDIANSHIP APPLIES ONLY TO MINORS.

TO ACCOMODATE LITIGANTS IN THESE CASES, FORMS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED FOR COMPLIANCE WITH THE NEW RULES AND ARE AVAILABLE IN THE PROBATE OFFICE.

...PROGRESS BEYOND THE NAKED EYE

SINCE INHERITING THE PROBATE OFFICE ON JULY 1, OUR STAFF HAS BEEN DILIGENTLY TOILING BEHIND THE SCENES TO MAKE IT CONFORM TO OUR PARTICULAR METHODS OF DOING BUSINESS. COMPLETE RENOVATION HAS BEEN MADE TO THE ARCHIVES, FOR EXAMPLE, WITH AN EYE TOWARD ORGANIZING THE FILES FOR BETTER EFFICIENCY. WE EARNED OUR CREDENTIALS IN THIS DEPARTMENT THROUGH THE TRIAL AND ERROR METHOD AS WE UNDERTOOK A SIMILAR PROJECT FOR CIRCUIT COURT CASES. BUT THE EXPERIENCE PAID OFF. THE PROBATE ARCHIVES NOW ARE IN ORDER WITH "OPEN" CASES ON ONE SIDE OF THE ROOM AND "CLOSED" ON ANOTHER.

IT WAS THROUGH THIS PROCESS THAT WE WERE ABLE TO ENHANCE OUR CASELOAD REDUCTION. IN DETERMINING WHICH CASES WENT WHERE, OUR STAFFERS REVIEWED EACH FILE SEPARATELY AND DETERMINED ITS STATUS. THIS PROMPTED US TO INCREASE OUR EFFORTS IN SENDING OUT NOTICES REGARDING THOSE CASES WHICH COULD BE CLOSED. THE BOTTOM LINE SHOWED A TOTAL OF 606 CASES BEING CLOSED IN THE JULY-DECEMBER PERIOD. THAT LEAVES THE OFFICE WITH 8,633 PENDING CASES FOR WHICH WE ARE CONTINUING AN ACCELERATED NOTICE PROCESS TO ATTORNEYS. OUR GOAL NOW IS TO GIVE THOSE ARCHIVE WALLS A BETTER BALANCE.

...MOTION DOCKET STREAMLINED FOR EFFICIENCY

MOTION DAY IN CIRCUIT COURT IS BEING CONDUCTED IN A MORE ORDERLY FASHION SINCE THE COMPUTER-GENERATED MOTION DOCKET WAS IMPLEMENTED IN JANUARY. THE NEW SYSTEM AUTOMATICALLY POSITIONS MOTIONS ON THE RESPECTIVE COURT DOCKETS IN THE ORDER THEY ARE FILED IN OUR OFFICE--BY DATE AND TIME. HERETOFORE, JUDICIAL CLERKS WERE REQUIRED TO TYPE THE DOCKETS FOR THEIR RESPECTIVE COURTS EACH WEEK. THAT TIME CAN NOW BE DEVOTED TO A VARIETY OF OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES REQUIRED OF THE CLERKS. LOOK FOR THE SYSTEM TO BE EXPANDED TO OTHER DOCKETS IN THE NEAR FUTURE.