Florida’s state courts “leading the nation” in social media

TALLAHASSEE – Long seen as the quietest branch of state government, Florida’s state courts have emerged in the last year as a national leader in social media use – particularly Twitter.

“The Florida state courts really have delved into social media in a more systematic way than courts anywhere else in the country,” said longtime Florida Supreme Court spokesman Craig Waters. “We are leading the nation with 20 out of 26 court divisions using Twitter to reach the public right now. That’s an astounding number.”

In a report sent yesterday to Florida’s Chief Justice Jorge Labarga, Waters and his staff detail the first year’s work in a state court communications plan adopted by the Florida Supreme Court in December 2015. Labarga sent the plan for implementation to a professional association of Florida court staff called the Florida Court Public Information Officers, or FCPIO. Waters is the group’s founder and its current executive director.

The goal is simple. It’s not enough that courts do justice. They also must make sure people see justice being done.

It was a mission FCPIO quickly accepted. Originally set up by a post-9/11 crisis management plan in 2002, FCPIO has evolved into a group of court communications professionals unique in the nation. No other state has anything approaching it – though many states now are studying FCPIO and the plan it is carrying out for Florida’s judiciary.

FCPIO incorporated itself as a federally recognized nonprofit in early 2007, right at the time events in Silicon Valley began shaking up the communications landscape. That was only a year after Twitter opened its doors and three years after the founding of Facebook.
But FCPIO also brings talent to the table. With representatives in every Florida state court, the group has been led by several media-skilled court officers that saw the need for statewide education and coordination with an emphasis on openness.

Waters is a lawyer and former Gannett newspaper reporter who has worked for the Florida Supreme Court for 30 years and started its public information office, its gavel-to-gavel oral argument broadcasts, and its website in the 1990s. FCPIO’s current president, Eunice Sigler of the Miami courts, is a former Miami Herald reporter and winner of a Pulitzer Prize for team coverage of the Elian Gonzalez immigration case.

The report on implementing the plan addresses other issues that include:

- **Websites.** Eighteen of Florida’s 20 circuit courts and all of the district courts of appeal currently are working toward redesigns of their websites because they are the judiciary’s most important communications tool.

- **Social media.** The Florida state courts continue to debate the pros and cons of social media because of the strict ethical limits they must shoulder. While Twitter is now broadly used, Facebook has been more controversial – and only a minority of the state courts currently use it. However, FCPIO is studying ways to address concerns and identify best practices employed by courts now using Facebook.

- **Podcasts.** Two courts in Orlando and Miami currently are using podcasts to communicate with the public, and the Florida Supreme Court soon will start its own podcasting program.

- **Media Relations.** FCPIO will continue to educate courts personnel and judges in the methods needed to work in a cooperative and respectful way with news media. And Twitter has become an important tool for getting word out to the press and the public about breaking news.

- **Community outreach.** Court outreach programs such as courthouse tours for schoolchildren, citizen forums, and public education programs remain important parts of the courts’ mission. They include outreach to elected officials, town hall meetings for residents, and innovative uses of Twitter to reach out to student groups and others.

- **Internal communications.** Proper communications with internal court staff remain important so that everyone understands the overall mission, the need to speak with a unified voice, and the ways to address problems when they arise. One important example is crisis communications with staff during hurricanes or other emergencies.

The Florida state courts’ stress on good communications rests on a near-legendary history.

“What you see now,” said Waters, “is really part of a longstanding commitment to transparency that began with letting cameras into the courts in the 1970s. It continues today thanks to several visionary judges leading the state system over the last half century. And despite doom-saying elsewhere in the nation, Florida’s courts really have had a very positive experience. Openness works.”

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