Florida State Courts to Begin Implementing New Communications Plan in 2016

TALLAHASSEE – The evolving world of communications has changed many aspects of life in the 21st century, but the foundation of public trust that courts need to carry out their mission must remain as solid as it has been for more than two centuries. The Florida Supreme Court has approved a statewide Court Communication Plan that balances both those realities.

“Florida’s courts are committed to enhancing public understanding of and support for the judicial branch as well as building and maintaining strong relationships with the other branches of state government and all our partners in the justice system,” Chief Justice Jorge Labarga said.

“Of course, any viable communication plan must strongly emphasize the need to be responsive to and even proactive with the media as reporters carry out their important work,” Labarga said. “This plan does so.”

The plan titled “Delivering Our Message” was developed with input from judges, the press, court public information officers (PIOs) and other court staff from around the state. Designed to be implemented over five years, the plan will serve as a guide for the entire branch statewide, Labarga said.

It stresses greater use of court PIOs to provide information to the press and the public about what Florida’s state courts do. Much of the plan is modeled after the Florida Supreme Court’s highly successful Public Information Office, which enters its 20th year in 2016.

The plan calls for use of communications technology and social media to the extent appropriate in judicial settings but also emphasizes the importance of age-old principles essential to any healthy communication dynamic – building and maintaining relationships of trust and training for emergencies and other high-stress cases, such as high-profile trials and hearings.

The plan was developed by the Supreme Court’s Judicial Management Council, an advisory body that includes judges, lawyers and non-lawyers. It is designed to be a user-friendly resource for the court staff and judges who will be implementing it.
Tenth Judicial Circuit Judge Olin W. Shinholser, who sits on the JMC, believes the plan will improve communication between Florida’s judicial branch and the public at large as well as court users, other parts of government and justice partners of the courts.

“It’s a very comprehensive plan that has a lot to offer to the circuits, both on a theoretical basis and a practical basis,” the Sebring judge said, adding that the more information people have about their courts the more likely they will be “to trust, use and support the courts.”

Implementation of the plan will begin in January 2016, and Florida’s court PIOs will play a vital role. The nonprofit Florida Court Public Information Officers, Inc., based in Tallahassee already has scheduled a training session in mid-March in Orlando to begin implementation.

In Miami, the chief judge of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit is also excited about the opportunity presented by the new plan.

“The work that we do in Florida’s courts is important because we touch real lives each and every day,” Chief Judge Bertila Soto said. “As we undertake this key role in society, it is extremely important to maintain active and meaningful communications with the communities we serve so they are well-informed about how to access the courts and we, in turn, are more in tune with their needs.

“This communication plan is comprehensive and well thought out and will be a vital tool to achieving that goal, especially in the areas of social media platforms, which are increasingly playing central roles in the public dialogue,” she said.

The plan identifies four strategic issues, with detailed goals and strategies outlined for each. The first strategic goal is “Enhancing Public Trust and Confidence.” Others include “Speaking with One Voice – Key Messages” and “Improving Communication Methods.” The last is “Strengthening Internal Communication.”

“As judges,” Chief Justice Labarga said, “we are excited to see Florida courts begin another chapter in our rich history of access and transparency.”

Florida has long been a pioneer in increasing public access to court information. In the mid-1970s, Florida was the first state to let cameras into its courtrooms. The Supreme Court’s first webpage went on-line in 1994 when the World-Wide Web was still in its infancy.

The Supreme Court established its Public Information Office in 1996. That office’s first major transparency program – broadcasting all high-court arguments live on television, satellite and the Web – began in 1997 and has been showcased in every high-profile case since.

Every judicial circuit has had a designated public information officer since 2003. The Florida Supreme Court began sending official tweets in 2009.

The plan can be found at http://www.floridasupremecourt.org/pub_info/documents/2016-Judicial-Branch-Court-Communication-Plan.pdf