



SHEBOYGAN COUNTY

Melody Lorge
Clerk of Courts

February 8, 2019

Honorable Members of the Sheboygan County Board and County Administrator Adam Payne,

The Clerk of Courts Office was challenged in 2018 to continue to provide timely and efficient services. Despite the fact that overall case load decreased in the number of cases filed, it was challenging because of reduced staff due to another retirement. We are fortunate to have dedicated, trained staff who continue to accomplish this.

In 2018, ordinance and forfeiture cases saw a decrease of 882 citations for a total case load of 6,821. Felonies increased by 44 cases, criminal traffic matters decreased by 30 cases, misdemeanors increased by 1 case for a total criminal case load of 2,205 cases in 2018. In total, we received filings of 14,388 cases – a net decrease of 1,070 over 2017. During 2018 the staff disposed of 14,690 cases. We processed 52 appeals and filed 234 liens and transcripts of judgment. We had a decrease of 6 jury trials in 2018, a total of 39, and the average number of days per trial decreased taking 69 days to hear them. The total jury trial cost of \$55,234 is a decrease of 25% over 2017 and an average cost of \$800 per day, an increase when compared to \$754 per day last year.

The collections of fines, forfeitures and filing fees increased by \$160,161 of the \$719,000 budgeted; due to our daily collection efforts and bond forfeitures. Of the total dollars we collected, \$2,242,248 was forwarded to the State and \$44,749 was distributed to municipalities within the County. County departments were credited with \$998,081 which is a decrease of \$32,390 in county-retained revenue.

I look forward to meeting the challenges that continue to result from the County's and State's budgets while still fulfilling our responsibilities. As a department, we will continue to look for more ways to improve efficiency and reduce costs as we have done in the past. I also look forward to continuing the partnership with the County Administrator, the County Board of Supervisors and most specifically the Law Committee, in order to provide the resources our department needs to carry out our responsibilities for the courts and the community.

Respectfully submitted,

Melody Lorge
Clerk of Circuit Courts

Mission Statement and Summary of Responsibilities

“To effectively and efficiently facilitate the administration of justice.”

The Clerk of Circuit Courts is a public official elected every four years, whose basic duties are enumerated in Sections 59.40 and 753.30 of the Wisconsin Statutes; myriad other responsibilities are scattered throughout the Statutes. The Clerk is the administrator of the Clerk of Circuit Courts Office and carries the responsibility of budgeting and administering trial court resources, developing effective policies and procedures, and maintaining competent staff.

Statutes require the Clerk of Circuit Courts Office to maintain a record of all documents filed with the courts, schedule all matters in court, keep a record of all court proceedings and collect the various filing fees, court costs, assessments, surcharges, fines and forfeitures ordered by the court or specified by statute through all means provided for by statute.

The Clerk also provides support personnel for each of the five Circuit Courts, as well as for the Court Commissioner and all outside judges who hear cases in Sheboygan County. The staff is responsible for scheduling court appearances, taking minutes in the courtroom and preparing all notices, judgments of conviction, jail and prison papers, driver’s license suspensions, juvenile placement orders and all other documentation and orders as required by statute. The Clerk is also responsible for filing and maintaining the judgment and lien docket, as well as preparing reports to many other agencies of determinations made in the courts.

Jury management is another function of the Clerk of Circuit Courts Office. The Clerk’s Office is responsible for qualifying, selecting and notifying potential jurors for service to the five Circuit Courts. Annually, in excess of 5,000 questionnaires are mailed to county residents, and from the responses four different jury pools are created for each of the thirteen four-week terms of service.

Goals and Objectives Achieved in 2018

Mandatory eFiling was implemented on July 5, 2017 for all case types except juvenile, probate, mental commitments, judgments and liens. In September 2018 we added voluntary eFiling for the last case types just mentioned. This transition continues to go smoothly and has proven to be more efficient in receiving and distribution of documents. We continue to review and streamline office procedures as needed to effectively and efficiently facilitate the administration of justice.

On March 1, 2018 Probate began mandatory eFiling for formal and informal case types..

All Attorneys are required by State Statute to eFile. Self represented litigants are not therefore we are still accepting paper documents and scanning them into the system. High volume agents filing on behalf of a business or corporation who file ten or more small claims cases per year and landlords who are an LLC are also required to eFile. The new mandatory eFiling rule does not apply to people representing themselves.

Due to another retirement in 2018 we continue to re-organize the office as a wealth of knowledge has left in the last several years. We are still training new employees and current staff learning new positions.

The sound system has been installed in all five courtrooms. We have met with the Sheboygan County Information Technology director and a vendor regarding phase two of the project adding the videoconferencing equipment to all courtrooms. We have seen a demonstration from the vendor regarding the videoconferencing capabilities. Further testing needs to be done to make sure the vendor's system will be compatible with all other agencies involved.

Budget

In 2018, our revenues increased by \$130,888 from the budgeted amounts the majority due to bond forfeitures, increased interpreter reimbursement and our daily collection efforts. We continue to face the challenge that our greatest expenditures outside personnel expense are for professional services, which are out of our control. The cost in 2018 to provide interpreters, psychologists, court appointed counsel and guardian's ad litem in criminal, juvenile, chapter 51's and family matters was \$557,119. This is an increase of \$73,227 from our 2017 expense. Our jury expense also saw a decrease of over \$17,000 from the prior year.

Once again it was our state mandated expenses that we have no control over that hurt us the most. Our expenditures were more than \$128,000 over our budget of \$2,226,000. It is the increase of revenue that helped us, an increase of \$160,161 above our budgeted collections revenue of \$719,000. The combination of the two areas resulted in a \$2,500 positive change to the fund balance. We have now seen a positive change four years in a row which continues to be an improvement. Prior to the last four years there had been no positive change in 12 years.

The 2018 budget included an approved capital outlay in the amount of \$175,000 for a much needed new sound system in all five courtrooms; replacing the twenty five year old "life exhausted" system. The sound system was installed in all five courtrooms. We are now in phase two of the project which is adding the videoconferencing equipment. A carryover of the remaining \$46,737 was approved and the project will be completed in 2019. We are hoping to have enough money to cover the cost of the equipment. If not, we will be asking for additional funding in 2020 to complete the project.

The 2019 budget of \$2,264,037 includes our tax levy of \$930,058; it contains an increase in the collections revenue. We have enforced all means of collection, which has resulted in an increase of revenue in 2018. We strive to continue to meet or exceed this goal in 2019. Our greatest challenge will be our expenses for professional services, which continue to be out of our control. With the increased property tax levy awarded us, we feel we are positioned to succeed in meeting our budget this year.

Issues and Challenges Ahead

Our foremost concern in 2019 is staff allocation and training. Since 2014 we have had eleven retirements. These long term employees retired with an average of 35 years of service. While these positions have been filled, there is always a long learning curve. This is affording us the opportunity to restructure part of the office; the time it takes to train competent personnel has placed a strain on remaining staff.

The number of pro se litigants continues to increase, creating more and more of a demand on the Clerk of Courts office for assistance in procuring forms, answering procedural questions and guiding court users through the process of litigation. Each self-represented litigant requires more staff resources than ever before, yet this is occurring at a time when we continue to operate with less staff.

Meeting our budget will continue to be a source of concern; however, this year I believe we are positioned to succeed.

Goals and Objectives for 2019

- Complete phase two of the sound system project, which is adding the videoconferencing equipment in all five courtrooms. We were informed by AT&T that due to the age of our videoconferencing equipment in our B-10/Court Commissioners courtroom, they will no longer honor a maintenance contract on this equipment. Therefore, we will also need to look at replacing this equipment. We are in collaboration with our Information Technology department to assist with researching vendors and equipment to accommodate our needs.
- On March 1, 2019 all case types will be mandatory eFiled except for restraining orders and a couple juvenile related filings.
- A new wall mounted kiosk will be installed to assist the public in researching of court related hearings.
- Determine and implement a way for prospective jurors called to serve on a jury trial to view an informational video before the voir dire process begins.
- Myself along with my Chief Deputy, plan on working together to achieve more efficiency and finding ways to improve increasing collections of our unpaid accounts. We will also continue to implement more cross training within the office.
- We will be researching and implementing the use of the State Debt Collection for unpaid accounts receivables.
- When the new phone system is implemented we plan on eliminating our current phone tree to improve customer service.
- The Clerk of Courts webpage will be reviewed and revised.

With these goals in mind, 2019 will be a challenging but rewarding year.