

From GONGWER News Service:

BAR PROPOSES COURT STREAMLINING

The state should have fewer trial judges and a unified electronic case file system, a task force of the State Bar of Michigan said Wednesday.

The Judicial Crossroads Task Force called for a review of each trial court to determine if it has the right number of judges and to, where appropriate, combine levels of trial courts. Those courts also should make more use of electronic records, both for filing from parties and for providing copies.

But the task force called for, beginning immediately, Governor Rick Snyder and the Legislature to avoid filling judicial vacancies unless the court can show immediate need for the additional judge. Officials said the move would save about \$500,000 per judgeship left vacant.

"Frankly, our court system is outdated and functions in a way we can no longer afford," said Tony Jenkins, president of the bar.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert Young Jr. also hailed the report.

"The State Bar's 'Judicial Crossroads' task force has produced a thoughtful and detailed report that merits serious consideration," he said. "As the report notes, some of our state courts simply have more judges than they need to keep up with their workload; also, many of our courts could benefit from consolidating some functions with other courts in the same judicial circuit. The Supreme Court has long urged the right-sizing of our court system and appropriate court consolidation."

Ed Pappas, an attorney with Dickinson Wright in Bloomfield Hills and one of the chairs of the task force, said the recommendations coordinate with improvement and cost savings plans at other levels of government.

"We need to stop thinking of the Judicial Branch as a stand-alone entity," Mr. Pappas said. "The work of the task force fits well into the work already underway by other leaders in Michigan."

As part of the task force work, the bar is developing a system to measure the need for judges that task force leaders said would be ready in August.

But courts also need to make better use of technology, Mr. Pappas said. For instance, more court appearances by jail and prison inmates should be done by video to both cut costs and improve safety related to moving inmates, he said.

Technology can also speed filing and providing copies of documents, he said. "Citizens and lawyers travel hours and miles to file papers and get information that could be gotten or filed electronically in seconds," he said.

But the task force said that would mean having a single case tracking system for all trial courts.

Trial courts in the past have balked at such suggestions, largely because of the cost involved in purchasing new equipment and training staff to use it.

Barry Howard, attorney with Lipson Neison Cole Seltzer and Garin in Bloomfield Hills and the other chair of the task force, said the system cost is estimated at \$30 million.

The task force also called for using technology to help those unable to afford an attorney, or trying to avoid having to go to court altogether, with an online self-help system. It also said all courts should accept the standardized state forms for various filings.

Among other key recommendations is creation of a business docket to ensure that those cases are resolved quickly.

"All too often they're put to the side because of the need to try criminal cases first," Mr. Howard said

Moving those cases to a special docket would speed action, cut costs and make the state more attractive to business, Mr. Howard said.

Going forward, the task force recommended naming a council of trial court leaders and a Justice Advisory Board that includes other stakeholders, to review the judicial system as a whole and individual courts.

The task force did not call for wholesale combination of the three trial courts - district, circuit and probate - but said that should be done in some communities where the change would make sense. Some communities have already combined one or more of those levels of trial court.