



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
OF THE COURTS
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA
94102-3688
Tel 415-865-4200
TDD 415-865-4272
Fax 415-865-4205
www.courtinfo.ca.gov

FACT SHEET

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Data Audit Pilot Project

Since the advent of state funding of the trial courts in 1998, the Judicial Council, the State Legislature, and the Governor's Office increasingly depend on operational data reported by the trial courts to the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). This data is now used to inform the planning process, make critical policy decisions, and evaluate programs. The equalization of funding to underresourced courts through the budget process and the creation of new judgeships are just two examples of policy decisions that rely on timely, accurate operational data reported by the courts.

Study Purpose and Background

At the present time, no systematic process exists to audit the accuracy and validity of the data submitted to the AOC, particularly to evaluate and review the trial courts' operational data. The Office of Court Research launched the Data Audit Pilot Project to fill this void. As the Judicial Council seeks to equalize public access to the trial courts and hold the courts accountable to specific performance standards, it is increasingly turning to operational data to measure workload, identify cost savings, ensure compliance with court orders, and monitor the caseload that is under the courts' jurisdiction. The credibility of these policy decisions depends on the credibility of the data on which the decisions are based.

Project Update

The Office of Court Research (OCR), a unit in the Executive Office Programs Division of the AOC, has been working on developing and implementing protocols for the auditing and improvement of operational data reported to the AOC by the trial courts. Operational data include, but are not limited to, the number of filings, dispositions, trials, hearings, and continuances; manner of disposition; and time to disposition. Although the Resource Allocation Study (RAS) and Judicial Needs Assessment methodologies currently only use filings data, these other data elements are important indicators of trial court workload and performance.

In 2006, OCR contracted with consultants from Sjoberg Evashenk Consulting, Inc., to develop protocols for auditing operational data and pilot test these protocols in two trial courts. Sjoberg Evashenk Consulting brings valuable experience and expertise in the operations, case management systems, and fiscal activities of California superior courts, and they have conducted a variety of operational, systems, data verification, and fiscal-related audit and evaluation projects at more than 30 of these superior courts.

OCR has contracted again with Sjoberg Evashenk to refine these auditing protocols in a number of ways, including (1) testing the transferability of the protocols to larger courts, (2) evaluating the feasibility of focusing audit procedures on a more limited number of case types or case-processing practices, (3) refining data audit protocols where necessary to capture essential elements of trial court performance, (4) reviewing how monthly Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS) reports are compiled and validated before submission to the AOC, and (5) designing an audit program that is compatible with the California Court Case Management System (CCMS).

Next Steps

OCR has already begun work on phase II of the Data Audit Pilot Project by testing the auditing protocols in additional trial courts. The project team will also begin providing limited technical assistance to courts that experience problems in compiling or validating monthly JBSIS reports.

OCR has also begun to meet with CCMS development staff to transfer knowledge related to technical and data specifications in CCMS. OCR plans to work with development staff for CCMS-V4 to ensure that the system will be able to generate auditing and data quality reports for court operational data.

Contact:

Chris Belloli, Senior Research Analyst, Office of Court Research, Executive Office Programs Division, chris.belloli@jud.ca.gov