



Cowlitz County jury system upgrade allows jurors to respond via email

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Cowlitz County jurors can now respond to summons, ask to be excused and fill out questionnaires online using with a new juror notification system that went live this week.

County officials say the web-based system will save time and money and free up some clerks' time for other duties.

The new system, by Canada-based Courthouse Technologies, was first used to summons jurors this week. There were some minor hiccups, and a new bar code check-in system couldn't be used Wednesday. By the end of the week, though, things were running relatively smoothly, officials said.

The system replaces a computer-based system that was more than 30 years old. It was antiquated and clunky, said Clerk of Superior Court Bev Little, and it wasn't clear how much longer the system would even be supported by its company. This system will serve both Superior and District courts and will allow District Court clerks to check in their own jurors.

Courthouse Technologies is used by most other counties in the state and allows jurors to respond to summons 24 hours a day by email. Eventually, the system may allow the jury clerks to go almost paperless in record keeping, Little said. (Traditional mail-in replies still are accepted now).

Judges can also log into the system to review dismissal requests and questionnaires as they arrive.

Courthouse Technologies also verifies juror addresses more often than the previous system, which should mean fewer returned summons, Little said. The county estimates it will issue 13,500 summons this year, more than 500 every two weeks.

Eventually, the county can add other features, such as a self-check in kiosk for jurors and a robo-call notification system. Little said officials wanted to get the basic system up and running before paying for additional features.

With the new system, jury notifications are expected to cost \$51,400 a year, which includes Courthouse Technologies' fee of \$1.68 per summons, mailing costs and a court clerk working half-time with the system. The previous system cost \$75,300, including staff time to print and fold mailings that will now be sent out by the contractor. The jury clerk also had to work full-time under the old system. With the new one, Little hopes to be able add some other duties that have been scaled back due to budget cuts.

Clerks still are learning the system and Little asked the public to be patient with any growing pains that occur.