

**DELIVERING  
OUR MESSAGE**  
*COMMUNICATION PLAN*  
**FOR THE JUDICIAL  
BRANCH OF  
FLORIDA**

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*Year Four Implementation Report & 2020 Pandemic Communications*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Court Communication Plan for the Judicial Branch of Florida took effect in January 2016 after unanimous approval by the Florida Supreme Court in late 2015. The plan was developed with input from judges, court public information officers and other court staff from all around the state; the plan was proposed to the Court by the Judicial Management Council, an advisory body that includes judges, lawyers, and non-lawyers. The JMC designed a plan to help Florida's courts, no matter what their size or local attributes, improve their communications with all their audiences.

**Florida's courts have taken the communication plan very seriously and accomplished a great deal since 2016.**

Implementing the plan today involves court staff in the 20 judicial circuits, five district courts of appeal, the Florida Supreme Court and the Office of the State Courts Administrator. Many are members of a statewide non-profit education group, the Florida Court Public Information Officers (FCPIO). Members and other court staff meet annually for an education meeting. Meetings cover a variety of topics including: public information, court communications, crisis communications, emergency planning, communication planning, social media, media relations, web content, education and outreach, and other timely topics. FCPIO holds regular monthly conference calls to work together to advance goals outlined in the plan.



# A MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUSTICE CHARLES T. CANADY

Five years ago, none of us knew that the full potential of Florida's then-untested Court Communications Plan would be shown because of a global tragedy. The COVID-19 pandemic was the unexpected test that has proven the Plan's worth – and then some.



Chief Justice Charles T. Canady

In implementing that plan, Florida's court communications staff around the state has shone on a national stage. Our court public information officers went above and beyond the call of duty in the pandemic.

They made sure the public could see and understand what we were doing to keep the courts at work administering justice. The attached report details their achievement.

As I attended Zoom meetings of national court organizations during the pandemic, I was struck by the many words of admiration from around the nation for Florida's Plan and the way it was implemented. Because of it, our state courts at every level were able to quickly and effectively launch communications campaigns as the pandemic worsened.

We were able to show the public and state leaders that our courts continued to work diligently. We could conduct only limited in-person proceedings, but we opened our operations to an unprecedented level of virtual transparency through social media and other newer forms of communication.

That is how we continued our proud tradition of open government here in Florida. While our judges made sure justice was administered despite the restrictions brought on by the pandemic, our communications staff made sure people could see this hard work as it was happening.

This statewide effort has made Florida a national model in the field of court communications.

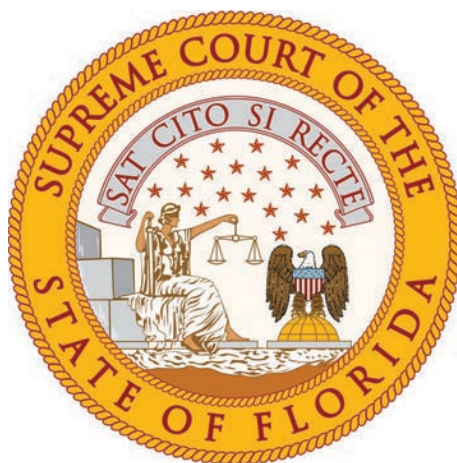
## A Message from Chief Justice Charles T. Canady, con't.

During the pandemic, roughly 60 Florida court public information officers at all levels of our state courts system worked hard as a statewide team. They coordinated their activities in monthly Zoom meetings arranged by their professional association and presented a unified and consistent statewide message to the public we serve.

Their robust collegiality in this effort is one of the high points of our overall pandemic response. I commend our PIOs for their success.

Five years ago, then-Chief Justice Jorge Labarga launched our Communications Plan with one overarching goal. In today's world we must do more, he said, than simply achieve justice. We also must make sure people see that justice is being done.

It is clear to me that we have achieved this goal. During a difficult time, we made sure everyone saw that our state justice system rose to meet the challenge of a global pandemic. Justice was done – and it was seen to be done – in one of the most trying of times.



# A MESSAGE FROM JUSTICE JORGE LABARGA

## "JUSTICE MUST BE SEEN"

When the Florida Supreme Court approved the Communication Plan for the Judicial Branch of Florida in late 2015, my message then, as Chief Justice, was "Justice must be seen." This four-word phrase comes from an old English legal case often cited on questions of judicial ethics. But its message applies equally to today's world of information overload when messages about public trust and confidence in the courts can get lost in all the online noise and disinformation.

During my time as Chief Justice, I traveled the state championing the Plan's cause – the idea that courts must deliver our message and play an active role in communicating good information about ourselves to the public. We must show the determined efforts we make to achieve justice. If we do not make sure the public hears this message, no one else will, not in a world where "traditional" news media are increasingly endangered.

These efforts are not a one-time event. They must be an ongoing, continuous communications campaign, one that takes planning and execution to succeed.

Today, courts are faced with misinformation and disinformation attacks. Whether inaccurate information is intentional or not, we must make sure that our constant goal is to guarantee that justice is seen – that people view the courts as positive parts of the day-to-day life of the communities they live in.

The Plan, approved by the Judicial Management Council, advocated using social media as a tool to communicate our message. Convincing court leaders that social media was (and still is) a good idea was not easy. But as you'll read in the report, the effort proved its worth when the 2020 pandemic hit our courts.



Justice Jorge Labarga received the FCPIO Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017.

## A Message from Justice Jorge Labarga, con't.

Florida now is a national model in how to effectively use communications in so many ways, but especially in surmounting an extended crisis. What we have done in the past five years will be studied by court managers for many years to come.

The Plan prepared our courts to respond quickly during all emergencies. Social media channels created because of the Plan have helped our courts meet the challenges of hurricanes, high-profile cases, and a global pandemic very effectively. Today, our courts rely on social media during emergencies to inform the public about changes to court operations, services, and procedures. Social media is the single most effective communications tool courts have to reach large audiences without being “filtered” by someone else. And it is the go-to tool for countering disinformation that sullies public trust and confidence in our judiciary.

I wish to thank everyone who stepped up to my "Justice must be seen" challenge five years ago. We are a better court system. The fruits of that effort have made Florida a major leader in the emerging field of court communications.



Justice Labarga with 2016 FCPIO Board members: (l-r) Stephen Thompson (6th Judicial Circuit), Francine Walker (The Florida Bar), Michelle Kennedy (18th Judicial Circuit), and Eunice Sigler (11th Judicial Circuit).

# A MESSAGE FROM JUDGE NINA ASHENAFI RICHARDSON JMC EDUCATION & OUTREACH COMMITTEE CHAIR

In 2014, I had the opportunity to chair the Judicial Management Council's Education and Outreach Committee to develop a statewide communication plan for the judicial branch of Florida. I had no idea how fruitful this effort would become, but now, seven years later, I am truly inspired by the significant and measurable progress our courts have made.

At the time, my fellow committee members included Judge Olin Shinholser, Tenth Judicial Circuit; Judge Benjamin Garagozlo, Brevard County; and several staff members from the Office of the State Courts Administrator. The extraordinary effort by the committee, the Judicial Management Council, and then Chief Justice Jorge Labarga to shepherd the revolutionary plan from development to implementation shows the importance of court communications in Florida.

The plan began with a simple vision: *Deliver Our Message*. Committee members understood the importance of speaking with one voice, promoting the good works of judges and courts, and using new tools and technology to deliver our message. The success stories you read in the following pages result from a coordinated, statewide effort to develop a "**Culture of Communication**" in Florida.

Today, court communications is emerging as both a specialty and a necessity in the overall system of court management in the U.S. and elsewhere. Florida's Communication Plan has become a national and international model for others to follow. I think we can confidently say that Florida is leading the way thanks to our efforts to implement and sustain the goals outlined in the Plan.

I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to everyone in our court system -- from chief judges to

Florida's court public information officers to court technology officers and other court staff -- who supported communication efforts over the years. Additionally, I very much appreciate the Supreme Court Public Information Office and the Florida Court Public Information Officers for the tremendous work that has gone into implementing and promoting the Communication Plan.



2021 FCPIO Lifetime Achievement Award recipient  
Judge Nina Ashenafi Richardson.



# 2019 Implementation Report: Delivering Our Message

The Year Four Implementation Report focuses on overall efforts to improve court communications. As directed by the Communication Plan, this fourth and final annual report on implementation of the plan draws on the assessments of Florida's Court Public Information Officers. In 2020, the PIOs described their court's outreach efforts during 2019 along with their assessment of crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Public Trust & Confidence

It is important that communication by all courts in Florida strengthens the public's trust and confidence in our court system. Courts rely on public trust and confidence as the source of their effectiveness. Public confidence in the judicial branch is directly related to the courts' ability to fulfill their mission. However, people don't trust what they don't understand. Therefore, educating the public about the judicial branch is one important component of increasing support of court-related initiatives that allow the courts to operate more effectively. The judicial branch will fulfill its mission most effectively when members of the public are able to use its services. Finally, the Florida judicial branch must engage the public in order to identify and meet public needs. Building relationships with all audiences increases trust and confidence in our system.

Public Trust and Confidence questions were asked to assess gains made by courts since 2016.

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: "Do you believe anything you have done in improved communications and outreach has improved public trust & confidence?"*

"I believe the working relationships we have fostered with the members of the media have helped increase our coverage. When court proceedings are seen, the workings of the justice system become more transparent, and that fosters public trust."

"Yes! Anytime the circuits provide positive information as it relates to the circuit/Judges, it should improve public trust and confidence in the court system."

"The educational outreach that the circuit does through the Chief Judge, judges and court administration has helped increase communication with the public, legal community and justice system partners. Hosting legal and community forums provides the Court with a unique opportunity to educate about the Judicial Branch and its role as the third branch of government. These opportunities allow our judges to highlight the importance of the Courts in resolving citizens' disputes and emphasizing access to justice with a timely and fair disposition."

"Yes, the ability to communicate directly with our audience has allowed the Courts to provide timely information about the operation and responsibilities for the judicial branch. This ensures true and accurate information is circulated."

"I believe our Facebook page continues to provide positive coverage of what's happening in the courts, even if none of it has anything to do with individual cases. Also, I freely give out my cell phone number, to the media and public alike, so questions can be answered anytime."

"Through our ongoing communication efforts, we have increased the accessibility of court information to potential court users. The use of social media gives users ease of access to the courts. By providing an unvarnished look at our judges, we humanize the judiciary."

"Regular Twitter postings concerning the operation of court programs and the engagement of judges/Court staff with community groups helps foster public confidence in the operation of the Judicial Branch."

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: "Do you believe anything you have done in improved communications and outreach has improved public trust & confidence?"*

"We make it a priority to respond to all media inquires and requests as quickly as possible. We don't want to see the media say in their reporting "we reached out to the courthouse for a comment or explanation but haven't heard back from them." Even when we can't comment we always take and return their calls. This indirectly builds the public's trust and confidence."

"In the months after Hurricane Michael the Circuit used traditional press releases, social media accounts, and the circuit website to communicate updates on facilities and proceedings in the two counties where the courts were operating from an alternate facility. We strived to communicate through any means available to make sure the public was aware that the Courts in the affected counties were up and operating, even though they were in alternate facilities."

"Yes. The transparency of streaming all of our oral argument live, and our continued interaction with the public at various in and out of town events, allows the public to see justice in action."

"Judging by the type of entities and individuals that follow us on Twitter and like particular posts, our outreach activities on Twitter have improved public trust and confidence. We definitely notice and appreciate the positive feedback that we receive on our posts related to community improvement events and services."

"As the Court continues to organize high school groups' visits to the courthouse to attend oral argument sessions, students have the opportunity to learn about the judiciary as they interact with judges and court staff."

"The Chief Judge presented on the State of the Court to several Bar groups and the Bench and the Bar gathered at least quarterly at each of the court facilities for "Java with Judges". In addition, several judges participated in educational events at local high schools and middle schools and hosted several Mock trial events and competitions. It is proven that the public's trust and confidence increases when judges get out in the community and engage with its citizens."

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: "Do you believe anything you have done in improved communications and outreach has improved public trust & confidence?"*

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"Yes, making the courts more accessible and understood in the public's view. Our annual outreach event, Your Courts Up Close, was a successful community event. We had triple digit attendance to the events. Various court partners were invited to present on topics ranging from navigating the court system, how systems work, taking a case through the system and volunteer opportunities."

"Our circuit's communications efforts have improved the public's trust and confidence by getting through to more people via social media. By utilizing several methods of communicating about courthouse events, we have seen more engagement by members of the community. Adjusting our message and/or outreach methods by keeping in mind the audience, I believe more members of the public better understand the courts' role in government."

"Anytime that the Chief Judge, a judge or the TCA communicates our message to members of the public, that improves the trust and confidence in the system by showing that we are being transparent and open."

"I think that putting the faces of the judges forward on our website and Facebook, demonstrating their work by posting opinions on Twitter, helps with public trust and confidence."

"Yes, improvements to our website. Justices speaking to groups, attending special events. Increasing our social media presence with relevant, timely, and historical posts. Professional, uniform photos of justices."

"I believe being transparent on social media about the events happening at the courthouse helps improve public trust and confidence. We continue to use social media and other communication tools to make sure we are reaching as many people as possible with our messages. We ensure that the public has access to the courts and that people get the answers they want when visiting for tours, mock trials, or Q&A with judges. We have released annual reports now on an annual basis and made them available to the public. Newsletters continue to be shared with the public and local stakeholders as well."

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: "Indicate the top five most effective communication tools used in your jurisdiction to distribute court information to increase public trust and confidence."*

<i>RANKING</i>	<i>TYPE OF COMMUNICATION</i>
#1	Website (22)
#2	Judicial Outreach in the Community (17)
#2	Twitter (17)
#3	Court Tours (15)
#4	Facebook (9)
#5	Newsletters (6)

*Note: 25 courts responding. (Number) indicates how many courts selected the option.*

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: What have you achieved under the auspices of the communication plan that would have otherwise not occurred?*

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- The communication plan resulted in greater focus on the importance of conveying information about who we are and what we do, and gave us a framework within which to focus our efforts. The communications plan also prompted our first efforts in social media.
- The establishment and coordination of the Media Committee for the Fourth Judicial Circuit which former Chief Judge Moran initiated which has been continued by Chief Judge Mahon and Trial Court Administrator Stelma. Prior to a high profile trial, the Media Committee is convened to explain expectations for the trial and to answer questions on logistics and coordination. The Media Committee Chair serves as the liaison between the media and Chief Judge and Trial Court Administrator. This is an important collaboration by the Court to help coordinate the media.
- This has enhanced media relations in the circuit overall. The media is versed in court policies and procedures for requesting permission to cover courtrooms, trials, etc. During the pandemic with courthouse restrictions on access, the media has been updated on policies and procedures through our website.
- Social Media / Podcasts / Website Upgrades
- A new County funded position
- The communication plan brought more awareness for the need to open more lines of communication.
- Making the larger community aware of Court events and the wide range of issues that Courts are called upon to consider.
- Developed relationships with community partners to improve the image and effectiveness of court operations as a whole.

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: What have you achieved under the auspices of the communication plan that would have otherwise not occurred?*

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- The communications plan has served as a framework, prioritizing communication goals.
- Regarding outreach and communication, our organic approach has naturally built a path of success on which we have fluidly progressed through building to our communication toolbox. Any subsequent successes are viewed more as naturally occurring building blocks that propel us to the next level of our communication plan. To really answer this question, all of our achievements could and should be brought back around to the very beginning, perhaps to the first time a Judge offered an attorney advice about research or explaining a ruling in an order- this could have created an idea that there is a need for education or training; or back to when a law librarian offered assistance to a pro se litigant seeking a case law reference- this could have evolved into our Pro Se division. Without these early examples of outreach and communication, we would not have been able to progress to any of what we have now achieved: Online media resources that we make available through our website and social media; to our various lunch & learns that we produce and host for the judiciary, law community and our staff. In considering all of this, what we view today to be our best achievements in communication may never have occurred if not for the small, long forgotten instances that occurred at the very beginning.
- Working with the other PIO's and circuits. Seeing how they handle specific situations and issues... as well as borrowing and mirroring some of their successes and innovations.
- An active website, social media presence, greater media spotlight on court programs.
- The circuit would probably have not ventured into the social media arena.
- Intern outreach, forging communications, hosting students onsite to learn about careers in the courts. (Lunch and learn type of events)

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PUBLIC TRUST & CONFIDENCE

*Q: What have you achieved under the auspices of the communication plan that would have otherwise not occurred?*

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- The acceptance of social media as an outreach platform has helped our court's relationship with the public immensely. By using social media for real-time communications, it adds a level of transparency to the courts which I believe helps to foster trust and understanding with members of our community.
- A cross functional event was held with court partners for problem solving courts. The several day training event brought court partners together for learning and networking.
- Created informative social media posts and graphics explaining the judicial branch and courts. Created a media policy. Improved relations with the local media by giving them courthouse tours and providing information about our local court system. In order to improve access to courts, we decided to redo our website so it was more user friendly to the public and attorneys.
- The expanded use of social media. We were approved to use Twitter before the communication plan, but since 2016, the supreme court has expanded to add Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. We also began a podcast. Adding these communication channels broadens our reach and has hopefully increased the public's knowledge about our work and history. We have worked hard to offer a human face and behind-the-scenes look of the Court to help make a connection with the public. Hopefully, this leads to improved public trust and confidence.
- Our Circuit was opposed to Facebook prior to implementing the communications plan. Facebook has since turned into a very effective communications tool during emergency situations. I did not foresee how quickly the public, the legal community, and our employees would count on the Court's Facebook page for updated information. This has been an unforeseen, but none the less desirable consequence.



# COURTS & SOCIAL MEDIA

## A GAME CHANGER

Perhaps the greatest success of the communication plan is the approved use of social media for courts. Social media is one of the most powerful and cost-effective tools for sharing the court's message.

Since the 2016 release of the branch-wide communication plan, Florida courts at all levels have implemented social media policies and developed their own social media accounts, which they use for communicating information about services provided, for pushing case-related postings and high-profile case information, for increasing public trust and confidence in the judiciary by improving understanding of the judicial process, and for communicating during crisis situations.



# COURTS & SOCIAL MEDIA: A GAME CHANGER

*Goal of social media: Meeting people where they are. Meeting expectations. Advancing public trust and confidence. Driving traffic to websites. Keeping courts relevant.*

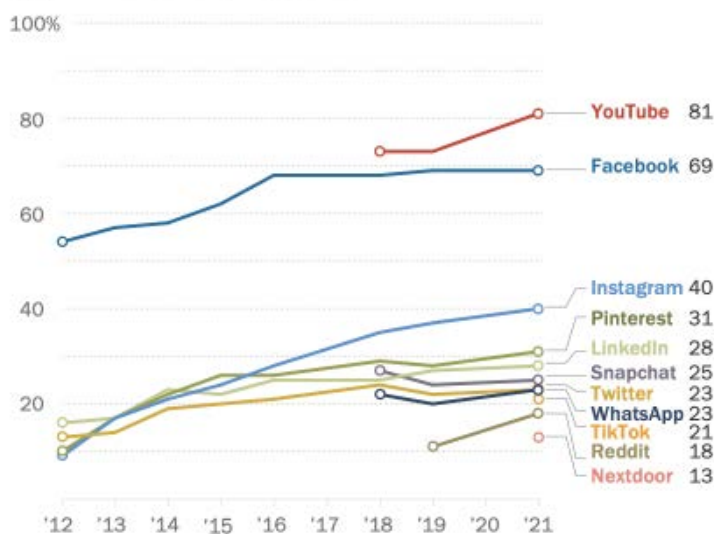
Florida’s courts widely use Twitter (93 percent of the courts—19 trial courts, each district court, the supreme court and OSCA—have Twitter accounts), or at least have a Twitter account to use in an emergency, such as an unexpected court closure.

Facebook is the second most popular platform (48 percent of the courts—nine trial courts, two district courts, and the supreme court and OSCA —have Facebook accounts) followed by the use of YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and podcasts.



## Growing share of Americans say they use YouTube; Facebook remains one of the most widely used online platforms among U.S. adults

% of U.S. adults who say they ever use ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp; pre-2019 telephone poll data is not available for Reddit. Pre-2021 telephone poll data is not available for TikTok. Trend data is not available for Nextdoor.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021. "Social Media Use in 2021"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

These accounts proved their value during several major hurricane events over the last few years and gave court PIOs critical experience in using social media specifically for crisis communications. When the global pandemic struck in 2020, because they already had a variety of active social media platforms in place, the PIOs were well-positioned to communicate quickly and efficiently both with internal and external audiences. ([Link to the branch’s social media accounts by court.](#))

# COURTS & SOCIAL MEDIA: A GAME CHANGER

*Goal of social media: Meeting people where they are. Meeting expectations. Advancing public trust and confidence. Driving traffic to websites. Keeping courts relevant.*

*Q: "How does your court use social media?"  
Top 5 responses below.*

<i>RANKING</i>	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA USE</i>
#1	Emergency/Crisis Communication (18)
#1	Share Court Facility Information (18)
#2	Promote Events (17)
#2	Share Photos of Events (17)
#2	Post Job Opportunities (17)
#3	Educate the Public (16)
#4	Promote Programs or Services (14)
#4	Highlight Individual Judges or Staff (14)
#5	Explain Processes & Procedures (12)
#5	Highlight Tours & Outreach Events (12)

*Note: 25 courts responding. (Number) indicates how many courts selected the option.*

# USING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE PANDEMIC

## SURVEY OF FCPIO MEMBERS

*by Stephen Thompson, PIO, Sixth Judicial Circuit*

In 2020, FCPIO members were surveyed about social media use in their court. Answers revealed what was widely suspected: social media use and success is directly related to PIO staffing. Courts with a full-time public information officer tend to use social media most. Courts without a full-time public information officers tend to do less.

Another finding that emerged from the survey results was that, while some court entities were essentially one-man bands, with one person responsible for social media, often the PIO and others enlisted the help of court administrative staff located in various counties within a particular circuit, perhaps by asking that some photo be taken and sent to the social media administrator with some information. For those circuits with more than one courthouse, this is obviously an excellent idea.

Most, but not all, types of social media posts changed once the pandemic hit. And, to an extent, court administrative staff responsible for social media posts were hamstrung by virtue of working remotely, a development that precluded them from traveling from courthouse to courthouse to take photographs for, say, Facebook.

In any event, here are examples of those types of social media posts that did not change: The introduction of new judges, judges and court staff winning recognition, court closures due to weather or holidays, and job postings when a freeze wasn't in effect.

An example of a social media post that went by the wayside: Since courthouses were in effect closed as of March 2020, there were no tours or presentations for the public, so circuits that typically would have featured these on social media did not. There was, however, one significant example of a court replacing real tours with virtual ones -- the Florida Supreme Court. Finally, there were the types of social media posts ushered in by COVID-19.

Most court entities created specific spaces on their web sites or social media accounts for coronavirus-related topics, including chief judges' operational plans and Zoom instructions and protocols, and, in some cases, their social media platforms referred back to their web sites. At least one circuit rewrote the Florida Supreme Court administrative orders related to COVID-19 in laymen's terms, then provided the links to the supreme court's administrative orders (AOs) themselves.

Other courts just posted the AOs. A half-dozen circuits or so, and the Florida Supreme Court, took the extra step of producing videos describing the measures taken at individual courthouses, or, in the case of the Florida Supreme Court, the statewide ramifications of COVID-19, to keep staff, judges and the public safe while the administration of justice continued. Some videos were posted on a court entity's web site, some on their YouTube channel. As was the case before the pandemic, there were those among the public who reacted negatively to these efforts, often by commenting on social media.

One circuit, responding to the survey, noted the importance of, and the challenges associated with, keeping the public informed about less-than-ideal events, such as positive COVID-19 cases in a particular courthouse.

**Courts with full-time public information officers tend to use social media most. Those without a full-time public information officer tend to do less.**

## Using Social Media During the Pandemic: Survey of FCPIO Members, con't.

It should probably be noted that, with the work required to keep the public informed about the coronavirus taking up so much court administration time, some court entities opted to discontinue, if only temporarily, pre-canned social media posts touching on routine legal terms, various factoids, or historical points of interest.

**The lessons learned are invaluable. And all are poised to do an even better job the next time around if we're unfortunate enough to go through such a crisis again.**

But even with the additional public information work created by the pandemic, the state courts did receive significant help. Specifically, circuit courts and district courts of appeal throughout the state were assisted throughout by the Florida Supreme Court and OSCA, both of which worked to keep all informed not only about the various supreme court administrative orders and workgroup recommendations regarding the coronavirus, but also about significant statewide changes, such as one touching on the appeals process, or a period

emphasizing a particular function of the courts, such as mediation week. To that end they often provided graphics to make the various messages more easily understood, and uniform statewide.

The Florida Supreme Court and OSCA also highlighted work being accomplished by courts throughout the state by tapping into their social media accounts for interesting posts, and served as a clearinghouse during the COVID-19 pandemic, informing the public about the various reopening phases the circuits were in.

All in all, all court entities did a yeoman's job in using social media or their own web sites to communicate swiftly to the public changes in local operations, the ramifications of Florida Supreme Court administrative orders, and measures taken with the cooperation of their stakeholders to keep the public as safe as possible while the administration of justice continued, albeit in limited form, during the pandemic. The lessons learned are invaluable. And all are poised to do an even better job the next time around if we're unfortunate enough to go through such a crisis again.

# USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COURT CRISIS COMMUNICATION

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2020 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*by Craig Waters, PIO, Florida Supreme Court*

In the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, social media like Twitter and Facebook proved to be the single most important component of crisis communications for many courts. The Florida State Courts' approach to the crisis under their 2016 Communications Plan has become a national model because of its early and carefully planned use of social media even before the first COVID-19 cases were reported.

This finding was one of the highlights of research done by a Rapid Response Team (RRT) for communications created in the spring of 2020 as a joint project of the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators. It was confirmed in a nationwide survey of court judges and staff conducted by the RRT during the summer of 2020, several months into the pandemic. And it shows a path going forward in which even more courts will use social media for communications in the future, especially to meet a crisis.

These survey results concluded that courts with previously approved social media accounts run by trained and experienced staff fared far better when the pandemic hit. Some of the surveyed courts described their lack of existing social media as an unanticipated obstacle to successful crisis communications considering the problems that would arise. Many scrambled to set up social media platforms for use once it became obvious that the pandemic was a long-term crisis rather than a short-term one.

One reason is now obvious. COVID-19 quickly pushed courts away from traditional means of interacting with the public and into the “virtual” online realm. This occurred in several ways. Faced with restrictions on in-person gatherings, most courts moved away from face-to-face meetings and toward videoconferencing using relatively new tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and similar software. Social media fit in well with the new regime of “social distancing” suddenly thrust upon courts by public health guidelines.

This trend was augmented by the economic wallop of the pandemic. Traditional news media were among the most hard-hit industries as the economy began to lag in 2020.

News organizations were left no choice but to make even more cutbacks than had occurred before. To meet revenue shortfalls, newspapers and television stations cut staff coverage, limited news content, and closed bureaus. Court news coverage always had been a low priority, and it became even lower as the pandemic progressed.

This added to an information vacuum. The dearth of news reporting about the legal community grew quickly worse as the pandemic persisted for months. Many courts were left with no choice but to communicate their own crisis messages directly to the public. They no longer could rely on traditional news media to transmit the message for them.

**Twitter and Facebook proved to be the single most important component of crisis communications for many courts.**

Among the best tools for doing so are social media, especially when social media posts link back to more detailed material on court websites. Other useful methods of court pandemic communications cited in survey results included smartphone text messages and emails sent directly to end users.



## Using Social Media for Court Crisis Communications: Lessons Learned from the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, con't.

These texts and emails also usually including links back to court websites. The most commonly used social media platforms cited in survey results were Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube – all of them in use in Florida long before the pandemic.

Florida's approach to court use of social media and crisis communications was favorably noted in the survey reports. Since 2016, Florida's state courts have operated under a statewide Court Communications Plan unanimously approved by the state Supreme Court after development by the Judicial Management Council. The plan is implemented on an ongoing basis by Florida's professional association of court PIOs, called the Florida Court Public Information Officers (FCPIO).

Under this plan, courts at all levels had implemented social media policies and developed their own social media accounts long before the crisis hit. These accounts had proved their worth in several major hurricanes prior to the pandemic. So, FCPIO had crucial experience in using social media specifically for crisis communications.

Florida's courts especially use Twitter and Facebook to distribute general crisis news. Posts there are written to be shared on social networks, taking advantage of the ability of social media items to spread in a "viral" way from friend to friend and from group to group. This increases their impact in a manner much like computerized "word of mouth."

For example, the communications staff of The Florida Bar are members of FCPIO and routinely share the crisis social media posts of the state courts both to their own separate social media accounts and in publications like the Bar News newspaper. This sharing allows the information to spread much more deeply into the legal and judicial communities than otherwise would occur. And this ability to directly target the communities most affected by the crisis makes social media platforms of special value.

There are other factors contributing to the exponential or "viral" reach of social media messages. By 2020, for example, the Florida Supreme Court had the largest number of Twitter followers (more than 17,000) and Facebook

## Using Social Media for Court Crisis Communications: Lessons Learned from the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, con't.

followers (more than 18,000) of any court in the nation. Demand during the pandemic increased those numbers to nearly 19,500 for Twitter and nearly 21,000 for Facebook - astonishing numbers compared to other courts in the nation. Supreme Court communications staff routinely share crisis-oriented social media posts from Florida's lower courts to their own subscribers, further broadening their reach into the target populations.

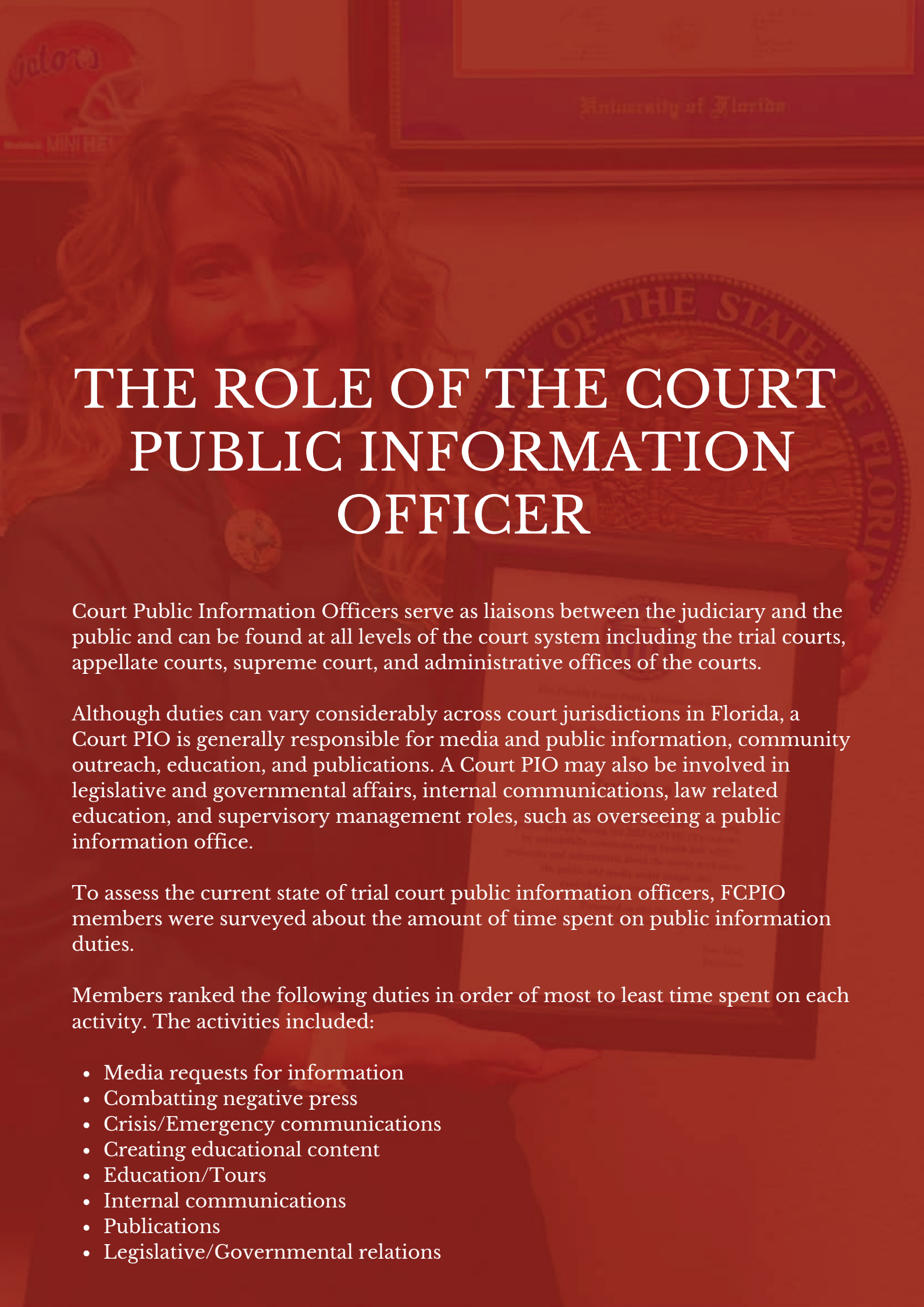
As another factor, a large percentage of Florida Supreme Court Twitter and Facebook followers and friends consist of members of other governmental bodies, crisis coordinators, media organizations, and other "influencers" in the state's communities. By "influencing the influencers," the Florida Supreme Court helps get word out widely about developments in the crisis. It also helps set the tone for governmental transparency even in a time of crisis.

It is clear from these developments that social media now have become crucial for court crisis communications.

In 2020, courts that either lacked social media policies or forbade the use of social media reported they were left at a disadvantage as the pandemic worsened. Developing quick and uniform crisis messaging was cited as a critical factor in meeting the challenge.

Crisis messaging that worked best used social media and other digital means of communications that linked people back to timely and more detailed information on court websites. Thus, the RRT's survey results suggested that court crisis planning in the future should have a communications component that includes an ongoing use of social media coordinated with website content. Florida was cited as the prime example of a successful approach.





# THE ROLE OF THE COURT PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

Court Public Information Officers serve as liaisons between the judiciary and the public and can be found at all levels of the court system including the trial courts, appellate courts, supreme court, and administrative offices of the courts.

Although duties can vary considerably across court jurisdictions in Florida, a Court PIO is generally responsible for media and public information, community outreach, education, and publications. A Court PIO may also be involved in legislative and governmental affairs, internal communications, law related education, and supervisory management roles, such as overseeing a public information office.

To assess the current state of trial court public information officers, FCPIO members were surveyed about the amount of time spent on public information duties.

Members ranked the following duties in order of most to least time spent on each activity. The activities included:

- Media requests for information
- Combatting negative press
- Crisis/Emergency communications
- Creating educational content
- Education/Tours
- Internal communications
- Publications
- Legislative/Governmental relations

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PIO DUTIES

<i>RANKING</i>	<i>PIO DUTY</i>
#1	Media Requests
#2	Crisis/Emergency Communications
#3	Internal Communications
#4	Publications
#5	Education & Tours
#6	Creating Educational Content
#7	Combatting Negative Press
#8	Legislative/Governmental Relations

*Q: "Has your circuit experienced an increased demand from media?"  
(Note: 20 judicial circuits responding)*

Yes	No
14	6

*Q: "If Yes, Indicate all areas that apply."  
Top Three (3) Responses:*

- Access to courtroom for video or photography
- Access to information or public records requests
- Interview with judges

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PIO DUTIES

*Q: "What are your overall comments about PIO Duties."*

"The PIO has the responsibility to communicate the Court's message at a moment's notice. In order to meaningfully represent that message to the community, the PIO needs to be able to tailor messages with carefully chosen verbiage and updated information. Not having a PIO with those exclusive responsibilities hamstring's the Circuit's ability to speak with a coherent message."

"PIO duties are directed more toward education, outreach, internal communications and publications rather than regular and direct interaction with the media and/or communication to the public through the media. While we do communicate with media outlets when applicable, those circumstances do not arise here as often as they do in circuits that are more populated and comprised of larger urbanized areas."

"The PIO duties, while extremely important to the overall success of the Circuit, tend to fall to the wayside because of everyday duties that must be handled by the staff also covering PIO functions. When an emergency arises, those covering the duties often times end up duplicating some PIO functions because multiple people are handling PIO duties. All that being said, the PIO team do a good job of getting the crucial information to those who need it in a timely manner. Each person respects the rights of the public to have access to the judicial system."

"The circuit receives many public records requests, not just from the media, that the PIO is responsible for answering. They often require a lot of time and IT resources to respond."

"The PIO duties are primarily handled by one court employee who has other duties. Additional court employees, including the Trial Court Administrator and General Counsel, assist on an as-needed basis with posting on Twitter and/or drafting press releases. The best practice would be to have a position dedicated full-time to public information duties."



Fourteenth Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Christopher Patterson presents the FCPIO Excellence in Communications Award to Amber Baggett.

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PIO DUTIES

*Q: "What are your overall comments about PIO Duties."*

"I believe full-time PIOs can greatly improve the public's understanding and perception of the judicial branch. Much time spent on damage control could have been prevented by proactive media outreach."

"PIO duties are varied but vital. Providing information about the Court and its operations has become increasingly important, particularly to those who may not have occasion to visit a courthouse."

"Much of the PIO duties is reactionary and responding to the developing needs of the media.

Trying to anticipate their needs isn't easy or often productive. But being ready to handle a variety of situations is a big challenge. I make a concerted effort to build my media relationships. This increases their trust in me and makes me (I hope) a valuable resource. That in turn (again I hope) reduces instances where they don't follow our rules and procedures."



Thirteenth Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Ron Ficarrota with PIO Mike Moore, TCA Gina Justice and court staff displaying their Excellence in Communications Award.

"The 4DCA mainly uses Twitter and the court website to communicate needed information. The judges of the court, and occasionally staff, participate in events with local universities, bar associations, etc. to provide information, answer questions, and present desired information."

"Our Chief Judge, Court Counsel, and TCA share the role of PIO. Media requests, public information requests, high profile trials, day-to-day trial and court operations are the primary areas where PIO responsibilities are needed. The Chief Judge prefers to handle media questions and defers other areas to the Court Counsel and TCA to coordinate. The demands in our Circuit to coordinate court operations requires adequate staffing which is currently lacking so the PIO position is seen as non-essential at this time. The PIO position needs to be funded with an FTE to fully address and implement communication goals and requirements."

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PIO DUTIES

*Q: “If your circuit does not have a dedicated PIO position, has the lack of such a position made fulfilling communication goals and increasing public trust and confidence difficult or impossible?”*

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- Yes, the lack of a dedicated position is a definite obstacle. Like many other circuits, the PIO position is "secondary" to other job duties which often take priority by necessity.
- Absolutely! We feel having a designated PIO could assist us with better communication with the public/media. Public trust and confidence is the sole purpose of why communication and providing positive information to the outside is extremely important. A designated PIO would be beneficial to small circuits as well.
- Without a dedicated PIO position, it is difficult to achieve the directives of the communication plan and goals set forth. A dedicated position is required to fully address the communication plan in a comprehensive manner. Our Circuit does not have adequate staff to take on these additional responsibilities. Our Circuit aims high to ensure that the public has trust and confidence in our court system.
- Although we do have a PIO position, the fact that they are also responsible for multiple departments and have additional responsibilities makes it difficult to focus effectively on communication efforts, be it with the media or the public. We have also increased partnering efforts with court stakeholders and affiliated agencies.
- While we do have a designated PIO in our circuit, we have found success in sharing PIO duties in what is largely a collective effort to achieve the level of outreach that we have been able to realize. We also feel that drawing from several perspectives rather than just one provides not only valuable oversight necessary for an entity such as ours, but also much larger perspective through which we can present a multi-faceted product rather than a limited perspective if just one person was doing everything.
- Yes. The former PIO was also our Chief Information Officer who oversaw all technology projects and staff, so maintaining the court’s technology needs took precedence and left little time to focus on communication goals.

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: PIO DUTIES

*Q: “If your circuit does not have a dedicated PIO position, has the lack of such a position made fulfilling communication goals and increasing public trust and confidence difficult or impossible?”*

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- Our Circuit is a small circuit and our staff are required to perform multiple duties. As such, we do not have the resources to have a dedicated PIO position. Currently different aspects of the PIO are handled by the Senior Management team consisting of 5 staff members. These staff members include the TCA, Technology Officer, Court Reporting Supervisor, Court Operations Consultant and Court Operations Manager. Each staff member has primary duties in addition to the PIO functions they cover. The PIO duties often are not highest on listed priorities – unless there is an emergency. Our Circuit wants to be more proactive in communicating with internal and external partners as well as the public, but it proves to be very difficult to achieve due to the lack of dedicated resources.
- Having a dedicated position would allow us to focus more on the goals of the plan.
- It has not made it difficult or impossible, but much more messaging, social media presence and outreach could be performed if we had a dedicated position.
- With so many other duties, our court PIO is unable to dedicate the time and resources required to significantly increase our social media footprint. Several creative ideas never come to fruition simply because other court functions must take priority. That said, implementing the communications plan to the best of our abilities has helped better inform the public which in turn increases public trust and confidence.
- A dedicated PIO would make community outreach easier. There are opportunities to be hosted in various community events and being able to have a dedicated person would ensure outreach attendance.





# DELIVERING

OUR MESSAGE

COURT COMMUNICATION PLAN  
for the Judicial Branch of Florida

January 2016


## Comments to the JMC from FCPIO Members

### **MISSION:**

To protect rights and liberties, uphold and interpret the law,  
and provide for the peaceful resolution of disputes.

### **VISION:**

Justice in Florida will be accessible, fair, effective,  
responsive, and accountable.



# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: JMC FEEDBACK

*Q: "Provide feedback and overall comments to the Judicial Management Council about the communication plan, its implementation, and its success and challenges."*

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- The 2nd Circuit appreciates all that you do! We will work hard to continue meeting the goals of the communication plan.
- The communication plan should be applauded for its comprehensive detail and format design which allows for easy planning, coordination, and implementation. The communication plan is recognized as a model nationwide which the Florida State Court System should take a great deal of pride with this accomplishment. Our Circuit recognizes the importance of the communication plan and the goals set forth. Craig Waters and Tricia Knox should be commended for their efforts to drive the goals of the communication plan for the Florida State Courts System. The PIOs, judges, and court staff have done the work at the local level to address the goals of the communication plan.
- The Florida Court PIO's are working hard to tell the branch's story. The communication plan is a success. The effort needs additional financial support.
- The Sixth Circuit has a PIO. I don't see how any circuit can fulfill the goals as laid out in the communication plan without a staff member devoted exclusively to PIO duties.
- The ability to utilize nontraditional communication means has been instrumental in expanding outreach to the public.
- Since its initial official creation and implementation, our circuit, through various committees and workgroups, has carefully cultivated and expanded our communication plan into what we have today. We feel that we have collectively created a plan that is a vital tool that greatly benefits our entity as well as our community. Through future planning and innovation, we hope to build upon our successes and expand our outreach in our endeavors to successfully educate ourselves, our community and beyond.

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: JMC FEEDBACK

*Q: "Provide feedback and overall comments to the Judicial Management Council about the communication plan, its implementation, and its success and challenges."*

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- The goals of the plan are admirable and our Circuit has made a concerted effort to implement this plan but due to lack of manpower it has at times created a burden on already taxed staff.
- It is difficult to comment, now, because the pandemic has turned everything upside down. This question should be posed to us in 2021.
- The communication plan was an excellent development and the year-by-year rollout made it achievable.
- I've seen many successes and no failures.
- I think the communication plan was very successful. I believe it brought more Courts up to speed in terms of new technology, social media, and ways to communicate with the public. I also think it brought FCPIO as a whole closer together.
- The Communication Plan catapulted Florida into a field all its own regarding judicial branch/court communications. No other state has a cohesive, statewide plan similar to Florida's. Other courts, states and countries have studied the plan and have tried to copy it, but their success is nothing compared to the success in Florida. The keys to our success are: 1) buy-in from all court stakeholders (judges, administrators, court staff, etc.), 2) Assigning the plan to an established unit (FLSC PIO Office), 3) Leveraging FCPIO members, 4) setting an implementation schedule, and 5) requiring an annual report. The communication plan has done so much to bring the focus of court communications into one strategic effort by all courts in Florida. Without this singular vision - all courts working in tandem to accomplish the goals of the plan - the effort would be haphazard and uneven across the state. The greatest success of the plan is that it has brought all Florida courts together for a common goal. This has strengthened the bonds of FCPIO members. We are a richer organization because of the responsibilities placed upon the organization. All members of FCPIO should be recognized for this great accomplishment.

# IMPLEMENTATION REPORT: JMC FEEDBACK

*Q: "Provide feedback and overall comments to the Judicial Management Council about the communication plan, its implementation, and its success and challenges."*

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- Around the nation, all eyes turned to Florida during the pandemic because of its statewide court communications plan. Organizations like the National Center for State Courts, the National Association for Court Management, and the national Conference of Court Public Information Officers highlighted the Florida plan to their members as a model for confronting the unexpected challenges posed by COVID-19. And they also noted that Florida's model provides one of the best ways of meeting and responding to the challenges posed by disinformation campaigns aimed at state courts in the years ahead – and disinformation is one of the biggest threats to public trust and confidence the judiciary faces in the Twenty-First Century. Florida's courts should be proud.

# Beyond the Plan

## **A MESSAGE FROM THE FCPIO BOARD**

*by Sara Miles, President and Stephen Thompson, President-Elect*

# A MESSAGE FROM THE FCPIO BOARD

We're all in this together. It was a phrase we heard throughout the pandemic and it's one that describes the stance taken by the members of the Florida Court Public Information Officers (FCPIO). We might not all be full-time PIOs, but the pandemic illustrated how we could all come together with one common goal: *informing the public and our employees about the ramifications of a public health crisis* the likes of which none of us has seen before.

The Communications Plan, which was already in place, helped immeasurably. It had shaped court communications before 2020 and put plans into place before the pandemic began. We were well prepared to share our message and put public confidence in the courts by letting everyone know the major stakeholders were making decisions to ensure public safety. Without the plan

and committees formed within FCPIO, we would not have been as prepared as we were and as we continue to be today. Although the four-year communication plan has reached its final year, our work has only just begun.

## Social Media

The landscape of social media is always changing. From Facebook to YouTube, there are a variety of platforms courts can use to reach every age group in the population. As we continue implementing the communications plan into the future, FCPIO's Social Media Committee can continue to brainstorm ideas on the best ways to reach people via social media.

The committee can work on creating posts for all courts to use – much like what OSCA did for Opioid Awareness Month.



Sara Miles,  
FCPIO President



Stephen Thompson,  
FCPIO President-Elect

## A Message from the FCPIO Board, con't.

### **Public Outreach**

Thanks to the creation of virtual tours, the first of which was implemented in the Sunshine State by the Florida Supreme Court, we now realize we can reach audiences that we were not able to before. Courts across the state can use Zoom and other platforms to educate people statewide, not just in their jurisdictions. Moving forward, this as a viable way for courts to share our messaging with educational institutions and community groups. In today's busy world, courts can use virtual tools to engage with justice partners and stakeholders, too. Public Information Officers should assume that citizens might not fully understand the judicial branch and with that in mind, we should make it our mission to continue educating, partly by emphasizing how transparent much of the court's business is. This is one of the surest ways instill public trust and confidence.

### **Media Relations**

Maintaining good relationships with members of the media will not only help them, but the courts as well. The more familiar reporters and news staff are with public information officers, the more often they will reach out for information on court proceedings, and clarification on any questions, and the more willing they'll be to cover positive court events, such as Adoption Day. Going forward, courts can continue to work to develop statewide media guidelines and materials for reporters to help them better understand the court system.

### **Public Information**

The crux of what public information officers do is inherent in the title itself: *provide information to the public*. Information about the judicial branch can be shared with court users in a variety of ways, whether it be social media, printed materials, or education events. One of the first stops for information is the judicial circuit's website. Courts can use their websites to increase public awareness about court programs, services and performance, and to provide information to the public and court users about how to access court services. It is important that the information on our web sites across the state be as consistent as is possible. This will help reduce misinformation and reduce confusion. And it will help promote public trust and confidence.

## A Message from the FCPIO Board, con't.

After reading this report, I hope you come away with a better understanding of all the accomplishments made under the communications plan and where we hope to take court communications in the future. FCPIO members will continue to work toward improving public trust and confidence in the judicial branch, and showing the public and the media how courts actually function. Although the four-year communications plan has come to an end, it is our hope that we will continue to operate in its spirit, improving what we do constantly, with a synopsis of our accomplishments presented annually for review.

