



Lessons and Life After the Launch:

A Q&A with MDEC Leaders and Users

MDEC launched in Anne Arundel County on October 14. That date marked the beginning of mandatory e-filing for attorneys filing in Anne Arundel County (non-criminal pleadings). This includes the District and Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County as well as any appellate proceedings arising from an Anne Arundel County case on or after October 14, 2014.

The courts accepted paper filings during the first four weeks of the rollout in Anne Arundel County. However, after close of business on November 14, attorneys must file electronically or their filings will not be accepted.

As this transition period comes to a close, we asked Anne Arundel County judges and leaders active with the implementation of MDEC to reflect on the launch and how they are working to make the case management system better for the rollout of MDEC in the next jurisdiction. We also asked local attorneys now using the case management and e-filing system how it is working on their end.

The responses below are from: Anne Arundel County Circuit Court Administrative Judge Paul A. Hackner; Robert Duckworth, Clerk of the Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County; Anne Arundel County Circuit Court Administrator Doug Hofstedt; Anne Arundel County District Court Administrative Clerk Tamera Chester; Joan Nairn, MDEC Project Manager; Carla Jones, Manager of Court Operations; and attorneys Susan Stobbart Shapiro, a director of Council, Baradel, Kosmerl & Nolan, P.A., and Jonathan P. Kagan, a partner with Baldwin, Kagan & Gormley, LLC.

1. What went right about the launch?

Doug Hofstedt- The main thing that went right about the MDEC launch was the dedication and hard work from our staff. We knew there would be challenges, and there were, but every department has stepped up to make it work. The JIS team and the Tyler team have been with us day-in and day-out to help in any way that they can, which has been a huge help.

Joan Nairn-The Anne Arundel County court staff have been working diligently alongside the MDEC project team for well over a year, so the go-live weekend was met with excitement and some fear. The court staff that worked all weekend to ensure they were ready for the doors of the courthouses to open on Tuesday morning. A smaller staff was brought in on Saturday to review the conversion of the data to insure there were no major “showstopper” issues. On Sunday, additional staff came in at 8:30 and started entering cases and scanning images into electronic case files. It was great to see staff, who started the morning off cautious and unsure, feeling confident by the afternoon and helping to show others how to do certain functions. There have been some bumps in the road but overall, the staff has remained positive.

The JIS staff did a great job of getting equipment installed and configured prior to go live and were then onsite to address any issues that arose, as well as the staff back at JIS that were available to respond to any issue or question. It was a huge joint effort between the court staff, JIS and Tyler to insure that the implementation went as smoothly as possible.

Carla Jones- It worked! We were functioning on Day One. Given the scope of what we’re trying to do and have a functioning system from all of those perspectives-that is what went right. Functioning and working on go live day.

Jonathan Kagan- Our firm has been using e-filing regularly since the launch. Using MDEC has definitely been an adjustment to the process we are used to, but there are many benefits to the launch. Not having to send files down to courthouses and hand file by 4:30 p.m. is the biggest. The system is user-friendly and the process is quick, painless, and convenient.

2. What went wrong about the launch?

Tamera Chester-The Domestic Violence and Peace Order application has not been very efficient for our clerks and judges. The application has a great deal of redundancy which is very labor-intensive for our office staff as well as courtroom clerks. The orders are not being produced as quickly as the previous system, and petitioners are waiting longer periods of time for their paperwork.

Robert Duckworth- The decision to allow attorneys 30 days to register for e-filing slowed progress in the MDEC roll out, since clerks had to devote time to scanning volumes of paper pleadings and documents into an electronic format. Also, some attorneys filed into both electronic and paper form, duplicating the workload of the clerks.

Judge Paul Hackner- There were a number of workflow issues relating to chambers work, such as the inability to sign and date orders, awkwardness in transferring work from one person to another and the number of steps required to accomplish routine

functions. With time, we will get used to the program and adapt our workflow to it. The clerks were inundated with paper and electronic filings which has caused back logs. The process of back-scanning documents has been laborious and has resulted in inadequate identification of documents in the files.

Joan Nairn- The implementation of MDEC wasn't just a change for the courts; it also had an impact to the legal community. The new Title 20 rules had several changes that had to be dealt with as part of the launch:

- a. Mandatory e-filing for all attorneys filing in an MDEC county.
- b. Attorneys needed to be in good standing in order to e-file
- c. Attorneys who are registered e-filers can have remote access to the electronic case files if they are the attorney of record in the case.

Some attorneys were excited about the prospect of e-filing, others were resistant to the change. In order to meet b and c above, we needed some way to identify an attorney. Since Maryland doesn't have a statewide bar that requires all attorneys to become a member, our only way to identify an attorney was through the Client Protection Fund number that is assigned when an attorney sits for the bar. Attorneys needed to use this number to register for e-filing. We received many phone calls and emails from attorneys asking for training and assistance. The project team posted manuals, FAQs and other materials, but we weren't prepared for the large number of inquiries and requests for individual training that we received. Attorneys expressed frustration with the amount of time it was taking to get a response to their inquiries.

Carla Jones- There were areas of implementation that sounded simple on paper and conceptually that turned out to be much more time-consuming than we anticipated. For example, the commitment the courts made to back scan case files. The MDEC vision always involved an electronic court record which involved a commitment by clerks to fulfil the electronic vision by back scanning old cases in as cases come to court. On paper this sounded easy- just take the file, stick it in the scanner, and put the case in the system. In reality, the process took much longer. We underestimated how much time it would take to disassemble and scan each case and make any image adjustments needed.

Doug Hofstedt- One challenge we have faced is dealing with conversion data that initially did not come across in the right way. This caused some commotion on go live weekend trying to get dockets assigned for the week ahead.

Jonathan Kagan- Attorneys have noticed that there is a delay between the time an attorney e-files a motion and the time it gets formally docketed. An automatic courtesy email confirmation is sent at the time of e-filing, but official receipt from the clerk may come a week later. In the federal system, it is officially docketed the day you file. This is just a learning curve for us to adjust to the delay with internal processing.

3. What are you doing to fix the problems?

Robert Duckworth- We have asked our clerks in the trenches to work massive amounts of overtime, which includes countless hours during the night and on the weekends.

Doug Hofstedt- Once the conversion issue was isolated, the Tyler Technologies team worked throughout the night to correct the problem so cases could be assigned correctly and the custom reports team from JIS worked closely with our assignment office to create a functional docket report that is used courthouse-wide and on our website.

Joan Nairn- From my team's perspective, the biggest relief came from the MDEC Executive Steering Committee in allowing the 30 day transition period. If an attorney had a problem or needed additional help with e-filing, the courts would still accept paper. This also gave an extra 30 days for the project team to respond to all the open questions that had been received by the attorneys who were trying to register. The 30-day transition period ends close of business November 14 and we currently have over 3,700 attorneys registered to e-file in Anne Arundel County.

Carla Jones- In order to keep up with the influx of both paper and electronic filings, Anne Arundel County Circuit Court scaled back some of their back-scanning of cases into the system until they catch up with the backlog of cases.

We have also started working on developing cheat sheets for clerks on how to do core area functions and getting them acclimated to business processes.

The pilot, in general, will have a lot of lessons learned to give to courts to better prepare for go-live. For example, don't just scale back the docket after go-live, scale back the docket before go live while the clerks are in training to better minimize the possible backlog of cases.

4. Name something great about MDEC you are experiencing now.

Tamera Chester- The calendar component of Odyssey is great! You can view caseloads in each courtroom on any given day without jumping from screen to screen.

Robert Duckworth- MDEC has given a number of my dedicated clerks the opportunity to grow and shine in their jobs. Also, we are bringing the court system into the electronic world. The system is intuitive and will bring efficiencies in time to achieve fair and equitable justice in the courthouse.

Judge Paul Hackner- I have been very impressed with the effort of all of the personnel involved in this transition. As the first county to launch the program, we anticipated that there would be issues to resolve, and it is satisfying to be an integral part of the process of refining the program so that future counties will be able to transition smoothly.

Doug Hofstedt- One of the huge benefits of MDEC is that multiple staff members can now work on the same case file at the same time. This has already had an impact, but the larger benefits will be seen in the years ahead as paper files become less and less and filings are all electronic. This helps the staff day to day and the court in the long run as part of our continuity of operations plan to safeguard case information that will no longer be stored in paper format.

Carla Jones- Every day, I wear a pin of a pig with wings that my boss gave me on launch day as a good luck charm. Pigs are flying, did you see them? The courts are positive, the courts are functioning, and the system is working. Yes, there are challenges, but I am proud of the big group effort to make MDEC a reality. A lot of hard working clerks helped make this a reality. They were calm under confusion, duress, and conflicting directions, but they stuck it out with us.

Now we get ready for criminal. We are still preparing and have lessons learned to take on to the next rollouts.

Susan Shapiro- I haven't been able to use the system much yet because the motions in our existing cases couldn't be e-filed, but I am looking forward to the benefits down the road. It is not easy to put a new system in place so it's important that everybody do their best to use it so we can be down the road using it happily.