

Moving Forward with the Help of a MAP

Posted by [State Court Administrative Office](#) on Aug 15, 2016 2:10:13 PM

By The Honorable Sara Lisznyai, 2B District Court (Hillsdale County)

Judges play many roles. They interpret the law, assess the evidence presented, and control how hearings and trials unfold in the courtrooms. Judges are impartial decision-makers in the pursuit of justice. They also serve as leaders of the court. I was honored to take on this role when elected to replace a retiring judge who had been on the bench here at the Hillsdale District Court for 36 years.

Many of my staff have been here nearly as long—I have three employees who have all worked for the court in excess of 25 years each. I came to the job knowing I wanted to make a few minor changes, but how to make those changes was a more difficult task. As I looked around my new office space, I came across a green book entitled, “Management Assistance Report” (MAP) from the State Court Administrative Office on one of the shelves. It was dated July 2, 2003. I began to read the report in my spare time and soon discovered that it made recommendations to the court on how to improve its processes and, thereby, better serve the public.

Implementing a collections process and handling civil cases more proactively were just a couple of my priorities for the court, and they were also a part of the MAP report. I began holding pretrials and issuing scheduling orders upon the filing of an answer. However, with the retirement of my predecessor came the additional retirements of the court administrator and probation officer. While challenging, it was also an opportunity to infuse new blood and ideas. It quickly became apparent that my arrival and the introduction of two new employees created a unique chance to move the court forward and bring it current with available resources and technology.

As I continued to review the MAP report, I was encouraged to learn that the program I had instituted on my own mirrored the recommended collections program that would interface with Judicial Information Services (JIS). My plan rearranged the duties of my staff, allowing for the creation of a “collection clerk” who used her Excel skills to develop a spreadsheet to track unpaid judgments. I then required a payment plan in every criminal case with outstanding fines and costs. In every case where the defendant was employed, an income-withholding order was

put in place. Show-cause hearings are held every week for those individuals who are not compliant, while also assessing a defendant's ability to pay when the issue arises. Later, we obtained the collections program, which replaced the spreadsheet and allowed for the generation of batch show-cause orders. Revenue generated by the district court increased by more than 50 percent in 2015 as a result of these measures.

Another change I wanted to ensure was made was open communication, so I began holding a quarterly staff meeting. Each meeting begins differently: doing team-building exercises, "getting to know you" games, and serving refreshments. At our most recent meeting we played a game I found online in which there are four animals that each represent a different personality type—a golden retriever, an otter, a lion, and a beaver. Each employee must designate which animal best describes him or her as well as each of his or her coworkers and be prepared to say why.

I offered to go first with my selections. "I think I am an otter," I said. "Playful and fun." The room went silent. Not understanding the reaction, I demanded, "What? Don't you agree?" In one voice the nine court employees said, "You are a lion."

In hindsight I can see why my staff thinks I am a lion, and why I need to rethink my game selection (pun intended). However, this exchange stayed with me and influenced the approach I wanted to take within the court.

As my time has increased on the bench, so has my understanding of the 2003 MAP report. We needed a stronger (more lion-like) administrative process so that changes could be implemented effectively. To that end, each staff member received an updated employee manual and a performance appraisal with recommendations for improvement and goals. Training was given on dealing with self-represented litigants and a large bulletin board was hung in the lobby to provide those litigants with resources to help them. Representatives from JIS came to the court on a number of dates to retrain on case management. Processes that had been in place for decades were reworked and streamlined.

Change has not always been easy. We have experimented. Each staff member's duties and desks have been reassigned numerous times. Filing cabinets have been rearranged. The layout of the court has even been reconfigured. After a long day of JIS training an employee said, "I

cannot believe that I have done my job wrong for 27 years.” She was one sad golden retriever that day, but she has rebounded, thrilled that she is doing parts of her job in a fraction of the time she used to spend.

I doubt that my staff will ever see me as the otter I am at heart, but I will continue to swim my way through the green MAP book, using games and humor as I navigate the waters ahead. Maybe I’ll serve fish at the next staff meeting.



Judge Lisznyi practiced law for 24 years before taking the bench in Hillsdale County on January 1, 2015. She and her husband of 29 years, Anthony, have two children, Eric and Elyse, and strong involvement in the communities of Jonesville and Hillsdale.

Topics: **Summer 2016 Connections**