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INTERNAL CASE PROCESSING GUIDELINES REQUIRED TO MEET TIME STANDARDS IN THIRD CLASS COUNTIES IN MISSOURI

On January 1, 1997, Missouri Court Operating Rule 17 became effective. The purpose of this rule was to establish time standards for processing civil and criminal cases in Missouri. The rule states that it is the responsibility of the court for keeping current dockets and sets out policies and procedures to assist the courts in developing guidelines for case management. However, it was left up to the individual courts to develop their own guidelines for effective caseflow management for meeting the time standards.

The goal of this study is to determine the best way to process cases to meet the time standards in third class counties in Missouri. The question is, “Is there a need for formal written case processing guidelines in rural courts?” To answer this question, it was necessary to determine what procedures and guidelines the third class counties are following and how effective the existing practices are.

The research for this study includes a review of literature available on caseflow management, a review of the policies and procedures set forth in Missouri Court Operating Rule 17, and a survey of the third class counties in Missouri on the current practices followed for caseflow management. In addition, statistics from the Missouri Judicial Report Supplement, fiscal years 1998-99 and 2000, Age of Case at Disposition: Comparison of Time Standards are reviewed.

Available information concerning practices used in third class counties in Missouri is inconclusive as far as determining current policies and procedures. When comparing the results of the survey with the statistics from the Missouri Judicial Report Supplement, it is apparent that the courts are working to reduce backlogs; however, most of the courts are not meeting time standards.

Based on the findings in this study, it is apparent that while most of the third class counties are concerned with caseflow management and meeting time standards, written caseflow management guidelines have not been prepared and are not being followed in Missouri's rural courts. If time standards are to be achieved, and if caseflow management is to become as effective and efficient as possible, judges, clerks, and others must work together to set goals, develop procedures, and prepare written caseflow management plans for their courts. The plan should be distributed to all parties involved and should be continuously revised and improved. Having a written plan that all parties know about and follow demonstrates the court's commitment to managing cases as effectively as possible.

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