

Toward Service Excellence: A Preliminary Assessment of Service Quality in  
Georgia Courts

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2005, the National Center for State Courts launched CourTool 1 – Access and Fairness Survey – as part of a set of ten trial court performance measures. The survey assesses customer perceptions of the court’s accessibility and its treatment of customer’s in terms of fairness, equality, and respect. Since its launch, CourTool 1 has enjoyed wide popularity among court practitioners nationally, and in Georgia, as a practical customer satisfaction assessment instrument. Even so, existing literature suggests the scale may not provide court leaders the quality of information needed to effectively manage quality of service.

An alternative methodology, SERVQUAL, originally developed for use in private enterprise, has been proven as an adaptable, robust and empirically-sound framework for understanding, measuring, diagnosing and improving service quality. As a concept, service quality is defined as the difference between customer perceptions versus expectations of the service provided. The SERVQUAL framework uses a gaps approach (perceptions minus expectations) to identify areas of service quality improve. A review of service quality literature establishes that the model has successfully been employed across industries, including public organizations. Literature indicating the instrument’s previous use in a court environment, however, could not be uncovered.

Using the SERVQUAL framework, the present study provides a preliminary assessment of service quality at trial courts in Georgia. A statewide survey of court managers was conducted to identify areas where service quality improvements can be made. Specific research questions which guided this study are as follows:

1. What are court manager's perceptions and expectations for service quality at trial courts in Georgia? Do perceptions and expectations of quality of service differ significantly among various court groups?
2. In which areas should trial court managers focus resources in order to improve quality of service?
3. Are there identifiable influencers of service quality gaps which, if addressed, can reasonably be expected to improve service quality in the future?

To address these questions trial court managers were surveyed using an online, modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument. Modifications to the instrument included a reduction in the number of survey items, a rewording of statements in a court context, and the addition of a section to investigate possible antecedent to service quality failures. An email invitation to participate in the survey was delivered to 1661 email accounts of Georgia court managers using various listservs and email distribution lists. A total of 144 usable surveys were received and used in the data analysis process.

The study found slight-to-moderate differences in gap scores among the several class-of-courts. In most instances gap scores were highest along the tangible and reliability dimensions and lowest in the areas of empathy and assurance. Survey data suggest additional attention and resources are needed for plain language court brochures, modern equipment and technology, and improved dependability in service delivery practices and outcomes. Study findings also suggest certain service quality gaps could be averted with regular customer service training and greater effort to recognize and reward court staff.

The study recommended AOC Georgia take a more active role in promoting and supporting local efforts to improve customer service and service quality. Specific

recommendations include the development of customer service training manual and materials, plain language brochures, and guidebooks and information resources on low/no cost employee recognition and reward approaches. A research agenda for future service quality-related studies was also presented.

## INTRODUCTION

**“[W]ell-conceived and practical court performance measures are increasingly valued not only as tools for incremental quality improvements of court programs and services, but also as the means for major policy reform and organizational transformation”<sup>1</sup>**

### A. Introduction

Nationally, and in Georgia, there is tremendous potential for improving customer service and enhancing service quality at local trial courts. It is irrefutable that court users do not always receive the kind of customer service they have come to expect in the private and service sectors. In fairness, courts face far greater challenges serving customers than private and service sector organizations. As public institutions, the courts serve a diverse range of customers, users, clients and stakeholders, which create complexities over and above what is typically experienced in private sector environments.<sup>2</sup> The various constituent groups may well have divergent and contradictory demands and expectations for service provision. For court managers, the diverse and complex needs of court customers makes difficult the task of establishing priorities in customer service improvement efforts. As well, court operations must embody our democratic values and ideals of public service while adhering to legal mandates and national and state constitutional requirements to provide full access to justice for all people. These obligations endure even when strict adherence is neither timely, convenient, nor cost-effective. At the same time courts are under constant pressure to provide an increasing range of services, more

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<sup>1</sup> Conference of Chief Justices/Conference of State Court Administrators, Resolution 14, “In support of Measuring Court Performance.” 57<sup>th</sup> Annual CCJ/COSCA Meeting, August 3, 2005 Accessed March 6, 2009.  
<http://cosca.ncsc.dni.us/Resolutions/CourtAdmin/resolutionMeasuringCourtPerformance.html>

<sup>2</sup> Curry, A. & Herbert, D (1998), “Continuous improvement in the public services- A way forward.” *Managing Service Quality*, Vol.8 No. 5 p. 348

effectively and with fewer public dollars. Any expenditure given toward service quality improvement initiatives necessitates a reallocation of scarce resources away from other equally important objectives.

These dynamics, however, do not invalidate the need for court leaders to seek service quality improvement. Rather, they substantiate the case for customer service evaluation methods that are exacting yet flexible, sweeping but practical, and easy to use while producing empirically-sound findings. An obvious approach for assessing service provision is to solicit feedback from the users of services through surveys. In a government service context, surveys have been considered instruments for increasing citizen participation and equity, setting budget priorities, holding government accountable for results, achieving program effectiveness, and obtaining information on citizen experiences, perceptions, and subjective evaluations of services received.<sup>3</sup> Customer service surveys, while not a universal practice at trial courts, are far from a novel concept among court practitioners. A recent informal survey on court performance measures suggest a vast majority of court jurisdictions are measuring court performance, through the use of nationally or locally prepared sets of measuring standards.<sup>4</sup> Generally, these measures include at least one component which evaluates service delivery. With guidance and technical support supplied by the National Center for State Courts, court administrators have for nearly twenty years investigated customer valuations of service delivery through structured surveys.

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<sup>3</sup> Dalehite, E.G (2008) Determinants of performance measurement: An investigation into the decision to conduct citizen surveys. *Public Administration Review* Vol. 68 No 5 p.891

<sup>4</sup> White paper on promoting a culture of accountability and transparency: Court system performance measures (2008) Conference of State Court Administrators p. 7 Accessed online March 29, 2009 at: <http://cosca.ncsc.dni.us/WhitePapers/2008WhitePaper-PerformanceMeasurement-Final-Dec5-08.pdf>

Drawing on the insights of previous research instruments, the National Center for State Courts in 2005 launched its latest customer service assessment instrument - CourTool 1 – Access and Fairness Survey – as part of a set of ten trial court performance measures. The scale contained 15 items that solicit court user feedback on their experiences in accessing the courthouse and conducting business with the court. More specifically, CourTool 1 gauges customer perceptions of the court’s accessibility and its treatment of customer’s in terms of fairness, equality, and respect on a “typical day” at court. Since its launch CourTool 1 has become the de facto standard measure of customer service within the court environment. The instrument has been adopted by more than 20 state court systems<sup>5</sup> and has enjoyed wide support among court professionals, including those in Georgia, as a valuable tool to assess and guide service delivery improvement efforts.

Notwithstanding its national acclaim among court practitioners, there is reason to question CourTool 1 as a normative instrument for evaluating service quality. A review of literature suggest the scale may be of limited utility in providing the quality of information needed to effectively manage service improvement efforts. Three points regarding the construct, operationalization and use of the scale are pertinent. First, CourTool 1 assesses customer satisfaction with a narrowed focus on customer *perceptions* of the service provided. This approach ignores other important aspects of the evaluation process. For example, researchers<sup>6 7 8</sup> have noted customers assessed service quality by comparing the level of service experienced

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<sup>5</sup> 2007 Annual Report, National Center for State Courts (p.7) Accessed online March 31,2009: [http://www.ncsconline.org/AnnualReport2007\\_ForWeb.pdf](http://www.ncsconline.org/AnnualReport2007_ForWeb.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49 No 4 pp.41-50

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, B., Mitchell, V. (1990) Defining and measuring the quality of customer service.” *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* Vol. 8 No 6 pp.11-17

<sup>8</sup> Brady, M., & Cronin, J. (2001) Customer orientation: Effects on customer service perceptions and outcome behaviors. *Journal of Service Research*, Vol.3 No.3, 241 -251

(perceived service quality) with the level of service they desired or expected (expected service quality). The perceptions-only design of CourTool 1 deprives court managers of relevant information relating to customer expectations of service provision. This information may be of particular importance to court leadership as policy direction is established and funding resources are aligned to meet service objectives.

A second point to be made stems from the fact that CourTool 1 evaluates quality of service based on three interrelated criteria: (1) fundamental court values; (2) balanced perspective on the work of the court; and (3) feasibility and sustainability,<sup>9</sup> as determined by court practitioners and researchers. On this basis, service attributes investigated by CourTool 1 can be said to be internally-driven and therefore may not mirror service quality dimensions that are important to court users. Researchers have cautioned “internally generated measures of quality often do not match customer perceptions of quality.”<sup>10</sup> Since the customer is the ultimate judge of service quality,<sup>11</sup> it stands to reason that measures not based on what outside constituencies want, expect and value will ultimately yield information that is of limited value to managers seeking to improve perceptions of customer service. Under these conditions customer surveys cease to exist as meaningful instruments of good governance but become ceremonial exercises to convince legislative officials and citizens of the court’s progress in becoming more accountable and responsive. The central point is perhaps best made in a published study on links between government performance, citizen satisfaction and trust:

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<sup>9</sup> National Center for State Courts (2005). “Why Measure? 5 Reasons to Assess Court Performance” Pamphlet, National Center for State Courts, Williamsburg, Va. page.4

[http://www.ncsconline.org/D\\_Research/CourTools/CourToolsWhitePages-v4.pdf](http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/CourTools/CourToolsWhitePages-v4.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Snipes, R., Thomson, N. (1999) An empirical study of the factors underlying student service quality perceptions in higher education *Proceedings of the Academy of Educational Leadership* Vol. 1 No.1 pp 42

<sup>11</sup>

“...traditional performance measures do not necessarily capture the dimensions or features of service quality that matter most to citizens. More effort must be made in the field, therefore, to develop truly citizen-driven performance measures that both help public managers manage and truly satisfy the needs of the people they serve... The overall satisfaction judgments that citizens make about government, in turn, depend on their performance perceptions – not necessarily on the objective measures of achievement printed in government scorecards and reports.”<sup>12</sup>

A third and final point emanates from a concern about the use of CourTool 1 as an adaptable methodology for assessing customer service. Resolution 14, issued as a joint resolution of the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) and Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA), urged state courts to “develop and test a balanced set of court performance measures using the CourTools and the six-step implementation process as models.”<sup>13</sup> A note of caution is due with respect to experimentation with survey research methodologies by unqualified persons. Court administrators and judges are not researchers and do not necessarily possess the skills to design a study, modify an existing instrument, or utilize survey research techniques in an empirically-sound manner. The likely result of such experimentation is an instrument that fails to accurately assess the intended concept (lacks validity) or fails to produce the same results when administered under similar circumstances (lack reliability). Existing literature is replete with examples where poor methodology has led to errant conclusions about a research topic. For court leaders findings supplied from unreliable or invalid instruments are apt to result in misplaced confidence, wasted time and squandered resources.

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<sup>12</sup> Van Ryzin, G.G., (2007) “Pieces of a puzzle: Linking government performance, citizen satisfaction and trust.” *Public Performance & Management Review* Vol. 30 No.4 p. 532

<sup>13</sup> See Note 1

In review, CourTool 1, like any assessment instrument, has its shortcomings. As previously noted the scale is of a limited scope and does not investigate customer expectations for services; the instrument operationalizes access and fairness constructs that may be dissimilar or only partially reflect service quality values held by court customers; and despite calls for its experimental use, research has yet to establish the tool as reliable and valid when modifications have been made. Therefore it must be contended that CourTool 1 as a customer service evaluation instrument, at best, supplies court leaders with limited information. As a result the court's scarce resources are likely to be utilized in an ineffective manner while underlying service problems that need to be addressed are continually masked.

Superior quality of service does not occur by happenstance, but rather is the result of good information and well-managed activities. What court managers need then is an intuitive, robust and flexible framework that is attentive to customer perceptions as well as their expectations. A review of the marketing and service industry literature suggest the availability and widespread use of a conceptual framework and instrument that relates to the way customers perceive service quality in organizations and firms. Building on seven years of research Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry<sup>14</sup> developed a general methodology, SERVQUAL, for measuring service quality. The model is established upon the premise that service quality is the difference between customer perceptions of the quality of service actually received and customer expectations of an ideal service. In the service quality literature, "expectations" are viewed as "desires or wants of customers, i.e. what they feel a service provider *should* offer rather than

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<sup>14</sup> See Note 6, supra, page 44-48

would offer.”<sup>15</sup> The model has been proven effective as a diagnostic methodology for uncovering the degree and direction of service quality shortfalls and strengths.

Research suggests many service-oriented institutions, like courts, share common attributes in service delivery processes within and across industries.<sup>16</sup> Parasuraman et al<sup>17</sup> note the existence of three well-documented characteristics of services: intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability. By this definition, the activities of courts can be aptly conceptualized as services, since they too are intangible (they cannot be seen, touched, held, or stored);<sup>18</sup> heterogeneous (their performance often varies from court employee to court employee, from customer to customer, and from day to day)<sup>19</sup>, and are inseparable (the production and consumption of court’s services occur simultaneously and cannot be separated).<sup>20</sup> Given these commonalities, it is worth investigating whether the SERVQUAL methodology and scale, used in business and service sector industries, can be utilized to assess service quality in a court domain. While SERVQUAL has been field tested across a number of service industries, this researcher was unable to uncover any literature which investigated its applicability in a court domain.

## B. Managing Service Quality in Georgia Trial Courts

According to Article Six, Paragraph II, of the Georgia Constitution, all courts of the state comprise a unified judicial system. Even so, a historical deference to local autonomy and home

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<sup>15</sup> Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A. Berry, L.L. (1988) SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. Vol. 64 No.1 pp.17

<sup>16</sup> Ibid at page 30

<sup>17</sup> See Note 6 supra, page 42

<sup>18</sup> **Loc. Cit.**

<sup>19</sup> Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L (1990) Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations New York, p. 15

<sup>20</sup> See Note 6 supra, page 42

rule authority has resulted in a state court system that operates in a non-uniform fashion. Such devolution allow local court leadership greater leeway in determining how best to meet constituent needs and expectations. As a result, decision-making in terms of court policy development, local operating procedure, and resource allocation is considered to be more effective than under a formal, highly centralized state court structure. Of equal importance, the exercise of home rule power allow for more meaningful customer interaction, robust policy initiatives and greater accountability of elected judges and clerks.

Georgia is comprised of 159 counties and 535 municipalities with a diverse population approaching 10 million people. Its state court system is organized along three-tiers, having at its apex the appellate courts, which consist of the Supreme Court (7 justices) and the Court of Appeals (12 judges). At the trial court level, the Superior Court (202 judges, 159 elected clerks) serve as the state's only general jurisdiction court. Superior Courts are organized according to 49 judicial circuits. Among the state's seven classes of limited jurisdiction courts are: State Courts (117 judges, 71 chief clerks of court), Juvenile Courts (133 judges, 159 chief clerks of courts), Probate Courts (159 judges, chief clerks), Magistrate Courts (499 judges, 159 chief clerks), and 388 Municipal Courts (350 judges, chief clerks). Special provisions within the Georgia Constitution allow for two additional classes of court of limited jurisdiction - County Recorder's Court (3 courts, 19 judges) and Civil Courts (2 courts, 4 judges). Together these court groups process over 3.6 million actions annually or an average of 14,726 case dockets, warrants, and filings processed statewide each day.<sup>21</sup> These general and limited jurisdiction courts are the basis where customer valuations of service quality in the Georgia judiciary are formed.

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<sup>21</sup> See 2008 Annual Report of the Works of the Court. Administrative Office of the Courts of Georgia. <http://www.georgiacourts.org/aoc/publications/FY+08+supplemental.pdf> Accessed online: March 6, 2009

At the trial court level, responsibility for controlling the court's bureaucracy – facilities, personnel and activities that are directly involved in the adjudication process – rest with an administrative or chief judge.<sup>22</sup> Yet, in many regards it is the trial court administrator, court manager, and/or chief clerk of court that set the tone and direction of court operations. These middle and executive level managers play an active role in the administrative functions of the court, including establishing and communicating goals, policies, guidelines and priorities. They oversee the daily operations and ensure the needs of court users are sufficiently met. They supervise the expeditious processing of cases and make certain that safe, clean, accessible, and convenient conditions exist at the court. Further, these agents have the principal responsibility of managing frontline staff to ensure court users are promptly served and treated with courtesy, impartiality, respect and dignity. Needless to say, the perceptions of customer needs and expectations held by court managers have a significant impact on quality of service provided by the court.

Getting a complete picture of customer perceptions and expectations surrounding service quality is of critical importance to the court's business objectives of improved service delivery and enhanced public trust and confidence. Accurate assessments of customer perceptions require actionable and relevant information. It makes sense that when court managers are supplied with meaningful data on how to best serve the customers that better decisions are made in terms of policy, operational procedures, and resource allocation. The key then to improving service

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<sup>22</sup> Hays, S.W. (1993) *The Traditional Managers: Judges and Court Clerks* in Hays, S.W., Graham, C.B. *Handbook of Court Administration and Management* New York: Basel p. 230

quality at Georgia courts is to provide court managers with a framework and tool that yields meaningful information about customer perceptions, values and expectations.

### C. Significance of the Problem

Studies conducted in 1978,<sup>23</sup> 1983,<sup>24</sup> 1999,<sup>25</sup> and 1999<sup>26</sup> suggest varying degrees of public dissatisfaction with the judicial system. The courts interest in improving the quality of service to the public is well-placed for a number of reasons. For one, courts, more than any other democratic institution, depend on the goodwill of the citizenry to remain viable.<sup>27</sup> The legitimacy derived from public support is particularly important to judicial institutions because they possess neither purse nor sword, but instead exist in order that the rule of law remains operative.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, without some level of support for and confidence in the justice system, people may be less willing to participate in the system as a juror and less likely to bring conflict into the system for resolution.<sup>29</sup> Dissatisfied citizens are less likely to comply with the rulings of court.<sup>30</sup> Third, citizens could also express their dissatisfaction at the polls by either supporting a candidate or ballot initiative that is adverse to the court<sup>31</sup> Fourth, dissatisfaction may also lead to citizens to

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<sup>23</sup> Yankelovich, Shelley and White, Inc., (1978) *The Public Image of Courts: Highlights of a National Survey of the General Public, Judges, Lawyers and Community Leaders in* National Center For State Courts (Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts).

<sup>24</sup> The Hearst Corporation (1983) *The American public, the media and the judicial system: A national survey of public awareness and person experience*

<sup>25</sup> American Bar Association (1999) *Perceptions of the U.S. Justice System.*

<sup>26</sup> National Center for State Courts (1999) *How the public views the state courts: A 1999 national survey*

<sup>27</sup> Wenzel, J.P. Bowler, S., Lanoue, D.J. (2003). "The sources of public confidence in state courts." *American Politics Research* Vol. 31 No 2 p.192

<sup>28</sup> Benesh, Sara C. *Understanding Public Confidence in American Courts.* The Journal of Politics, (2006) Vol. 68, No 3 p. 697

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, J.V., Stalans, L.J. (1997). *Public Opinion, Crime and Criminal Justice.* Boulder: Westview Press

<sup>30</sup> Tyler, T.R. (2006) *Why People Obey the Law.* New Haven: Yale University Press p. 82

<sup>31</sup> *Supra* 1, at 193 and 204

move outside a certain jurisdiction, while satisfaction leads to trust of local officials and positive changes in confidence in local officials.<sup>32</sup>

Research has found direct experience affect attitudes toward local courts;<sup>33</sup> therefore, it is easily discernable that it is to the court's advantage to pay attention to service quality. Additionally, researchers have determined service quality to be the antecedent to customer satisfaction.<sup>34 35</sup> Given these findings the value of a proven framework and measure to evaluate service quality by court customers is self evident. When court managers understand how services will be evaluated by the users, it will also be possible to identify how to manage these evaluations and how to influence them in a positive direction.

This research is significant in that it contributes to the field of court administration in three fundamental ways: (1) it introduces an alternative methodology for evaluating and diagnosing service quality; (2) it takes the preliminary step of using the SERVQUAL scale to gauge the strength and direction of service quality in a court context; (3) it establishes a base of information regarding court managers' perceptions surrounding service quality, from which future studies can build and improve upon.

#### D. Purpose of Study

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<sup>32</sup> See Note 12 Supra at p.532

<sup>33</sup> Wenzel, J.P. Bowler, S., Lanoue, D.J. (2003). "The sources of public confidence in state courts." *American Politics Research* Vol. 31 No 2 p. 205

<sup>34</sup> Cronin, J.J., Taylor, S.A. (1994), "SERVPERF versus SERVQUAL: Reconciling performance- based and perceptions-minus-expectations measures of service quality." *Journal of Marketing*, " Vol. 58 No. 1 pp.125-131.

<sup>35</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. (1994), "Reassessment of expectations as comparison standard in measuring service quality: Implications for further research." *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 58 No.1 pp. 111-124.

As the architects of the SERVQUAL framework note “knowing what customers expect is the first and possibly most critical step in delivering quality service.”<sup>36</sup> Yet their model establishes a requisite need to determine management’s perceptions of customer expectations in order to compare against customer expectations. The purpose of this study is to use a service quality model to assess court manager’s perceptions of service delivery as a preliminary step in a broader effort to improve service quality in Georgia trial courts and beyond. This report seeks to determine if gaps exist in terms of perceptions surrounding existing service versus service levels believed to be expected by customers. Here, service quality is assessed along five dimensions – *tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance* and *empathy* - as prescribed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry.<sup>37</sup> If successful this report will suggest a way forward in improving service quality evaluation and diagnostic capabilities of courts. The availability of a proven model would better equip court practitioners to respond to existing challenges and emerging changes in meeting the needs and expectations of court customers.

### Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are court manager’s overall perceptions of service quality at trial courts in Georgia? Do perceptions of service quality differ significantly among the various classes of courts?
2. In which areas should trial court managers focus resources in order to improve quality of service?
3. Are there identifiable influencers of service quality gaps, which if addressed, can reasonably be expected to improve service quality in the future?

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<sup>36</sup> See Note 17 supra, page 51

<sup>37</sup> See Note 14 supra, page 23

## Organization of the Report

The first section of the report provides an introduction to this study. It highlights several limitations of the CourTool 1 instrument, provides background information on court management in Georgia, briefly introduces an alternate methodology for assessing service quality and establishes the research questions. Section 2 is a review of the relevant literature on service quality. The section begins with a discussion of service quality concept and later presents several models for evaluating service quality. The third section, Methodology, describes the study's research design, sample population, survey instrument and data collection and analysis processes. Section 4 reports survey findings and offers interpretations of the data based on the service quality model. The final section discusses conclusions, presents recommendations and offers guidance for future research initiatives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In so far as establishing a framework to effectively assess service quality within a court environment is the central aim of this study, it is fitting that this section begins with a discussion on the service quality concept. Next are segments which summarize developments in the service quality literature and profile several prominent models for measuring quality of service. A review of the SERVQUAL approach and its practical application in public sector associations follows. The final segment provides an overview on how the present study is shaped by past literature.

### The Service Quality Concept

Service providers position themselves more effectively when they deliver higher levels of service quality to customers.<sup>38</sup> Therefore courts, as purveyors of justice, may improve their standing in terms of public support, satisfaction, trust and confidence by taking interest in improving the quality of services. However, the effective management of service quality is difficult because the elusive and abstract nature of the concept makes it a challenge to define and measure.<sup>39</sup> A review of the literature suggests service quality is generally defined in terms of subjectivity and perception. Zeithaml et al<sup>40</sup> noted perceived quality can be defined as the customer's judgment about a service's overall excellence or superiority. Brysland et al<sup>41</sup> concluded service quality is about "providing something intangible in a way that pleases the

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<sup>38</sup> Brown, S.W., Swartz, T.A. (1989) "A gap analysis of professional service quality" *Journal of Marketing* Vol.53 No. 2 pp.98

<sup>39</sup> See Note 5 supra, page 41

<sup>40</sup> Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L. (1988). "Consumer perceptions of price, quality and value: A means-end model and synthesis of evidence." *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 52 No. 3 p.3

<sup>41</sup> Brysland, A., Curry, A. (2001). Service improvements in public services using SERVQUAL. *Managing Service Quality* Vol. 11 No 6 p. 391

consumer and that preferably gives some value to that consumer.” Gronroos<sup>42</sup> defined service quality as a mixture of three elements: (1) the quality of the consumption process itself; (2) the quality of outcomes of the process; and (3) image of the provider of the service. Parasuraman et al<sup>43</sup> regarded perceived service quality as the difference between customers’ expectations of an ideal service and their perceptions of the service actually received from a service provider. Despite the subtle differences a recurring theme among definitions can be established: service quality is based on customer valuations of the services provided. It follows then that the essence of the service quality concept is captured in Berry, Zeithaml and Parasuraman’s declaration that “customers are the sole judge of service quality.”<sup>44</sup>

A review of the early literature on service quality revealed a preoccupation among researchers with the conceptualization of service quality.<sup>45 46 47</sup> Considerable effort was expended in understanding how customers interpret observations in making quality of service judgments. Several models were advanced and researchers sought to explain the evaluation process in terms of conjoint analysis;<sup>48</sup> critical incident technique;<sup>49</sup> and quality function

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<sup>42</sup> Gronroos, C. (2001). The perceived service quality concept- a mistake? *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 11 No 3, pp.151

<sup>43</sup> See Note 5 supra, page 42

<sup>44</sup> Berry, L.L., Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A.(1990) Five imperatives for improving service quality. *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 31 No. 4. p. 29

<sup>45</sup> Gronroos, C. (1982). “Strategic management and marketing in the service sector.” Helsinki: Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration

<sup>46</sup> Gronroos, C (1984).”A service quality model and its marketing implications” *European Journal of Marketing* Vol. 18 No. 4 pp 36-44

<sup>47</sup>See Note 5 supra, pages 42-43

<sup>48</sup> Carmen, J. (2000). Patient perceptions of service quality: combining the dimensions. *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 14 No. 4 p.337

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, R. (1997). Identifying the critical determinants of service quality in retail banking: importance and effect. *The International Journal of Bank Marketing*, Vol. 15 No 4 p.111.

deployment.<sup>50</sup> However, two conceptual models emerged among others as the most prominent of all – The Gronroos model and the SERVQUAL or Gaps model.

### The Gronroos Model

One approach suggested by Christian Gronroos indicated service quality is judged by customers along two dimensions: functional and technical quality (See Figure 1). As illustrated on the right side of the conceptual model, the functional dimension of quality is associated with the process of service delivery or *how* the service is performed and delivered. Likewise, service quality judgments are also based on *what* customers actually received (outcome), which he considered as its technical dimensions. Gronroos proposed six criteria for assessing service quality: professionalism and skills, attitudes and behaviors, accessibility and flexibility, reliability and trustworthiness, recovery, and reputation and credibility<sup>51</sup> He hypothesized that the functional quality assumes a role of greater importance in customer's perceptions of quality as long as the outcome or technical quality remains acceptable.<sup>52</sup> He also believed perceptions surrounding service quality would be largely based on functional quality whenever the technical quality (outcomes) of services was difficult or not readily discernable to customers.<sup>53</sup>

Gronroos' model also recognized that the service provider's image acts as a filter and therefore plays a critical role in the quality perception process. Accordingly, mistakes or service failures by service providers with a favorable image, while damaging, are likely to be forgiven

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<sup>50</sup> Sahney, S. Banwet, K., & Karunes, S. (2003). Enhancing quality in education: Application of quality function deployment – an industry perspective. *Work Study*, Vol. 52 No 6/7 pp. 297-309.

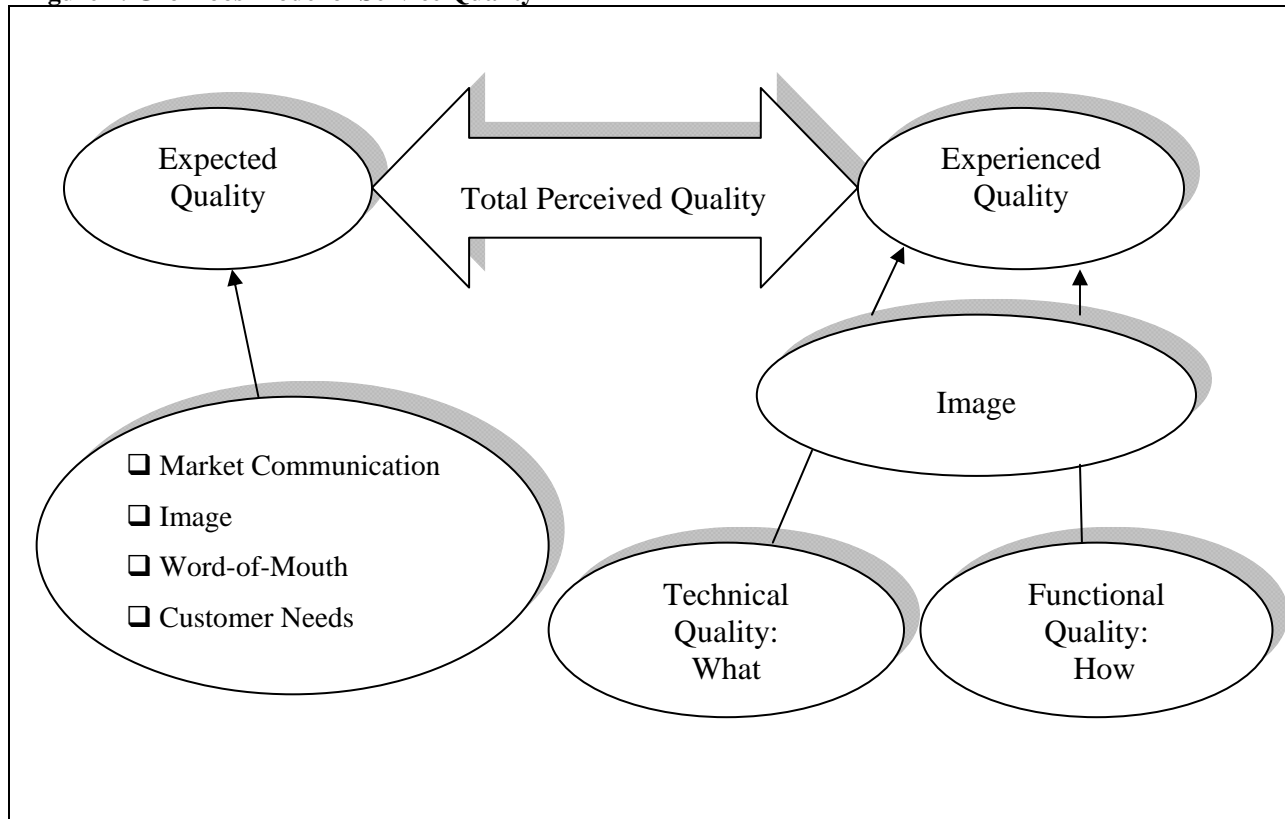
<sup>51</sup> Gronroos, C. (1988) "Service quality: The six criteria of good service quality." *Review of Business* Vol. 9 No 3, p.13

<sup>52</sup> Gronroos, C. (1982). Strategic management and marketing in the service sector. Helsinki Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, at page 82

by customers.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, similar mistakes at organizations with a negative image will often be judged with greater derision.

**Figure 1: Gronroos Model of Service Quality**



Source: Gronroos, C. (1988): "Service quality: The six criteria of good service quality." *Review of Business* Vol. 9 No 3, p.12

The left side of the model illustrates that expectations of service quality are contingent on several factors, including market communication, image, word of mouth communication, and customer needs. The model serves as a reminder that the service provider opportunity to directly influence customer expectations are limited to market communication, although image and word-of-mouth factors can be indirectly impacted by the organization.<sup>55</sup> Therefore the importance of

<sup>54</sup> Gronroos, C. (1988): "Service quality: The six criteria of good service quality." *Review of Business* Vol. 9 No 3, p.12

<sup>55</sup> **Loc Cit**

ongoing efforts to manage an organization's image and the stated and unstated messages communicated to the consuming public cannot be overstated. Service providers should work diligently at understanding customer expectations for their organization, seek to exhibit service quality excellence so that word-of-mouth communication is advantageous to the organization's image, and to the extent possible attempt to manage and influence expectations through marketing communications. At the same time caution and care should be exercised so that total perceived quality level isn't impacted negatively due to a tendency toward overpromising.<sup>56</sup>

### The Gaps Model

The SERVQUAL (Gaps) model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry,<sup>57</sup> has as its underpinning the theory of expectation disconfirmation. In his studies on disconfirmation, Oliver<sup>58</sup> observed expectations create a frame of reference about which one makes a comparative judgment. It follows that a service perceived to have outperformed expectations (a positive disconfirmation) is rated above this reference point. Conversely, a service perceived to be poorer than expected (a negative disconfirmation) is evaluated below this base.<sup>59</sup> Expectations then play a disconfirming role in the "gaps" model of service quality<sup>60</sup> in that the customer's attitude toward overall service quality is the result of a comparison between expectations and perceptions of the different components of the service. In other words, determinations about service quality

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<sup>56</sup> **Loc. Cit.**

<sup>57</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V., Berry, L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49 No 4, pp.41-50.

<sup>58</sup> Oliver, R.L. (1980) A cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction. *Journal of Marketing Research* Vol. 17 No.3 p. 460

<sup>59</sup> **Loc. Cit.**

<sup>60</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V., Berry, L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49 No 4, pp.41-50.

are subjectively formed as a result of pre-existing judgments and interaction encounters or “moment[s] of truth”<sup>61</sup> between consumer and service provider.

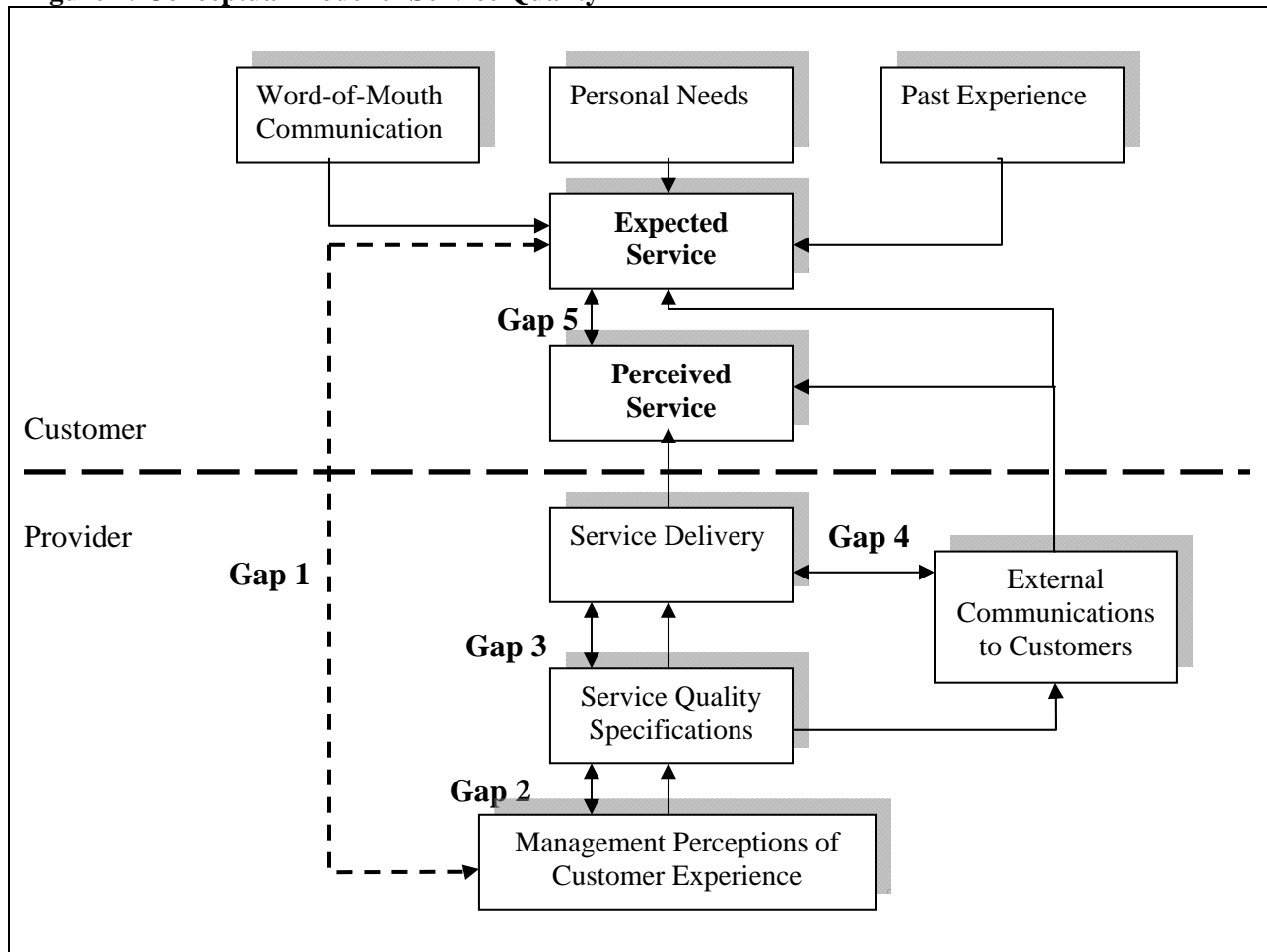
Building on the disconfirmation paradigm, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry conceptualized service quality as the difference between the perceptions and expectations customers have about services rendered. The researchers developed a conceptual model (see Figure 2) which identified 5 gaps within an organizational-context that lead to service quality shortfalls. These deficiencies are discernable by court customers and lead to perceptions of poor quality of service and dissatisfaction. The upper portion of their model (customer’s side) indicate customer expectations of service are influenced by communications with other consumers, personal needs, past experiences, as well as external communication with the service provider. The lower portion (provider’s side) illustrate four gaps within the provider’s organization that when neglected lead to perceptions of poor service quality and dissatisfaction. Gap 5, the difference between customer’s expectation and management’s perception of customer expectation, is considered the most important gap and is used as the overall definition of service quality by researchers.<sup>62</sup> Under the Gaps Model, Gap 5 is on the customer’s side; Gaps 2-4 are on the service provider’s side, While Gap 1 spans both sides. Therefore data from customers are needed to measure Gaps 1 and 5, and data from organizational personnel (court managers) are needed to measure Gaps 1-4. The five service quality gaps are explained in detail below.

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<sup>61</sup> Gronroos, C (2007) “Service management and marketing: Customer management in Service Competition “ England: John Wiley & Sons p.81

<sup>62</sup> Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A. , Berry, L.L. (1990) *Delivering Quality Service*, New York: The Free Press

**Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Service Quality**



Source: *Delivering Quality Service*, (p.46) V.A. Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, & L.L. Berry, 1990, New York: The Free Press © 1990

Gap 1: The Customers' Expectations- Management Perceptions Gap.<sup>63</sup> Managers' inaccurate understanding of customer's needs and expectations may lead to service-delivery performance that is below customer expectations. Investigative research with managers and users may detect discrepancies between expectations and perceptions. Front-line employees play a vital role in the service delivery process and can supply management with an informed perspective on when, how, and why the court failed to meet expectations. However, the best source of information on customer needs and expectations are the customers themselves. If managers do not seek feedback

<sup>63</sup> See Note 17 supra, pages 37-39

information on a regular basis, they become uninformed about what really matters and therefore develop false perceptions.

Gap 2: The Management's Perceptions- Service Quality Specifications Gap.<sup>64</sup> Here, managers have accurate perceptions about customer's needs, but fail to translate those needs into the appropriate service standards. Ideally, the organization's commitment to service quality would be communicated in the vision and mission statement and reflected in the strategic plan, which includes strategies to achieve the service quality vision. By design, the strategic plan would convert the court's knowledge of customers' expectations into concrete performance standards. Firms that fail to develop performance standards invariably will experience service quality shortfall.

Gap 3: The Service-Quality Specification- Service Delivery Gap.<sup>65</sup> Gap 3 is also known as the service-performance gap and it occurs when employees are unable and/or unwilling to perform according to established performance standards. To improve service performance, managers must establish clear guidelines, ensure adequate resources (i.e. people, systems, and technology) are supplied, conduct regular training to provide the requisite skills, and require achievement.

Gap 4: The Service Delivery – External Communications Gap.<sup>66</sup> This gap occurs when promises communicated through court leadership, staff, brochures, website and other communications are different from the actual service provided. For service organizations these

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<sup>64</sup> See Note 17 supra, pages 39-42

<sup>65</sup> See Note 17 supra, pages 42- 43

<sup>66</sup> , See Note 17 supra, pages 43-45

external communications raise expectations which ultimately serve as the standard by which customers will assess quality of services. Oftentimes this discrepancy is a result of inaccurate planning or poor coordination between operations and management or marketing personnel /public information officer. If expectations are raised too high, because of a public relations campaign for example, the quality of service may be disappointing, if only because customers had unrealistic expectations.<sup>67</sup>

Gap 5: The Service Quality Gap.<sup>68</sup> Gap 5 is established as the difference between the expected and perceived quality of services from the customer's standpoint. This gap may arise because of deficiencies in one or more of the previous four gaps. As the authors note the key to effectively addressing Gap 5 is to ensure Gaps1 through 4 are closed and kept closed.<sup>69</sup>

Table 1 provides additional information on service quality gaps, definitions and key contributing factors.

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<sup>67</sup> Gronroos, C. (1993) Quality comes to service. In E. Scheuing, W. Christopher (Eds) The Service Quality Handbook. New York: American Management Association p.21

<sup>68</sup> See Note 24 supra, page 46

<sup>69</sup> **Loc Cit**

**Table 1: Service Quality Gaps, Definition and Key Contributing Factors**

Service Quality Gap and Definition	Key Contributing Factors of Service Quality Gaps
Gap 1. (The Positioning Gap) – pertains to managers’ perceptions of consumers’ expectations and the relative importance consumers attach to the quality dimensions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of a marketing research orientation (insufficient marketing research, inadequate use of research findings, lack of interaction between management and customers);</li> <li>2. Inadequate upward communication from contact personnel to management;</li> <li>3. Too many levels of management separating contact personnel from top managers.</li> </ol>
Gap 2. (The Specification Gap) – is concerned with the difference between what management believes the consumer wants and what the consumers expect the organization to provide.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inadequate management commitment to service quality;</li> <li>2. Perception of infeasibility;</li> <li>3. Inadequate task standardization;</li> <li>4. Absence of goal setting.</li> </ol>
Gap 3. (The Delivery Gap) – is concerned with the difference between the service provided by the employee of the organization and the specifications set by management.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Role ambiguity;</li> <li>2. Role conflict;</li> <li>3. Poor employee-job fit;</li> <li>4. Poor technology-job fit;</li> <li>5. Inappropriate supervisory control systems;</li> <li>6. Lack of perceived control;</li> <li>7. Lack of teamwork.</li> </ol>
Gap 4. (The Communication Gap) – exists when the promises communicated by the organization to the consumer do not match the consumers’ expectations of those external promises.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inadequate horizontal communication;</li> <li>2. Differences in policies and procedures across departments;</li> <li>3. Propensity to overpromise.</li> </ol>
Gap 5. (The Perception Gap) – is the difference between the consumers’ internal perceptions and expectations of the services.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Word of mouth communications;</li> <li>2. Personal needs;</li> <li>3. Past experiences;</li> <li>4. External communications with service provider</li> </ol>

Source: *Delivering Quality Service*, V.A. Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, & L.L. Berry, 1990, New York: The Free Press © 1990

### Measuring Service Quality

Thus far the literature has established service quality as a subjective concept --- it is what the customer says it is. The literature further suggests a general consensus among researchers that customers evaluate service quality by comparing what they expect with how a service provider actually performs. The subjective nature in which customers judge quality of services makes creating an effective, reliable, valid measurement scale a formidable task. However, through focus group interviews, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry developed an initial list of ten

dimensions of service quality: access, communication, competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability, responsiveness, security, understanding and tangibles.<sup>70</sup> After researchers subjected these dimensions to empirical validation and rigorous scale development a high degree of correlation between communication, competence, courtesy, credibility, and security were found to exist. Likewise a correlation between access and understanding were discovered. In response, the research team condensed these determinants into two broad dimensions – assurance and empathy – so that a total five consolidated dimensions remained.<sup>71</sup> (See Table 2)

***Tangibles:*** the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials;

***Reliability:*** the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

***Responsiveness:*** willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

***Assurance:*** knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence;

***Empathy:*** caring, individualized attention provided to customers.

SERVQUAL investigates service quality along these dimension using 22 statements which measure customer perceptions of services provision and 22 similarly worded items measuring customer's expectations of service. Responses are recorded on a 7 point Likert scale, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 signifies strong agreement. A gap score for each item is computed taking the difference of the perception and expectation score. The process is represented by the equation:

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<sup>70</sup> See Note 5 supra, page 47

<sup>71</sup> See Note 17 supra, page 25

$$SQ = P - E$$

where, SQ (Service Quality score) corresponds to the Perception score (P) minus the Expectation score (E)

<b>Original Ten SERVQUAL Dimensions</b>	<b>Modified SERVQUAL Dimensions</b>
Tangibles	Tangibles
Reliability	Reliability
Responsiveness	Responsiveness
Competence	Assurance
Courtesy	
Credibility	
Security	
Access	Empathy
Communications	
Understanding the Customer	

Source: Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L (1988) Delivering Quality Service, New York: Free Press, p. 25

### Criticism of SERVQUAL

Although SERVQUAL has enjoyed wide popularity and extensive use among researchers, the methodology has not escaped critical review. Criticisms of the SERVQUAL scale exist on both theoretical and operational grounds. Teas<sup>72</sup> (1993) tested several models and concluded the perception-minus-expectations framework has conceptual and operational problems. Specifically, it was noted the conceptual definitions of expectations was problematic

<sup>72</sup> Teas, R.K. (1993) Expectations, performance evaluation, and consumers' perceptions of quality. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 57 No. 4 pp. 18-34

in that it was not clear if expectations are meant to measure what service providers “would” offer or “should” offer. Issue was also taken with the operationalization of the expectation concept. Empirical results of his study suggests variance in the SERVQUAL expectations measure may be attributable to respondents’ misinterpretation of the question presented rather than to variance in respondents’ attitudes or perceptions.<sup>73</sup> Carman<sup>74</sup> similarly questioned the validity of the expectations measure when consumers do not have “well-formed expectations.”

Other researchers<sup>75 76 77</sup> have questioned the utility of the expectations component on the grounds of redundancy. The argument is made that respondent, in providing their estimations of customer satisfaction may have already factored the perceptions minus expectations paradigm in the mental evaluation process.

Brown et al<sup>78</sup> criticized the use of the difference scores (perceptions minus expectations) in measuring service quality. Specifically, they questioned the merit of using expectations as a comparison standard to create a separate variable, and later using that variable (gap score) as an overall measurement of service quality (see Gap 5, Figure 2). Their study illustrated three instances in which the use of difference scores to measure service quality could lead to problems with reliability, discriminant validity, and errors induced by variance restriction. The authors contend the reliability of difference scores was artificially intensified by a positive correlation

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, page 31

<sup>74</sup> See Note 33 supra, page 38

<sup>75</sup> Carmen (1990) Consumer perceptions of service quality: An assessment of the SERVQUAL dimensions *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 66 No 1 pp.33-55

<sup>76</sup> Finn, D., Lamb, C (1991), An evaluation of the SERVQUAL scales in a retailing setting *Advances in Consumer Retailing* Vol. 18 pp. 483-90

<sup>77</sup> Cronin, J.J., Taylor, S.A. (1992) Measuring service quality: A reexamination and extension. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 56 No.3 pp 55-68

<sup>78</sup> Brown, T.J., Churchill, Jr., G.A. Peter, J.P. (1993) Improving the measurement of service quality. *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 69 No.1 pp. 140-147

between component scores and that “a measure with low reliability may appear to possess discriminant validity simply because it is unreliable.”<sup>79</sup>

In separate studies Babakus et al<sup>80</sup> and Carmen<sup>81</sup> argued that the perception-expectation approach is of little added value and should be combined into a single scale which focuses on customer perceptions. Cronin and Taylor<sup>82 83</sup> agreed that it was unnecessary to measure expectation and concluded that perceptions provided a sufficient assessment of service quality. They advanced a performance-only based model (SERVPERF), which outperformed comparative measures in terms of reliability and validity. Their alternate instrument used the 22 questions from the perception scores to measure levels of service quality experienced. The SERVPERF survey is identical to the SERVQUAL scale, except it lacks the 22 item expectation portion. Brady et al<sup>84</sup> replicated the study and found the SERVPERF performance-only approach to be the superior instrument in terms of predictive power.

Parasuraman<sup>85</sup> defended their model by maintaining the position that the perceptions-expectations approach yielded richer information than alternate approaches that focused on perceptions-only. However, presented with the findings from the Cronin and Taylor study, the research team advanced a three column disconfirmation scale comparing customers’ desired and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, page 130

<sup>80</sup> Babakus and Boller (1992) “Adapting the SERVQUAL scale to hospital services: an empirical investigation, *Health Services Research*, Vol. 26 (2): 767-86

<sup>81</sup> Carmen (1990) “Consumer perceptions of service quality: an assessment of the SERVQUAL dimensions,” *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 66 pp.33-55

<sup>82</sup> Cronin, J.J., Taylor, S.A. (1992) Measuring service quality: A reexamination and extension. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 56 pp 55-68

<sup>83</sup> Cronin, J.J., Taylor, S.A. (1994) SERVPERF versus SERVQUAL: Reconciling performance-based and perceptions-minus- expectations measurement of service quality. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 58 pp.125-131

<sup>84</sup> Brady, M., & Cronin, J. (2001), “Customer orientation: Effects on customer service perceptions and outcome behaviors.” *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 3 No. 3 pp.241 -251

<sup>85</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. (1994) Reassessment of expectations as a comparison standard in measuring service quality: implications for further research. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 58 No. pp.111-124

adequate levels of expectations to the perceptions of service provision. In comparing performances of several models Parasuraman et al found that the “difference-score measures perform as well as the direct measures on all psychometric criteria except predictive power.”<sup>86</sup> They researchers ultimately concluded that the research intent should dictate which type of instrument should be used. As they put it:

“If maximizing predictive power is the principle objective, the perceptions-only scale is the best as it outperforms all other measures on this criterion. However, if identifying critical service shortfalls is the principal objective, the three column format questionnaire seems most useful; and this format also provides separate perceptions ratings for those concerned with maximizing predictive power.”<sup>87</sup>

Despite problems with its psychometric properties, researchers<sup>88 89</sup> contend that SERVQUAL consistently highlights the dimensions considered most important by customers. Perhaps the most flattering comment attributed to the SERVQUAL instrument was put forward by Nyeck et al , who recognized SERVQUAL as the “the most complete attempt to conceptualize and measure service quality.”<sup>90</sup>

### SERVQUAL in the Public Sector

The SERVQUAL scale was developed using customers of five service sectors: retail banking, credit cards, securities brokerage, appliance repair and maintenance, long distance

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<sup>86</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. (1994) Alternative scales for measuring service quality: A comparative assessment based on psychometric and diagnostic criteria *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 70 No. 3 p. 218

<sup>87</sup> Loc. Cit.

<sup>88</sup> Donnelly, M., Shui, E. (1999) Assessing service quality and its link with value for money in a UK local authority’s housing repairs service using the SERVQUAL approach. *Total Quality Management Business Excellence* Vol. 10 No. 4/5 pp. 498-506

<sup>89</sup> Wisniewski, M., & Donnelly, M. (2001). Using SERVQUAL to assess customer satisfaction with public sector: The potential for SERVQUAL. *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 7 No 4 pp. 357-365.

<sup>90</sup> Nyeck, S., Morales, M., Ladhari, R. Pons, F. (2002) “10 years of service quality measurement: reviewing the use of the SERVQUAL instrument. *Cuadernos de Difusion* Vol. 7 No. 13 p.101

telephone.<sup>91</sup> It has become one of the most widely used methods for assessing service quality in marketing, retailing and many other disciplines.<sup>92</sup> The scale's flexibility has been demonstrated by its use in a variety of industries such as a placement center, dental schools and acute care hospital<sup>93</sup>; gas and electric utilities;<sup>94</sup> lodging properties<sup>95</sup> catering services, grounds maintenance, library services;<sup>96</sup> housing repair services;<sup>97</sup> travel and tourism industry;<sup>98</sup> banks, pest control firms, dry cleaners, and fast food restaurants<sup>99</sup> Nyeck et al<sup>100</sup> noted SERVQUALs popularity among researchers can be attributable to its ease of use and its adaptability to diverse sectors.

Compared to efforts in business and service sector industries, service quality research in public sector domains is relatively sparse. The scale has been used to evaluate and improve quality of service at a public library<sup>101</sup>, police services,<sup>102</sup> college and universities<sup>103</sup> and the

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<sup>91</sup> Parasuraman, A., V.A. Zeithaml and LL Berry . 1993. SERVQUAL: A multiple item scale for measuring consumer perception of service quality. *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 69 No 1 pp:127-139

<sup>92</sup> Schneider, B., White,S.S. (2004) Service quality: Research perspectives. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication

<sup>93</sup> Carmen, J. (1990) Consumer perceptions of service quality: An assessment of the SERVQUAL dimensions. *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 66 No 1 pp. 33-55.

<sup>94</sup> Babakus, E., & Boller, G.W. (1992). An empirical assessment of the SERVQUAL scale. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 24 No 3 pp. 253-268.

<sup>95</sup> Knutson, B., Stevens, P., Wullaert, C., Patton, M., & Yokoyama, F (1990) LODGSERV: A service quality index for the lodging industry. *Hospitality Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 2 pp.277-284

<sup>96</sup> Wisniewski, M., & Donnelly, M. (2001). Using SERVQUAL to assess customer satisfaction with public sector: The potential for SERVQUAL. *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 7 No 4 pp. 357-365.

<sup>97</sup> Donnelly, M., Shui, E. (1999) Assessing service quality and its link with value for money in a UK local authority's housing repairs service using the SERVQUAL approach. *Total Quality Management Business Excellence* Vol. 10 No. 4/5 pp. 498-506

<sup>98</sup> Fick, G. & Ritchie, J. (1991). Measuring service quality in the travel and tourism industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 30 No 2 pp.2-9.

<sup>99</sup> Cronin, J.J., Taylor, S.A. (1992) Measuring service quality: A reexamination and extension. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 56 pp 55-68

<sup>100</sup> See Note 49 supra, page 101

<sup>101</sup> Dalrympie, J., Donnelly, M., Wisniewski, M., Curry,A. (1995) Measuring service quality in local government. In Kanji, G.K. (Ed.) *Proceedings of the First World Congress on TQM*, London: Chapman and Hall pp.263-266

<sup>102</sup> Donnelly, M., Kerr, N.J., Rimmer, R., Shui, E.M (2006) Assessing the quality of police services using SERVQUAL *International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* Vol. 29 No. 1 pp.92-105

<sup>103</sup> Smith, G., Smith, A., Clarke, A., (2007) Evaluating service quality in universities: A service department perspective. *Quality Assurance in Education* Vol.15 No. 3 pp.334-351

military.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, the available research offers rich lessons in understanding the instrument's capabilities and limitations when used in the public services domain. The work of Donnelly<sup>105</sup> provided a theoretical discourse on the measurement of service quality in local government using the SERVQUAL approach. Their research was significant in that it outlined features of local government that might affect an assessment of service quality delivery. Orwig et al<sup>106</sup> also investigated the applicability of the SERVQUAL instrument in a public sector environment and hypothesized that SERVQUAL's reliability and validity would be the same if service quality is viewed in a similar manner by both the private and public sector. They recommended further research to determine if SERVQUAL was specific to the organization or symptomatic of the public sector.

Bryceland and Curry used two service cases (catering and grounds maintenance) to illustrate the use of the SERVQUAL instrument to improve both process management and strategic planning in the UK North Lanarkshire Council. They examined SERVQUAL as a measurement tool and findings suggest the identified gaps could aid in prioritizing service developments and form the basis for future service developments. Their study noted several benefits of the SERVQUAL methodology in evaluating and determining the following:

- Different customers' perceptions and expectations of service quality to highlight current performance levels, by customer segmentation;
- Resultant service quality gaps;

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<sup>104</sup> Orwig, R., Pearson, J., & Cochran, D. (1997). An empirical investigation into the validity of SERVQUAL in the public sector. *Public Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 21 No 1 pp. 54-68.

<sup>105</sup> Donnelly, M. (1999). Making the difference: Quality strategy in the public sector. *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 9 No 1 pp. 47-52.

<sup>106</sup> Orwig, R., Pearson, J. & Cochran, D. (1997). An empirical investigation into the validity of SERVQUAL in the public sector. *Public Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 21 No 1 pp. 54-68.

- How important each of the service quality dimensions is to the customer, which assist in resource allocation and definition of action-planning priorities;
- An understanding of customer perceptions and expectations over time, allowing further analysis as part of the monitoring process;
- How to manage customer expectations with regard to service planning, design and delivery
- The impact of service improvement activities carried out as a result of customer expectations and priorities;
- Most importantly, the results that provide a starting point and assist in the prioritization of service improvement activities.<sup>107</sup>

In another study Wisniewski<sup>108</sup> utilized a modified SERVQUAL questionnaire developed specifically for each service to conduct pilot studies across a range of Scottish Council services. The pilot studies assesses customer satisfaction with public sector services in catering, building control, development control, grounds maintenance, housing repairs, leisure services and library services. The study examined the diagnostic characteristics of the SERVQUAL instrument and its use in facilitating the continuous improvement of councils. Their study identified seven ways in which SERVQUAL results could be used to help services identify areas for performance improvement:

1. To enable the service manager to assess current service and quantify gaps that exists.
2. To provide an overall understanding of the relative importance of the five service dimensions from the customer's perspective in terms of an individual service and across different services.

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<sup>107</sup> Brysland, A., Curry, A. (2001). "Service improvements in public services using SERVQUAL" *Managing Service Quality* Vol. 11 No. 6 p.394-395 [389-401]

<sup>108</sup> Wisniewski, M., & Donnelly, M. (2001). Using SERVQUAL to assess customer satisfaction with public sector: The potential for SERVQUAL. *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 7 No 4 pp. 357-365.

3. To compare different customer groups.
4. To allow comparisons across different parts of the same service on a geographical basis.
5. To understand the internal customer.
6. To compare different or similar services
7. To allow action to be taken to close significant gaps in service provision. <sup>109</sup>

Tan et al<sup>110</sup> noted several benefits of employing the instrument:

- It is good at eliciting the views of customers regarding service encounter (e.g. customer relative importance, expectations, and satisfaction).
- It is able to alert management to consider the perception of both management and customers.
- Addressing the service gaps can serve as a basis for formulating strategies and tactics in order to ensure the fulfillment of expectations.
- SERVQUAL is able to identify specific areas of excellence and weaknesses.
- It is able to prioritize areas of service weaknesses.
- It provides benchmarking analysis for organizations in the same industry
- SERVQUAL can trace the trend of customer relative importance, expectation, and perception, if applied periodically.

Finally, the literature review uncovered an effort to assess service quality at the county government level within Georgia. Sullivan et al<sup>111</sup> explored how the SERVQUAL model could

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<sup>109</sup> Wisniewski, M., Donnelly, M.(2001). "Using SERVQUAL to assess customer satisfaction with public sector: The potential for SERVQUAL." *Total Quality Management* Vol.7 No.4, pp. 357-365

<sup>110</sup> Tan, K.C., Pawitra, T.A (2001) Integrating SERVQUAL and Kano's model into QFD for service excellence development. *Managing Service Quality* Vol. 11 No 6 p.420-421

<sup>111</sup> Sullivan, B. & Cheryl Estes (2007). "Measuring Customer Service Quality in Local Government." *Public Manager* Vol. 36 pp. 37-39

be applied to improve the grants program of the Fulton County (Atlanta), Georgia Human Services Department. A modified version of the instrument was used to conduct a customer satisfaction survey. The authors noted new information was acquired and areas for improvement throughout the grants process were discovered.<sup>112</sup> The researchers provided several specific recommendations when using SERVQUAL in a government or nonprofit setting:

- On the whole, SERVQUAL or a modified version is most useful when employed to test the impact of changes made in organizational processes.
- If the organization is limited in its capacity to implement program measures, combining a SERVQUAL-type survey with satisfaction measures may be an easy way to introduce the concept.
- The survey should be developed from a process map of activities that illustrate the SERVQUAL quality dimension identified in the appendix, especially when conducting a satisfaction survey rather than a quality study.
- A gap analysis is needed, but it should consider the convenience of the customer and organization. A modification of the original SERVQUAL gap analysis is best, but if that is not possible, a modification of the original survey should allow the examination of the importance of quality.
- Finally, private –sector models aren’t designed for public decision making. Careful selection of participants is necessary. In our case, the customers were nonprofit partners with which we maintain a specific relationship. They are well aware of all customer-related phases of the grants process and could speak with authority and knowledge when providing an assessment.<sup>113</sup>

From the literature review common findings of researchers include use of SERVQUAL as a diagnostic tool of service quality.<sup>114</sup> Researchers contend that SERVQUAL may be used in the public sector provided the instrument is tailored to the context in which it is to be applied.<sup>115</sup> Given the complexity of the public sector, several researchers expressed a viewpoint that despite

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, page 39

<sup>113</sup> **Loc. Cit**

<sup>114</sup> (Bryland & Curry, 2001; Donnelly et al 1995; Wisniewski, 2001).

<sup>115</sup> See for example Brysland & Curry (2001); Curry, (1999), Donnell & Shui (1999).

SERVQUAL's utility it should not be the only method used to determine needs, expectations and perceptions of customer's.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, most studies concluded that further research was needed and the application of SERVQUAL in the public sector should be based on rigorously tested and validated models. The findings and conclusions reached by researchers are believe to be applicable to service quality at trial courts and are influential in this research design.

### Summary

Taken on a whole existing literature provides guidance and direction for assessing service quality in a court setting. From the body of literature it can be established that service quality is determined by customer judgments about service provision. From the Gronroos studies it is recognized service quality has both technical and functional dimensions. The functional quality (how services are provided) becomes critically important in domains such as court operations, where the technical quality dimensions of administering justice are not easily discernable to customers. From Parasuraman and colleagues a proven framework and measure is provided and when properly refined in a context-specific manner can assess the degree and direction of gaps in customer perceptions and expectations. The gaps assessment is conducted along five service quality dimensions. As a result of academic discourse between Parasuraman et al and Cronin Taylor, researchers are admonished to select survey instruments based on the type of research under investigation. Finally, from the available studies on service quality in public sector organization several benefits and precautions are noted when using the instrument in government services environment.

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<sup>116</sup> See for example Donnelly & Shui (1999); Wisniewski, M., & Donnelly, M. (2001). Using SERVQUAL to assess customer satisfaction with public sector: The potential for SERVQUAL. Total Quality Management, Vol. 7 No 4 pp. 357-365.

## METHODOLOGY

The overarching objectives of this research are to determine court manager's perceptions of service quality at local trial courts and to identify areas for service quality improvement. To these ends, the present research uses the SERVQUAL approach as a framework in which to (1) gather insight into existing perceptions of service quality among court managers, (2) identify service quality gaps within the various trial courts and (3) probe common influencers of service quality gaps as identified by Parasuraman et al<sup>117</sup>. This section provides an overview of the population, survey instrument, research methods and data collection process employed in this study.

### Population

The present study investigates court manager's perceptions of service quality at local trial courts. Here, the term "court manager" is used in the generic sense to include chief clerks of court, deputy clerks of court, court administrators, managers, supervisors and other persons who by election, appointment or civil selection process serve in a senior or middle management capacity at a local trial court. Therefore, the population of this research is defined as court managers presently serving at a superior, state, juvenile, probate, magistrate or municipal court in Georgia. The focus on court managers was deemed appropriate in so far as persons occupying these positions bear responsibility for managing daily operations, assessing performance, ordering priorities, developing and enforcing policy, and have general supervision of those who perform the work of rendering services to court's customers.

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<sup>117</sup> See Note 17 supra, page 190

## Survey Instrument

A survey questionnaire, adapted from Parasuraman et al<sup>118</sup> SERVQUAL instrument and with consideration for Cronin and Taylor's SERVPERF scale, was used for data collection purposes. The SERVQUAL instrument was originally developed to assess consumers' perceptions of service quality in retail banking, credit card, securities brokerage, and product repair and maintenance industries. As previously discussed numerous studies have validated it as a reliable scale for measuring service quality in other industries, including public sector organizations. A review of the literature could not establish that either instruments had previously been deployed in a court environment.

Unlike the original instrument which is a two-part 22 item questionnaire, the present study investigates the five dimensions of service quality using a two-part 10 item survey. Accordingly, the *tangible* dimension is assessed in statements #1 & #2; *reliability* in statements #3 & #4; *responsiveness* in statements #5 & #6; *assurance* in statements #7 & #8; and *empathy* in statements #9 & #10. This modification was made to reduce overall questionnaire length, improve response rate, encourage survey participation and minimize time required for survey completion. The instrument was further modified with context-specific items that are similar in structure to the original statements, as recommended by the instrument's architects.<sup>119</sup> Context-specific modifications have been demonstrated to improve the instrument's reliability when used across industries and is recommended by the architects of the instrument. Survey data would be collected using a 7 point Likert scale with "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" anchoring opposite ends of response options.

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<sup>118</sup> See Note 17 supra, pages 191-194

<sup>119</sup> Parasuraman, A., Berry, L., Zeithaml, V. (1991). Refinement and reassessment of the SERVQUAL scale *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 67 No 4 pp. 420-449

A second section, consisting of 13 questions, was added to the questionnaire to investigate influencers of service quality gaps. Here, the prognostic nature of the underlying research questions warranted the use of the perceptions-only methodology, SERVPERF, as according to existing literature it outperforms other models in its predictive capabilities. As with the previous section, survey participants were asked to rate each statement according to a 7-point Likert scale. The final section elicited general information on position/title, class of court, and county population size for statistical purposes. A single question which asked participants to provide an overall assessment of service quality served as the lead question for the survey.

#### Pre-test Pilot

Once developed the survey instrument was pretested to verify face validity, research design, and court-setting relevance. In the pretest phase, the instrument was administered to a sample of seven court professionals, consisting of five executive level administrators (including three Fellows of the Institute for Court Management), one senior manager, one program manager and two line staff. They were asked to critically review the questionnaire and offer their assessment. (See Appendix A Pretest Participation Letter).

Feedback received from reviewers was constructive, with several recommendations advanced. It was suggested that the question “Using a 10-point scale, where 1 indicates “very poor” and 10 represents “excellent,” how would you rate the overall service quality at your court?” should be repositioned as the lead question since it solicits a general evaluation of service quality. The question was originally listed among concluding items in order to invite a more reflective assessment. Reviewers also commented the combination of statements phrased in

a negative form and the agree/disagree response format was especially confusing. For illustrative purposes consider the following statement: Court leadership is not supportive of service quality improvement efforts – (sample response options) Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree/agree, Agree, Strongly agree. As a result, a number of statements were subsequently rephrased to make them less complex and easier to understand. For example the previously noted statement was reworded and now reads: Court leadership is supportive of service improvement initiatives. Also, reviewers pointed out several typographical errors, which were promptly corrected. Finally, it was determined the survey on average took less than ten minutes to complete.

### Research Design

This study sought to obtain meaningful data regarding service quality in the Georgia trial courts. The research design, as originally conceived, called for a 20 percent random sample of court managers throughout the state. To guard against over-representation, a stratified sampling method was employed so that the maximum number of court managers selected for participation would not exceed 20 percent of the total population in any class of court. This approach was complicated by local arrangements at many courts in which the court administrator or chief clerk of court serves in a dual capacity and across multiple classes of court. It was determined the issue of overlap could be effectively addressed by requiring court managers to base their response on a particular class of court. Random sampling among the court groups was achieved with assistance from an Internet-based service (Researchrandomizer.com). After assigning each of the state's 159 counties a numeric value according to its place on the alphabetized list, computer-generated random numbers were used to establish the sample population. The process

was repeated for each class of court, including the combined 403 municipal and special courts. On several occasions a substitution protocol (again, using the random selection process) had to be employed due to instances where a court manager was previously selected for their related duties in another class of court.

In total, survey questionnaires were mailed to 242 court managers. Included in the correspondence was cover letter which informed respondents about the purpose of the research, offered assurances of anonymity and established a two week deadline for response. Respondents were provided the option to return completed surveys via U.S. mail, facsimile, or online via Internet-based survey tool (surveymonkey.com). To encourage participation, increase response rate and expedite the data analysis process, an incentive was offered to court managers who completed the survey online. A \$20.00 gift certificate to a national discount retailer (Wal-Mart) was offered to every twentieth online respondent. Here, it is important to note the permissibility of county employees accepting a gratuity was investigated and found to vary on a county basis. In some counties, employees were prohibited from accepting gifts, while in others the maximum gratuity permitted under county policy ranged from \$20 to \$100.00. Survey respondents were informed of an option to participate in survey while opting out of consideration for the gift certificate in the event a conflict with local policy existed.

Despite these efforts, only 26 of the 242 (10%) mailed surveys were returned, including a total of five online completions. Of this total, 21 were retained as 5 surveys were deemed unusable due to excessive missing data. Therefore, 9 percent of mailed surveys yielded useable data. In an effort to obtain the data needed to draw meaningful conclusions, the research plan

was modified. It was decided the survey would be administered to all court managers using available email addresses and existing listservs. This option had been considered in the original research design, but ultimately was rejected out of concerns about inclusiveness and representativeness of the survey population. The researcher is aware that an undetermined number of court managers within the state are not subscribed to any listserv; neither can they be reached through direct email campaign. An email communication was transmitted to court managers statewide through the several listservs and personal emails accounts on file at the AOC. In total, the announcement was delivered to 1661 recipients using 12 separate listserv and email distribution lists. This figure is skewed in two regards: (1) it includes an undetermined number of frontline and auxiliary personnel staff who are listserv subscribers and (2) an undetermined number of court managers are subscribed to multiple listservs. Based on these factors, no attempt at determining rate of response is made. The email message contained a direct link to the online survey (surveymonkey.com) and informed respondents of the gift certificate offer. To encourage timely completion of the survey an eight day deadline was established for responses. A copy of the cover letter and survey questionnaire is included in Appendix B. This effort yielded an additional 123 surveys completed. A feature enabled in the online survey required a response to each question; therefore 100% of these responses provided useable data for analysis. Survey results are therefore based on 144 useable responses gathered from both surveys.

### Data Analysis

In accordance with the SERVQUAL framework, the five dimensions of service quality will be assessed separately using the simple average of the gap score (i.e. perception minus

expectation) for the two items which comprise the dimension. The more negative the SERVQUAL (gap) scores the more serious the service quality deficiency.<sup>120</sup> A score closer to zero indicates the existing service quality is perceived to meet customer expectations in that dimension. A positive SERVQUAL score signifies current service quality is believed to exceed customer expectations along that dimension.

Due to formatting protocol within the surveymonkey.com application the observed responses were recorded and tallied by response category (i.e. strongly disagree ... neither agree/disagree ... strongly agree), as opposed to assigned numerical values of 1-7. Only the raw number of responses and percentage of the total for each category was supplied. In order to compute the gap scores for each dimension, these figures had to be converted into ordinal variables. This was accomplished by assigning each response a value between 1-7, where “strongly disagree” would be scored as 1, “strongly agree” would be counted as a 7, and responses in between would be tallied according to the relative place on the continuum. Once complete, a gap score for each statement and dimension could be determined according to suggested guidelines for using the SERVQUAL framework.<sup>121</sup> The gap scores for each dimension would be displayed in an intuitive bar graph for easy interpretation of results.

Section three investigates possible antecedents of service quality gaps. The specific antecedents and statements on the questionnaire pertaining to them are indicated in Table 3. A determination on the commonality and variability of each item will be based on the associated mean and standard deviation. The mean provides an average response score for each statement

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<sup>120</sup> See Note 17 supra, page 29

<sup>121</sup> Loc.Cit.

on a 7 point scale. A higher mean indicates the statement under investigation is an area of strength throughout the court group, and therefore not a contributing factor to whatever related service gap found to exist. Conversely, lower mean scores denote an area where attention is needed. The standard deviation index illustrates the amount of variance among responses for a particular statement. Higher indexes of standard deviation reflect a greater incongruence among courts regarding that statement item. Such instances would suggest some courts may be in need of assistance in this area, while others do not.

**Table 1: Statement Pertaining to Possible Service Quality Gaps**

Antecedents of Gap 1	Corresponding Statements
Marketing research orientation	Statements 6 (from section 2)
Upward communication	Statement 4
Antecedents of Gap 2	Corresponding Statements
Management commitment to service quality	Statement 1,8,10,11, 12
Goal-setting	Statement 6,
Task Standardization	Statements 7,9,11
Antecedents of Gap 3	Corresponding Statements
Employee Job Fit	Statement 2
Perceived Control	Statement5
Supervisory Control System	Statement 3
Antecedents of Gap 4	Corresponding Statements
Horizontal Communication	Statement 4

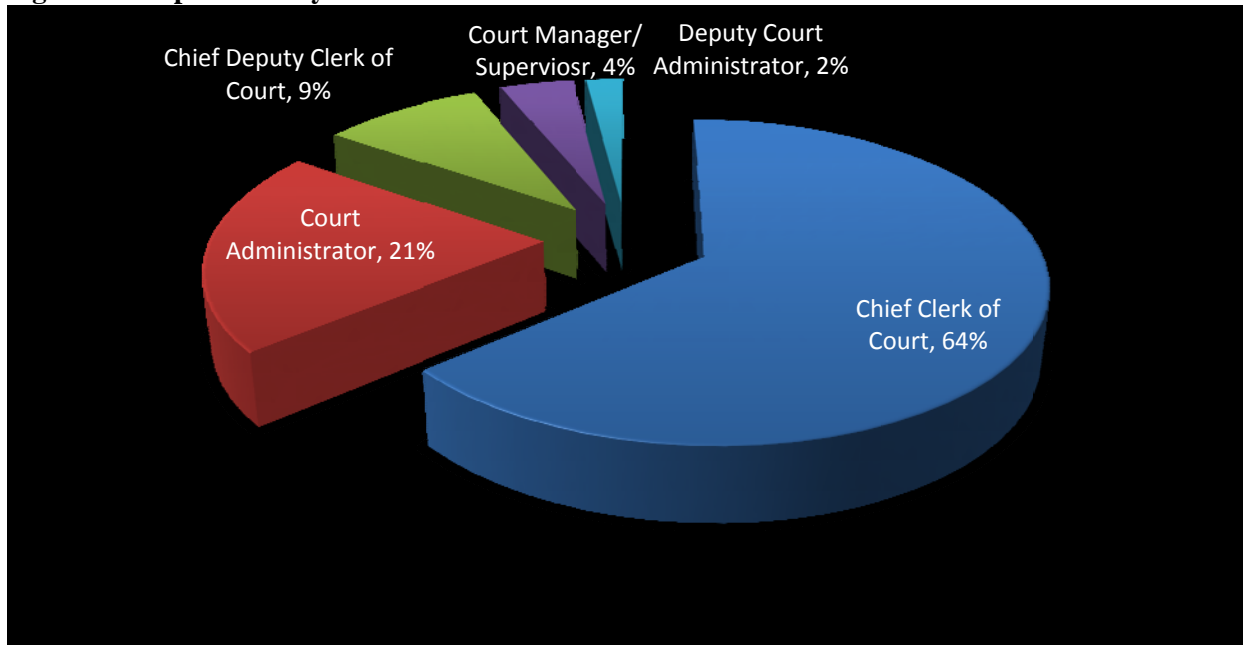
Adapted from Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L. (1990) Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations New York: The Free Press p.190

## FINDINGS

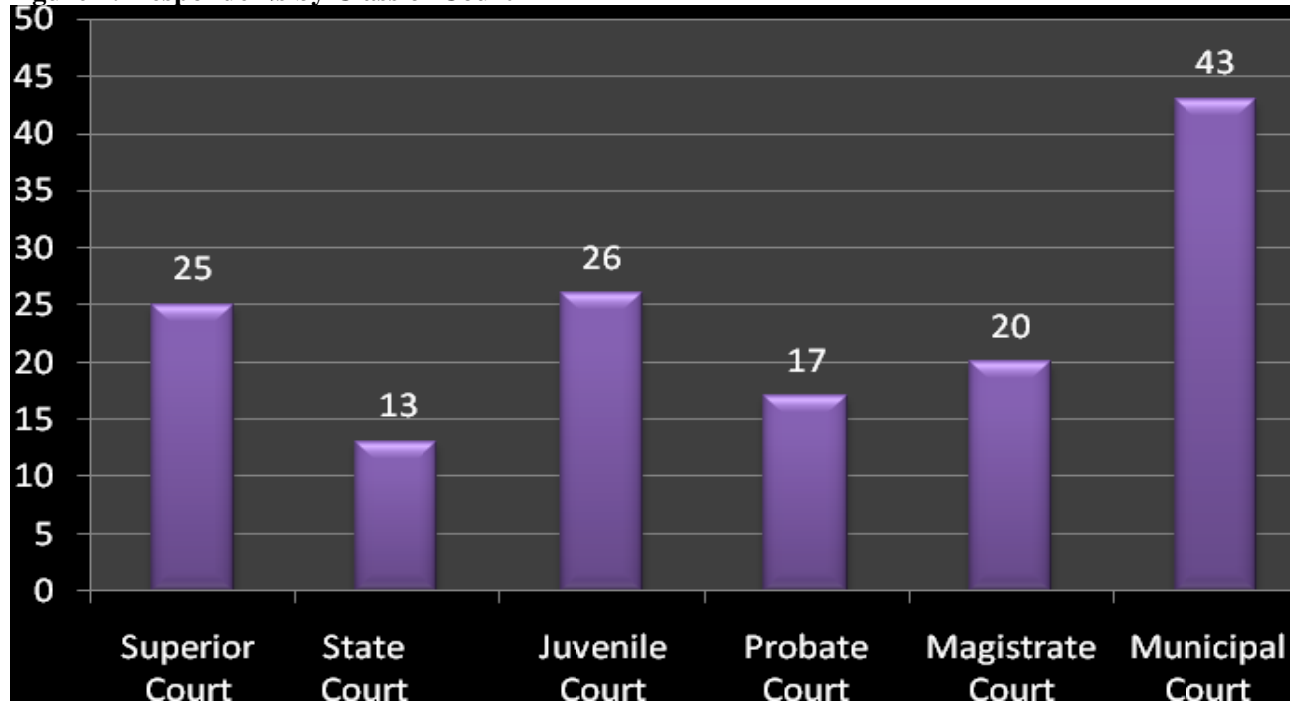
As previously noted, the stated objectives of this study are to assess court managers' perceptions of service quality and to investigate the root causes of service quality gaps in a court system setting. This section presents and interprets statistical information derived from survey questionnaire responses. Results are arranged by class of court with summary data presented in graph and table form.

To gain an understanding of survey respondents and classify their responses in a meaningful way, the final three questions elicited information on position/title, class of court and population. Results suggest respondents represent a cross-section of Georgia's court managers. As can be seen from Figure 3, the largest percentage of survey respondents serve as chief clerk of court (64%), with court administrators (21%), chief deputy clerks of court (9%), court manager/supervisors (4%) and Deputy/Assistant Court Administrator (2%) rounding out the field. Responding court managers were most likely to serve in municipal court (30%), juvenile (18%) and superior (17%) courts (see Figure 4). Responding court managers represent jurisdictions over various sizes, with 36 % from jurisdictions with 26, 000 or fewer residents and 25 % from jurisdictions with populations of more than 100,000 people.

**Figure 3: Respondents by Position Title**



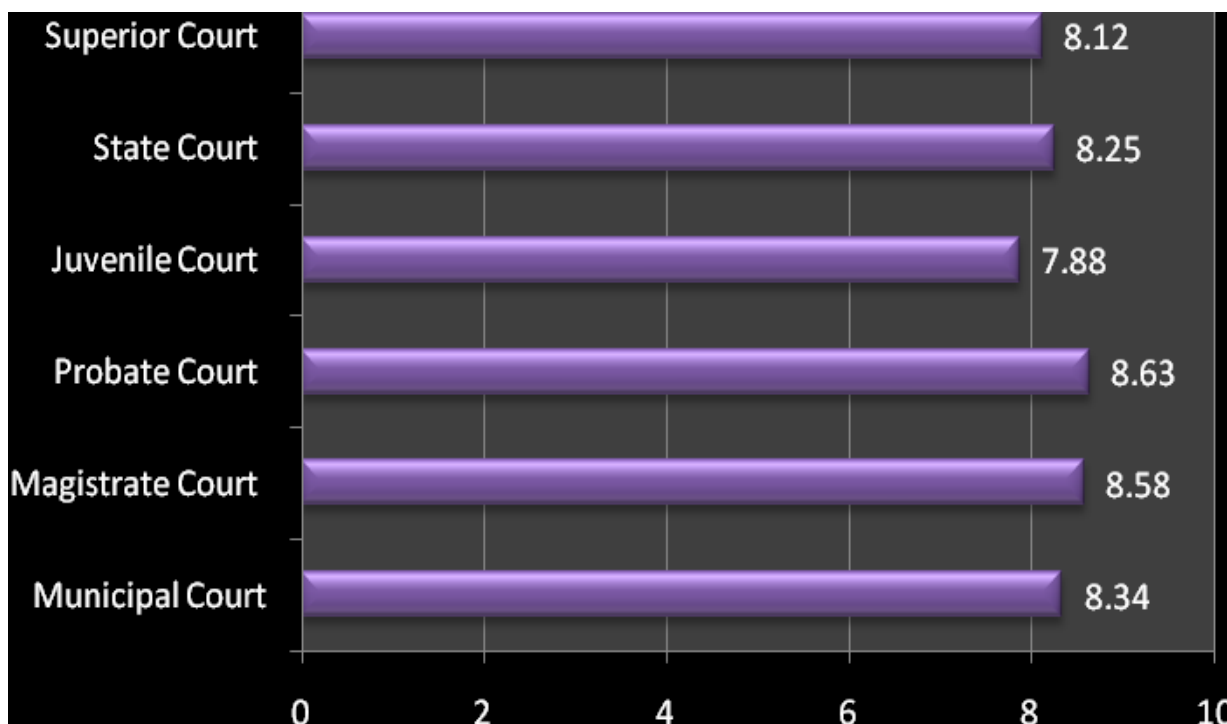
**Figure 4: Respondents by Class of Court**



### Overall Service Quality Rating

At the onset of the survey, respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of service at their court. A 10 point scale was provided, where 1 represented poor service quality and 10 indicated service quality excellence. Individual responses were classified according to class of court. The data was then used to compute an average score for each court group. Figure 5 illustrates the average rating by class of court on a 10-point scale. With the exception of juvenile courts, the average self-rated score for all court groups was above the 8 of 10 index. None of the groups approached the 9 of 10 mark, which indicates court managers perceive service quality to be generally good, while acknowledging room for improvement overall.

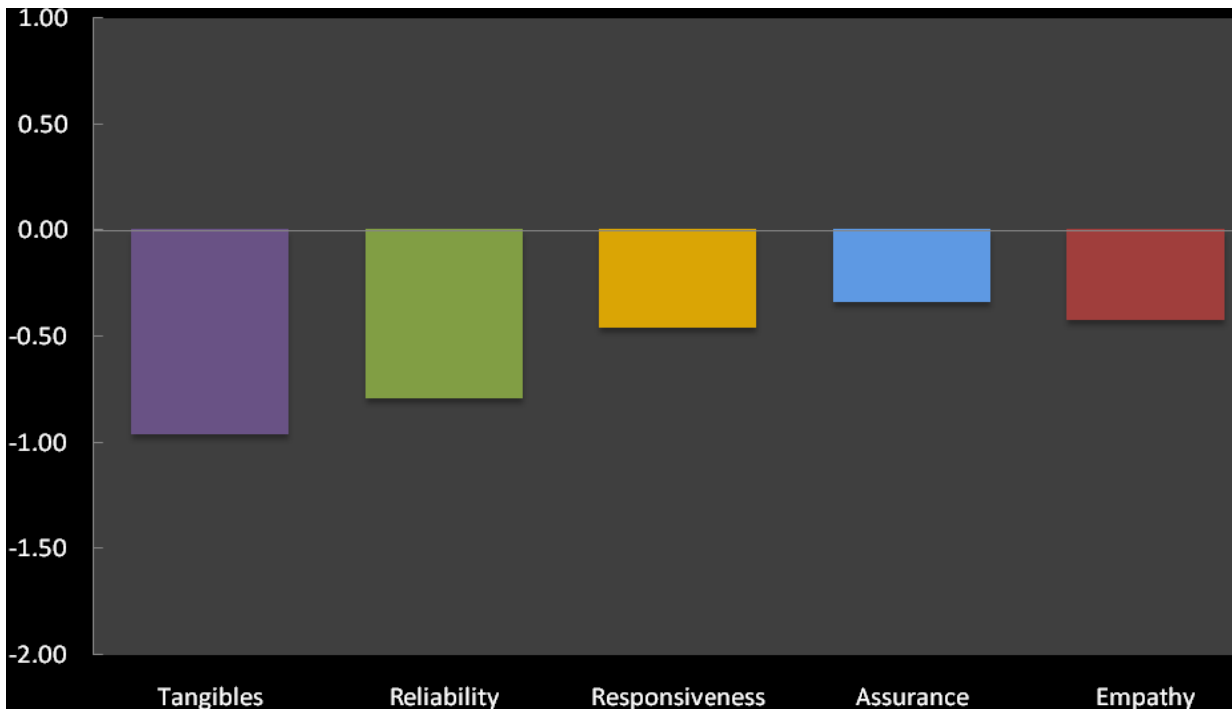
**Figure 5: Self-Assessed Service Quality Ratings, by Class of Court**



### SERVQUAL Assessment – Superior Courts

Summary gap scores reflecting each service quality dimension for superior courts are shown in Figure 6. Negative SERVQUAL scores across the board are an indicator that in varying degrees there is room for improvement in service quality. As can be seen, the highest gap scores were in the areas of *tangibles* (-0.96) and *reliability* (-0.79). A review of individual statement suggests the gap score for *tangibles* is largely driven by a perceived shortfall in the area of user-friendly brochures (-1.36). On the other hand, the gap score for *reliability* can be attributed to a perception that the court can do better at delivering on its promises (-0.99). Gaps scores were not as pronounced along the dimensions of *responsiveness*, *assurance* and *empathy*. The respective gaps, -0.46, -0.34 and -0.42, suggest court managers perceive the court to be in near proximity of fully meeting expectations.

**Figure 6: SERVQUAL (Gap) Scores for the Superior Courts**



**Table 2: SERVQUAL scores for Superior Courts (n=25)**

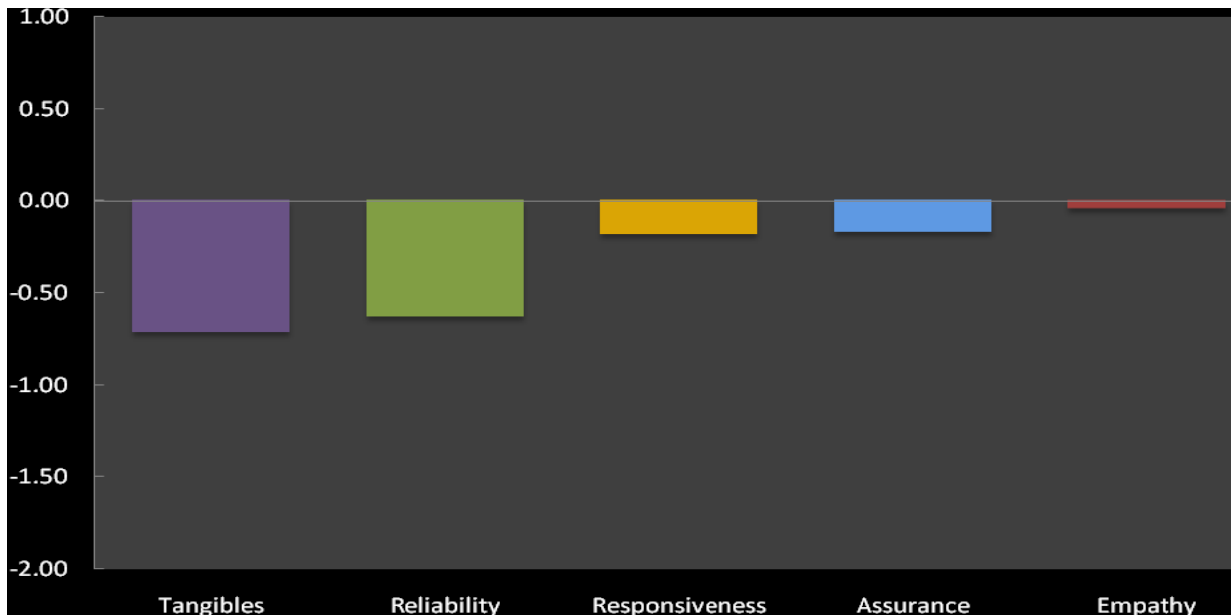
Dimension	Perception	Expectations	Gap Scores
<i>Tangibles</i>	5.22	6.18	-0.96
1. Modern technology	5.48	6.04	-0.56
2. User-friendly brochures	4.96	6.32	-1.36
<i>Reliability</i>	5.78	6.57	-0.79
3. Deliver on promises	5.64	6.63	-0.99
4. Correct services the 1 <sup>st</sup> time	5.92	6.52	-0.60
<i>Responsiveness</i>	5.46	6.00	-0.46
5. Prompt and courteous	6.36	6.68	-0.32
6. Suggestions & feedback	4.84	5.44	-0.60
<i>Assurance</i>	6.18	6.52	-0.34
7. Knowledgeable staff	6.08	6.56	-0.48
8. Behavior instill confidence	6.28	6.48	-0.20
<i>Empathy</i>	6.04	6.46	-0.42
9. Understand customer needs	5.92	6.48	-0.56
10. Customers best interest at heart	6.16	6.44	-0.28

Note: SERVQUAL score (SQ) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E)

### SERVQUAL Assessment – State Courts

Summary gap scores reflecting each service quality dimension for state courts are shown in Figure 7. Though to a lesser degree than superior courts, the highest gap scores recorded for state courts were along the *tangibles* (-0.71) and *reliability* (-0.63) dimensions. Court managers at state courts likewise perceive a shortfall in meeting customer expectations in the areas of user friendly brochures (-1.06) and delivering on the court’s promises (-0.67). On a more positive note, court managers perceive service quality along the *empathy* dimension to meeting customer expectations (-0.04). In fact, a positive SERVQUAL score (0.17) was recorded for statement #10: “The court has the customer’s best interest at heart.” It is worth reminding that a positive score reflects a perception that existing service delivery exceeds customer expectations in that area or dimension.

**Figure 7: SERVQUAL (Gap) Scores for the State Courts**



**Table 3: SERVQUAL scores for State Courts (n=13)**

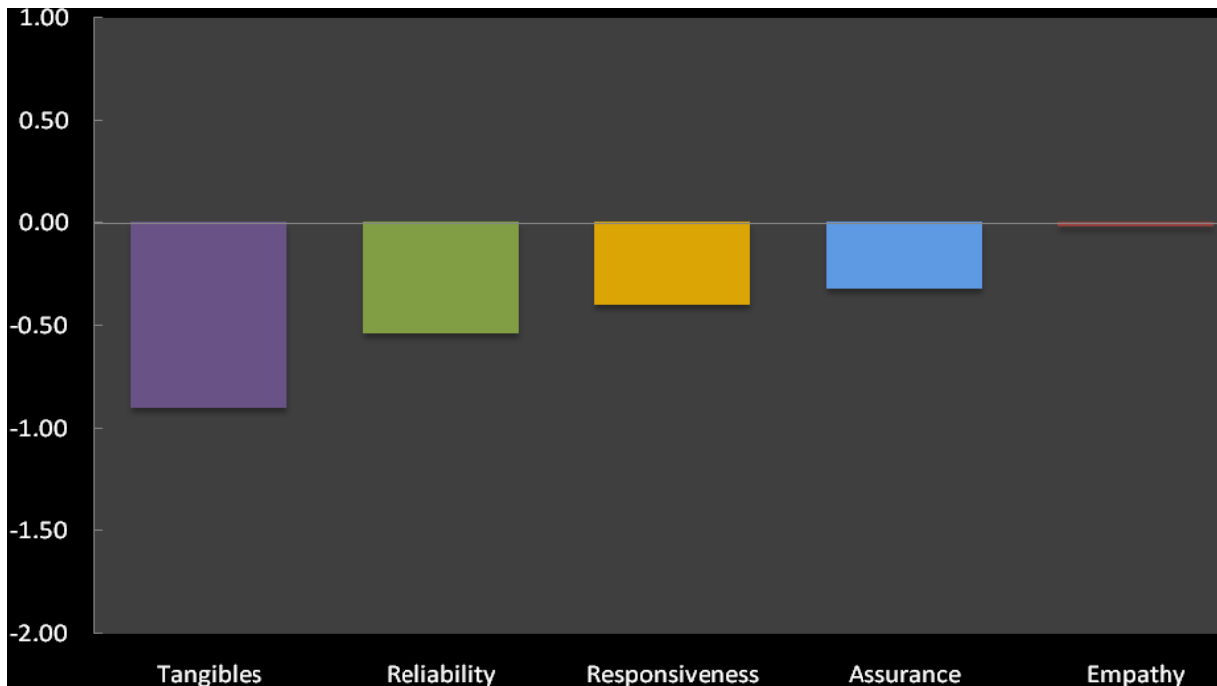
Dimension	Perceptions	Expectations	Gap Scores
<i>Tangibles</i>	5.58	6.29	-0.71
1. Modern technology	5.83	6.17	-0.34
2. User-friendly brochures	5.33	6.42	-1.09
<i>Reliability</i>	6.00	6.63	-0.63
3. Deliver on promises	6.00	6.67	-0.67
4. Correct services the 1 <sup>st</sup> time	6.00	6.58	-0.58
<i>Responsiveness</i>	5.99	6.17	-0.18
5. Prompt and courteous	6.33	6.42	-0.09
6. Suggestions & feedback	5.64	5.92	-0.32
<i>Assurance</i>	6.33	6.50	-0.17
7. Knowledgeable staff	6.33	6.58	-0.25
8. Behavior instill confidence	6.33	6.41	-0.08
<i>Empathy</i>	6.08	6.12	-0.04
9. Understand customer needs	6.08	6.33	-0.25
10. Customers best interest at heart	6.08	5.92	0.17

Note: SERVQUAL score (SQ) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E)

## SERVQUAL Assessment – Juvenile Courts

Gap scores for juvenile court also bring about a mixed review. As can be seen from Figure 8, service quality along the *empathy* dimension (-0.02) is interpreted as perfectly meeting expectations. Survey data suggests court managers believe the court surpasses expectations in regards to having the customer's best interest at heart. This is evident by the positive gap score (0.08) for question #10 (see Table 4.3). Areas for improvement include *tangibles* (-0.90) and to a lesser degree *reliability* (-.54). As with the superior and state courts, gap scores suggests service quality, as perceived by court managers in juvenile courts, could be improved with attention and resources toward user-friendly brochures (-1.08) and modern technology (-0.72). Data further suggest a perception exist that juvenile court are at the verge of fully meeting customer expectations along the other dimensions – *responsiveness* (-0.40) and *assurance* (-0.32).

**Figure 8: SERVQUAL (Gap) Scores for Juvenile Courts**



**Table 4: SERVQUAL scores for Juvenile Courts (n=26)**

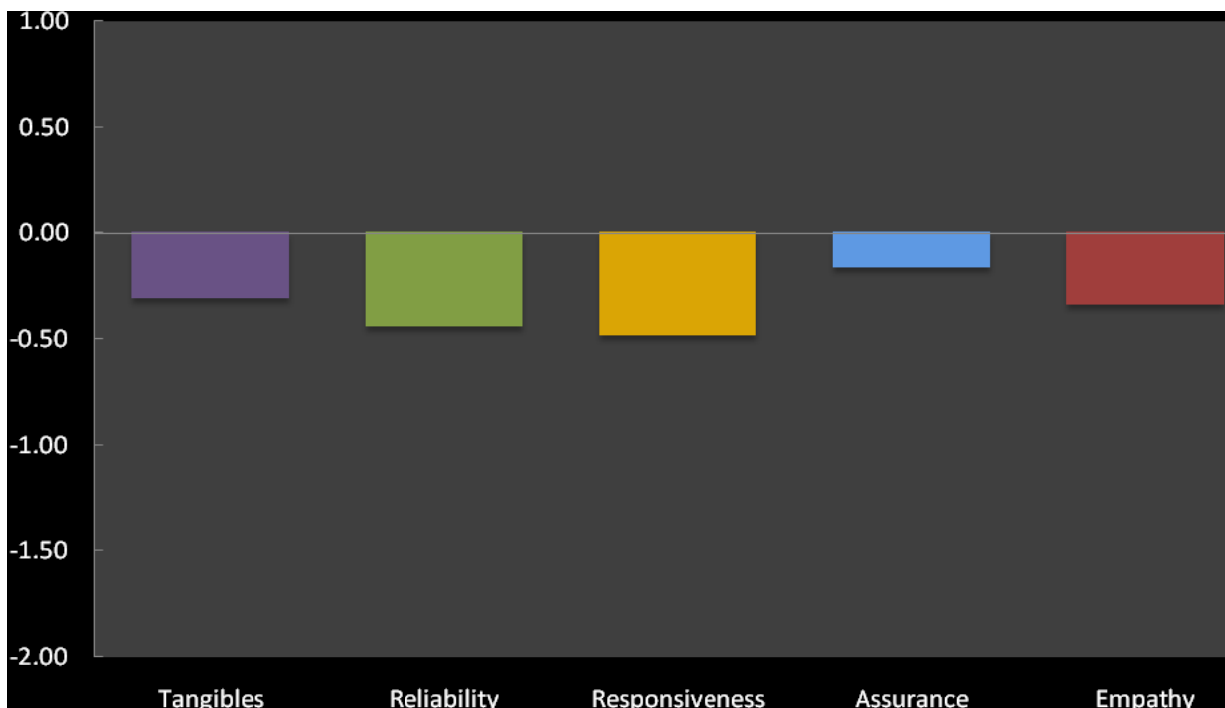
Dimension	Perceptions	Expectations	Gap Scores
<i>Tangibles</i>	5.22	6.12	-0.90
1. Modern technology	5.28	6.00	-0.72
2. User-friendly brochures	5.16	6.24	-1.08
<i>Reliability</i>	5.82	6.36	-0.54
3. Deliver on promises	5.72	6.32	-0.70
4. Correct services the 1 <sup>st</sup> time	5.92	6.40	-0.48
<i>Responsiveness</i>	5.56	5.96	-0.40
5. Prompt and courteous	6.12	6.44	-0.32
6. Suggestions & feedback	5.00	5.48	-0.48
<i>Assurance</i>	6.12	6.44	-0.32
7. Knowledgeable staff	6.12	6.44	-0.32
8. Behavior instill confidence	6.12	6.44	-0.32
<i>Empathy</i>	6.14	6.16	-0.02
9. Understand customer needs	5.88	6.36	-0.48
10. Customers best interest at heart	6.04	5.96	0.08

Note: SERVQUAL score (SQ) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E)

#### SERVQUAL Assessment – Probate Courts

A review of gap scores along the five service dimensions indicate court managers believe probate courts are neither fully meeting service quality expectations nor woefully inadequate in any one area. This class of court is within easy closing distance of meeting expectations along all dimensions. SERVQUAL scores for each of the five dimensions are well below the -0.50 threshold, which is commendable considering the court group’s broad jurisdiction and responsibilities. A review of gap scores from individual statements offers a glaring area for improvement – customer feedback. The gap score (-0.87) associated with statement #6– “Customers are provided opportunity to make suggestions and offer feedback” is significant in the overall goal of improving service quality. Further discussion on the implications of customer feedback efforts will be provided in this report’s final section - conclusions and recommendations.

**Figure 9: SERVQUAL (Gap) Scores for Probate Courts**



**Table 5: SERVQUAL scores for Probate Courts (n=17)**

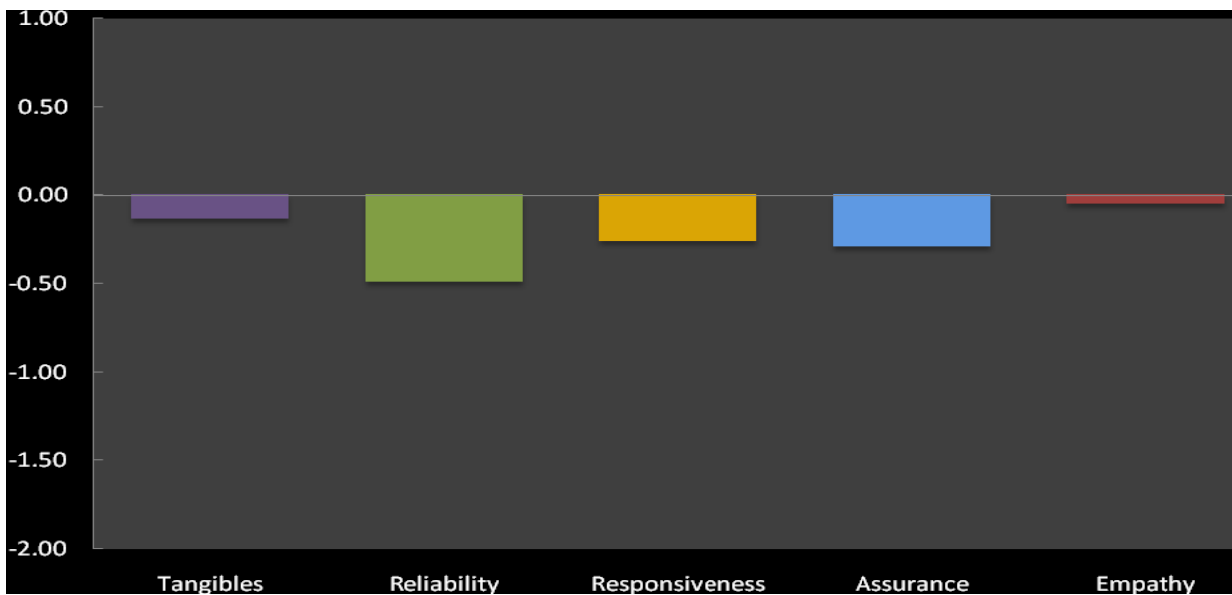
Dimension	Perceptions	Expectations	Gap Scores
<i>Tangibles</i>	6.22	6.53	-0.31
1. Modern technology	6.44	6.50	-0.06
2. User-friendly brochures	6.00	6.56	-0.56
<i>Reliability</i>	6.34	6.78	-0.44
3. Deliver on promises	6.38	6.75	-0.38
4. Correct services the 1 <sup>st</sup> time	6.31	6.81	-0.50
<i>Responsiveness</i>	5.87	6.35	-0.48
5. Prompt and courteous	6.67	6.75	-0.08
6. Suggestions & feedback	5.07	5.94	-0.87
<i>Assurance</i>	6.47	6.63	-0.16
7. Knowledgeable staff	6.31	6.56	-0.25
8. Behavior instill confidence	6.63	6.69	-0.06
<i>Empathy</i>	6.44	6.78	-0.34
9. Understand customer needs	6.56	6.69	-0.13
10. Customers best interest at heart	6.31	6.88	-0.56

Note: SERVQUAL score (SQ) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E)

### SERVQUAL Assessment – Magistrate Courts

On a whole, magistrate courts recorded the lowest gap scores across all service quality dimensions (see Figure 10). The highest recorded gap score for the group was for the *reliability* (-0.49) dimension. Analysis at the individual statement level identified question #6 (-0.74) – “The court delivers performs its services correctly the first time,” as a contributing factor to an otherwise admirable gap score. It is further telling that court managers assigned comparatively low expectation (4.79) and perception (4.74) scores in the area of customer feedback. This signifies a widespread belief that customer service surveys and other forms of communications with external publics are trivial matters to court users and unimportant to management. That ratings among magistrate court managers produced a positive (0.04) gap score (which implies the courts are exceeding customer expectations) in response to statement #9 - “Court employees understand the specific needs of the court’s customers” is curious indeed. Scores for the remaining quality dimensions – *tangibles* (-0.13), *responsiveness* (-0.26), *assurance* (-0.29) and *empathy* (-0.08) reflect a perception that magistrate courts are virtually meeting customer expectations in these areas.

**Figure 10: SERVQUAL (Gap) Scores for Magistrate Courts**



**Table 6: SERVQUAL Scores for Magistrate Courts (n=20)**

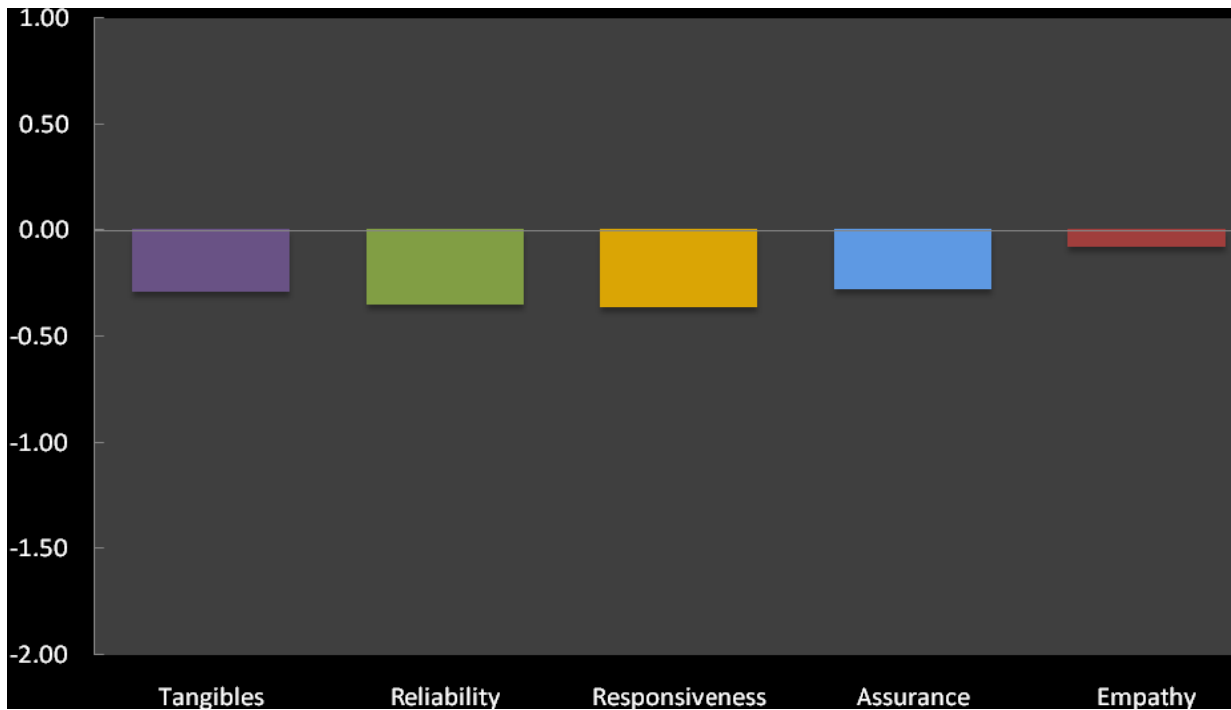
Dimension	Perceptions	Expectations	Gap Scores
<i>Tangibles</i>	6.00	6.13	-0.13
1. Modern technology	6.11	5.95	0.16
2. User-friendly brochures	5.89	6.32	-0.42
<i>Reliability</i>	6.08	6.57	-0.49
3. Deliver on promises	6.11	6.36	-0.25
4. Correct services the 1 <sup>st</sup> time	6.05	6.79	-0.74
<i>Responsiveness</i>	5.53	5.79	-0.26
5. Prompt and courteous	6.32	6.79	-0.47
6. Suggestions & feedback	4.74	4.79	-0.05
<i>Assurance</i>	6.08	6.37	-0.29
7. Knowledgeable staff	6.16	6.48	-0.32
8. Behavior instill confidence	6.00	6.26	-0.26
<i>Empathy</i>	6.16	6.21	-0.05
9. Understand customer needs	6.16	6.12	0.04
10. Customers best interest at heart	6.16	6.30	-0.14

Note: SERVQUAL score (SQ) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E)

### SERVQUAL Assessment – Municipal Courts

SERVQUAL scores for municipal court are remarkably low and congruent across the five dimensions. The highest and lowest gap score were achieved in *responsiveness* (-0.36) and *empathy* (-0.08), respectively. These scores reflect a prevailing opinion among managers that service quality at municipal courts would be favorably assessed if polled by court users. As with other class of courts, responses to individual statements suggest managers on a whole do not believe the public expects to have a voice in court operations. Average scores on a 7 point scale were recorded at 5.22 for expectation and 4.66 for perception. As previously noted, the implications of this viewpoint will be discussion in the concluding section.

**Figure 11: SERVQUAL (Gap) Scores for Magistrate Courts**



**Table 7: SERVQUAL scores for Municipal Courts (n=43)**

Dimension	Perceptions	Expectations	Gap Scores
<i>Tangibles</i>	6.00	6.13	-0.29
1. Modern technology	5.53	5.90	0.37
2. User-friendly brochures	6.00	6.20	-0.20
<i>Reliability</i>	6.22	6.57	-0.35
3. Deliver on promises	6.34	6.56	-0.22
4. Correct services the 1 <sup>st</sup> time	6.10	6.58	-0.47
<i>Responsiveness</i>	5.51	5.87	-0.36
5. Prompt and courteous	6.36	6.52	-0.16
6. Suggestions & feedback	4.66	5.22	-0.56
<i>Assurance</i>	6.14	6.42	-0.28
7. Knowledgeable staff	6.14	6.53	-0.39
8. Behavior instill confidence	6.15	6.32	-0.17
<i>Empathy</i>	6.19	6.27	-0.08
9. Understand customer needs	6.20	6.35	-0.15
10. Customers best interest at heart	6.19	6.19	0.00

Note: SERVQUAL score (SQ) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E)

### Influencers of Service Quality Gaps

In addition to assessing perceived levels of service quality using the gap model, the present study sought to investigate potential antecedents or factors believed to contribute to those gaps. Section three of the survey contained a set of 12 statements pertaining to influencers of gaps 1-4. The mean and standard deviation for each item and by court group was computed and presented in Table 10. To evaluate a potential cause of gap 1 – the marketing research gap – a mean and standard deviation from the perceptions portion of question #6, section 2 – (customer feedback) was computed.

From Table 10 it can be determined leadership support for service quality improvement efforts is perceived to be high across all court groups with little standard deviation. In statement #2 - regular training to maintain subject matter knowledge and professional competency – a noticeable decline among superior and state court managers is observable. Next, significant regression in the mean and standard deviation across all court groups can be detected in response to statement #3- Adequate rewards and recognition are available for employees. This establishes the item as significant area where improvement is needed among all court groups. The range of averages related to statement #4- communication across organizational levels also suggest room for improvement in superior, state and juvenile courts. Responses to statement #5 indicate court employees are sufficiently empowered to take initiative in improving customer service. The matter of court delay is taken up in statement #6 and results suggest the perception that more could be done to improve this area, but the concern has not risen to crisis proportion. Mean averages related to statement #7 – guidelines for assisting pro se litigants – are, however, a cause for alarm. The data suggest a lack of a formal manual or official procedures among superior,

state, and juvenile to guide staff as they assist the self-represented in understanding court processes, procedures and terminology. The implications of this finding with regard to assessments of service quality are self-evident. Responses to statement #8 advocate the need for a facilities review at local courthouses throughout the state. With the exception of the probate court, statement #9 - protocol for assisting persons in need of interpreter services - indicate trial courts are well-versed and prepared to ensure the interpreter service needs of the state's diverse population can be timely met. Data reported in statement #10 is somewhat misleading in that it is an index of web presence among courts that have websites. The statistics do not include the superior court (32%), state court (23%), juvenile (30%), probate (41%), magistrate (25%) and municipal (49%) respondents that indicated their court does not have a website. Across court groups, the response to statement #11- regular customer service training- was meaningfully low. It is perhaps the case that high workload volume coupled with scarce resources has resulted in the indefinite postponement of customer service training. At any rate, the results implore further investigation especially considering the strong leadership support for service quality improvement noted in statement #1. Statement #12 finds that court managers agree to a large extent that local courts are customer-focused. Finally, data from statement #6, section two – “customers of our court are provided opportunity to make suggestions and offer feedback” – were also comparatively lower than many of the previous items, though not as low as related averages for customer service training and employee rewards and recognitions. This is yet another indicator that surveys and other mediums for customer feedback are lightly regarded among court managers.

**Table 8: Descriptive Statistics of Potential Influences of Service Quality Gaps**

Variables	Superior Court (n = 25)		State Court (n = 13)		Juvenile Court (n = 26)		Probate Court (n = 17)		Magistrate Court (n = 20)		Municipal Court (n = 59)	
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
1. Supportive leadership	6.08	0.75	6.38	0.08	5.88	1.07	6.58	0.71	6.20	0.83	6.37	0.74
2. Regular training	4.92	1.44	5.38	1.32	5.15	1.59	6.58	0.61	5.90	0.91	6.08	1.03
3. Adequate rewards	3.72	1.83	4.15	2.11	3.73	1.88	3.88	1.90	4.25	1.86	3.93	1.77
4. Good communication	4.52	1.47	4.84	1.72	4.69	1.87	5.52	1.28	5.15	1.63	5.55	1.13
5. Empowered employees	5.24	1.16	5.38	1.12	5.00	1.41	5.52	1.32	5.50	1.00	5.61	1.23
6. Delay standards	4.84	1.62	5.15	1.21	5.11	1.6	5.82	1.42	5.80	1.32	5.64	1.34
7. Pro se assistance	4.52	1.89	4.23	1.73	4.23	1.65	5.52	1.62	5.35	1.60	5.11	1.48
8. Physical barriers	4.96	1.48	5.07	1.38	4.84	1.71	4.64	1.80	5.10	1.55	5.01	1.76
9. Interpreter services	5.60	1.22	6.07	1.03	5.69	1.31	4.94	2.01	6.40	0.68	5.64	1.53
10. Court website	5.41	1.17	4.37	1.18	5.16	1.20	6.20	0.06	5.40	1.18	5.90	0.88
11. Cust. Serv. training	3.68	1.37	3.68	1.37	4.00	1.44	3.80	1.77	4.35	1.56	4.59	1.92
12. Customer culture	5.44	1.26	5.6	1.31	5.11	1.47	6.00	1.06	5.60	1.53	5.28	1.30
6* Cust. Feedback (from Section 2)	4.84	1.54	5.3	1.49	4.88	1.75	4.76	1.39	4.6	1.84	4.66	1.64

**Note:** Measurement items were rated using a 7- point scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the course of providing services, Georgia trial courts contend with the values, needs and expectations of a variety of customers, constituents and stakeholders. Consequently, understanding service quality in terms of customer perceptions and expectations of stakeholders presents a difficult problem for court managers. Yet when court managers fully appreciate the needs of customers they can better align policy, procedures and resources to these ends. The present study investigated the use of methodology and measure for assessing service quality in a court context. The framework provides a “basic skeleton” to assist court managers in their efforts to evaluate service quality and ultimately improve the court’s ability to serve customers in a fully satisfactory manner.

In reviewing the conclusions and recommendations that follow, it is worth reminding that the findings here are based on data collected from court managers across several classes of trial courts in Georgia. Conclusions reached are therefore pertinent to Georgia trial courts at the time in which the survey was administered. Court practitioners and researchers would be ill-advised to generalize these findings to individual courts or other state court systems.

### Conclusions

This study investigated the perceived service quality at trial courts from the viewpoint of court managers. Collected data was analyzed to address several research questions put forth in the introduction of this study. Specifically, this research sought undercover answers to: 1) what

are court manager's perceptions of service quality at trial courts in Georgia; 2) In which areas should trial court managers attention and resources in order to improve quality of service; and 3) Are there identifiable influencers of service quality gaps, which if addressed, can reasonably be expected to improve service quality in the future?

Based on the survey findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) **Georgia court managers hold favorable perceptions of quality of service at local trial courts.** With the exception of juvenile court, court managers on average rated current service quality slightly above an 8 on a 10 point scale. This can be interpreted as court managers believe service quality to be good overall, while acknowledging room for improvement.
  
- 2) **Georgia courts can address service quality shortfalls by focusing attention and resources on developing plain-language communications materials, upgrading court facilities and technology and delivering on promises communicated to customers.** Among the five aspects of service quality, gaps along the *tangibles* and *reliability* dimensions were prominent across several court groups. A closer review suggests the gaps may be the result of deficiencies in user-friendly (plain language) brochures along with a lack of modern equipment and technology and the court's ability to deliver services in a dependable and accurate manner.

- 3) Customer service training is needed across all court groups.** Survey data suggest a lack of customer service training for all class of courts. This is troublesome since the quality of service is assumed to be a function of employee-customer interactions,<sup>122</sup> where variations in employee performance lead to service quality disparity. Moments of truth are important factors in the service evaluation process; the courts need well-trained, customer service oriented frontline employees during these interactions with court users. Customer service training plays a vital role in the success of courts, as service-oriented institutions and would be beneficial to all parties involved. For court users, customer service training affords them opportunity to be served by competent, knowledgeable and understanding employees. For court employees, customer service training instills confidence that they have the skills necessary to meet the needs of all who enter the courthouse. For court management customer service training communicates the organization's priorities, demonstrates its commitment to service quality, and reduces customer complaints and dissatisfaction.
- 4) Court managers could benefit from creative, low/no costs ideas and strategies to reward employees.** Corresponding data suggest court managers are struggling to recognize and reward employees in nonpecuniary ways. As trends toward rising caseloads and diminishing resources continue, issues of burnout, employee satisfaction and morale are likely to become matters of even greater importance. If not addressed, issues of employee dissatisfaction, low office morale and turnover can be expected to have a significant impact on service quality.

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<sup>122</sup> See Note 6 supra, page 43

**5) Court managers have not fully embraced customer service surveys and other forms of feedback.** Regarding customer feedback opportunities, data supplied from survey responses indicate across the board declines in perception and expectation averages, compared to other statement items. The message is apparent: customer service surveys and feedback opportunities are not perceived as value added activities. Interestingly enough, however, court managers across all groups indicate court employees understand the specific needs of the court's customers. Any contention that customer needs and expectations are sufficiently known without customer survey or other forms of feedback communication is no doubt an exercise in self-deceit.

### Recommendations

As indicated in the subtitle, this report is intended as a preliminary assessment of service quality at local trial courts. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that the chief recommendation of this report is a call for further investigation. By design, the present study is introductory in nature and limited in scope. Service quality was investigated only through the perceptual lenses of court managers. The results here supply a base of information regarding management's perception of customer expectations. Zeithaml et al<sup>123</sup> advised that the necessary first step in improving quality of service (i.e. narrowing Gap 5) is for management to acquire accurate information about customer expectations (i.e., close Gap 1). Since Gap 1 requires an assessment of customer's expectations and management's perceptions, the value of the present study as a parallel first step is established.

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<sup>123</sup> See Note 17 supra, page 39

In keeping with the SERVQUAL framework a full assessment of customer perceptions and expectations of service quality should be conducted using the SERVQUAL scale. This information will be essential in the comparative analysis process which undoubtedly will uncover areas of incongruence between management's perceptions and customer's perceptions and expectations. It will be interesting to note court manager's accuracy in predicting customer expectations for service quality. Additional recommendations for future research will be provided as a final segment of this report.

In addition to the noted general suggestions, this report recommends the following actions to address existing service quality gaps as perceived by Georgia trial court managers:

**RECOMMENDATION #1: To improve operational effectiveness of Georgia trial courts, the AOC should promote the use of service quality evaluations and other data-driven approaches to measuring and enhancing customer service.** The needs and expectations of court customers are diverse, complex and ever-changing. Courts must assume greater responsibility for tracking and responding to these expectations. There is a danger in relying upon court manager perceptions to drive service innovation. Regular assessments can monitor the effects of service improvement initiatives or determine the direction and degree that customer expectations of services are changing.<sup>124</sup> This information is critical in the quest of effectively aligning service provision with customer needs. AOC personnel should assist court managers in understanding the impact and benefits of customer surveys and seek opportunities to launch pilot

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<sup>124</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. (1993), "Research note: More on improving quality measurement." *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 69 No. 1 pp.140 -147

initiatives at local jurisdictions. Moreover, AOC staff should provide guidance and technical support in the development, administration, analysis and presentation of survey findings.

**RECOMMENDATION#2: To promote a highly motivated workforce among trial courts, the AOC should develop resources regarding no/low cost approaches to reward and recognize court employees.** Too often, the bulk of the work day for court managers is expended organizing and planning daily duties, addressing personnel matters, and putting out fires. In dealing with these demands court managers may fail to acknowledge and reward good performances by desiring court employees. It is widely acknowledged committed and motivated employees have a positive impact on organizational performance. In a court setting, positive performances in customer service delivery a key in diminishing public dissatisfaction, which in turn, leads to enhanced public trust and confidence in the court system. The AOC should assist the efforts of judges and court managers to bolster morale by developing guidebooks, at-a-glance booklets, in-person trainings on creative, insightful, and low/no cost approaches to recognize and reward court employees.

**RECOMMENDATION#3 : To assist litigants in understanding court processes, procedures and terminology and to provide legal information, the AOC should work in consultation with the various judges' councils, clerk's associations, and local court personnel to develop a broad array of plain language court brochures, materials and website content.** The illustrious Will Rogers is credited with saying "The minute that you read something that you can't understand, you can almost be sure it was drawn up by a lawyer."

Research conducted in California suggests plain language court forms are easier to read, more completely understood and more likely to be read by court users.<sup>125</sup> The study noted several ancillary benefits of plain language court forms as well:

- A greater number of consumers understand and therefore are able to comply with the instructions contained in the legal forms, court expenditures are reduced.
- Consumers who use plain language as a vehicle to access legal information and protections are more confident and self-reliant
- Printing and translation costs are reduced because Plain Language documents are typically 40% shorter than untreated documents

Therefore it is of mutual benefit to courts and user of services that plain language materials and website content be made available in as many print and electronic formats as possible.

**RECOMMENDATION#4: To improve customer service and promote service quality, the AOC collaborate with the Georgia Superior Court Clerks Authority, and the various judges and clerk's association to develop and facilitate customer service training modules.**

Given the emphasis now placed on customer service it is advisable that court personnel be informed as to the various strategies to effectively assisting customers with their diverse needs.

There is a wealth of materials available including entire curriculums on various aspects of customer service delivery. Training workshops to raise awareness and understanding of the

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<sup>125</sup> Mindlin, M. (2007) Is plain language better? Comparative readability study of plain language court forms. See page 4. Accessed online March 26, 2009 at: [http://www.transcend.net/pdf/Comp\\_Read\\_web.pdf](http://www.transcend.net/pdf/Comp_Read_web.pdf)

impact and importance of superior customer service may also be helpful. It is also recommended that customer service training be facilitated through online webinars to minimize cost and out-of-office time for local court staff.

**RECOMMENDATION#5: To improve assistance to self-represented litigants and provide frontline staff with needed guidance, the AOC should work with the various court groups to develop court-specific guidebooks for assisting pro se litigants.** Both court staff and judicial protocols for assisting pro se litigants should be developed in coordination with the different trial court judges' councils and the Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority. An example of guidebooks for assisting pro se litigants developed in Iowa and Arizona may be found at [http://www.ajs.org/prose/pdfs/Iowa\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.ajs.org/prose/pdfs/Iowa_Guidelines.pdf) and [http://supreme.state.az.us/courtserv/Legal\\_A-I/ManualGloss.pdf](http://supreme.state.az.us/courtserv/Legal_A-I/ManualGloss.pdf) respectively.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

This report was intended as a preliminary assessment – an initial step- toward the goal of advancing a better instrument for assessing customer service and service quality. The research here generated a wealth of data that can be re-examined in subsequent studies. As well, the assumptions, methodology and findings presented should not be accepted as empirically valid or reliable, but should be scrutinized, replicated and expanded upon by researchers and court practitioners. Future research should therefore be committed to investigating the use and applicability of the SERVQUAL framework as an effective methodology for assessing service

quality in a court environment. Such investigations will ensure that the present dearth of literature on service quality in a court-context becomes fully developed.

The following are suggestions for future research initiatives:

- 1. Conduct local customer service surveys using SERVQUAL.** Court leaders should survey court users using a full version (modified in a court context) of the SERVQUAL instrument to identify critical service shortfalls. The present study establishes a baseline of information regarding management's perception of customer expectations. Within the gaps model framework this is a preliminary step in the process of assessing the discrepancy between customers' experience and managements' perceptions of those expectations (Gap 1). As Zeithaml et al note "management's correct perceptions of customer's expectations is necessary, but not sufficient, for achieving superior quality service."<sup>126</sup>
- 2. Investigate which service dimensions are most important to court customers.** In a study of service firms across four different industries Parasuraman et al<sup>127</sup> found that *reliability* followed by *assurance* were consistently determined by customers to be the most important critical dimensions. Researchers should seek to validate this in a court setting. Such investigation would also prove useful establishing weights for each service dimension. Weighted scores provide an added component to the service quality evaluation process. It supplies court managers with enhanced data about the needs and

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<sup>126</sup> See Note 17 supra, page 39

<sup>127</sup> Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. (1988) "SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring customer perceptions of service quality," *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 64 No 1 pp.12-40

expectation of customers. Armed with weighted gaps scores, court managers could prioritize attention and resources to those areas that matter most to court users; thereby resulting in a more effective use of the courts diminishing resources. It will be important for early studies to establish weights. If the weights are shown to be stable through time, court practitioners may elect to forgo this battery in subsequent administrations of SERVQUAL. If, however, these weights prove unstable, regular collection and more detailed analysis would be in order.

- 3. Conduct research to understand the causes of service gaps in courts.** Utilizing the SERVQUAL framework, researchers and court managers should endeavor to understand the antecedents of gaps 1 through 4, which are on the provider's side of the service quality model. Courts have limited opportunity to influence customer expectations of service and nothing can be done to negate yesterday's service failures. Through attentiveness and diligence courts can, however, remain diligent about diagnosing and addressing the root causes of service quality shortfalls in hopes of making a favorable impression upon court users during those moments of truth. Over time, this focus on meeting customer needs will invariably yield dividends in terms of improved satisfaction, greater trust and confidence.

If pursued, the recommended areas of future research outlined above will supply court practitioners with the quality information needed for improving service quality in the courts. In so far as courts operate within a turbulent environment, limited resources, rapidly changing society and ever-increasing demands placed upon courts, the need to fully develop the service

quality literature in a court context cannot be overstated. There is much to be uncovered in terms of measuring, diagnosing and managing service quality in a court domain. Such next steps are critical if courts are to raise their service aspirations and make significant improvement in public satisfaction. SERVQUAL provides the conceptual framework and the assessment instrument; court managers, however, must provide the leadership.

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## APPENDIX A – Pre-Test Participation Letter

February 13, 2009

Dear Colleague:

Attached is a draft survey that has been developed for use in my Court Executive Development Program research project. The focus of my research project is service quality in the Georgia judiciary. For purposes of this study service quality is defined as the extent to which service meets customer needs or expectations. Existing literature establishes a framework for assessing service quality in organizations along the following five dimensions:

- (1) *Tangibles*- the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials;
- (2) *Reliability*- the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;
- (3) *Responsiveness* – the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;
- (4) *Assurance*- the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence;
- (5) *Empathy* – the caring, individualized attention provided to customers.

The present study uses a modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument to assess perceptions and expectations among court managers and chief clerks of court. In section one, two statements are devoted to each of the five dimensions, so that statements 1-2 measure *Tangibles*, 3-4 assess *Reliability*, and so forth. Items 11-15 contain statements that explore other aspects of a service quality dimension. The remainder of the questionnaire investigates barriers and solicits a recommendation for service quality improvement.

Before this instrument can be deployed, it must be reviewed for clarity and soundness. Your insight and expertise in court administration is needed in determining the instrument's validity. As you conduct your review please consider the survey's adequacy in the following areas:

- Accurate measures of service quality dimensions
- Wording
- Clear and sufficient instructions
- Free of threatening or controversial subject matter
- User-friendly format

You are encouraged to make comments and suggestions regarding all aspects of the survey. If you think certain important statements have been omitted or if you believe existing topics are not relevant please note this. Feel free to write all comments directly on the survey or comment electronically (the edit functions in MSWord has been enabled). Your comments and suggestions will be kept strictly confidential and will be used only in revising the survey questionnaire. Please email or fax your suggestions to me, [patterc@gaoc.us](mailto:patterc@gaoc.us) or 404 651-6449, at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your time and assistance in the pre-test phase of the research study.

Warm regards,

Christopher T. Patterson  
Associate Director for Court Services

**APPENDIX B – Survey Cover Letter and Questionnaire**

# Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

## 1. Cover page

Dear Court Manager:

Currently, I am participating in the Court Executive Development Program offered by the Institute for Court Management at the National Center for State Courts. One of the program requirements is a research project which benefits the state's judicial system. The focus of my research is service quality at local trial courts. For purposes of this study service quality is defined as the degree in which services meet customer needs or expectations. This project investigates perceptions surrounding service quality delivery, service quality gaps and barriers to improvement. Findings gleaned from the research data will have practical implications for judicial stakeholders, including judges, court managers, staff and external users of services.

You can assist in this project by completing this 24 question survey - it will take less than ten minutes. This survey is completely voluntary. Results will only be presented in an aggregated form. You are assured I will not identify you or your court in presenting the results of this survey. A copy of my survey results will be made available to you upon request.

As a manager at the local trial court your honest assessment is of critical importance. The overall quality of this study depends on the information obtained from you. I realize the value of your time and greatly appreciate you completing this survey by March 12, 2009. As a token of my gratitude, I am offering a Wal-Mart gift certificate valued at twenty dollars (\$20.00) to every twentieth trial court manager to complete the survey online (one response per person please). Be sure to provide the necessary information when prompted to do so, that I may contact you regarding the gift certificate award. A maximum of ten (10) gift certificates will be awarded.

Please note: (1) Although I am an employee of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) I am personally and solely responsible for any and all awards associated with this research project. (2) You may complete the survey while opting out of consideration for the gift card by withholding your contact information if you believe a conflict exists with applicable regulations and policies governing gifts and monetary awards.

I look forward to your response and hope to begin data analysis on March 13th. If you have questions concerning this study and its purpose, you may contact me at (404) 463-3804 or [patterc@gaoc.us](mailto:patterc@gaoc.us).

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely  
Christopher T. Patterson  
Associate Director for Court Services

## 2. Overall Rating

\* 1. Using a 10-point scale, where 1 indicates "very poor" and 10 represents "excellent," how would you rate the overall service quality at your court?

Remember: For purposes of this survey "service quality" is defined as the degree in which services meet customer needs or expectations.

1 Very Poor     2     3     4     5     6     7     8     9     10 Excellent

## 3. Perceptions and Expectations

Please review each of the 10 statements carefully. Two rows are provided for your response. Row 1 scores your beliefs about current services and arrangements at your court. Row 2 seeks your opinion of service levels that customers expect at excellent courts.

# Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

If you strongly disagree, check the leftmost button. If you strongly agree, check the rightmost button. If your feelings are less strong, check the button in the middle that best represent your viewpoint.

This study is interested in your feelings so there is no right or wrong answer.

- \* 1. The court utilizes modern equipment and technology to improve service delivery to its customers.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our court utilizes modern equipment and technology to improve service delivery to its customers.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect courts to use modern equipment and technology to improve service delivery to its customers.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

- \* 2. Information brochures, court forms, instructions, and other materials are presented in clear and easy to understand terms.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
At our court, instructions, court forms, brochures and other informational materials are clear and easily understood.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect instructions, court forms, brochures and other informational materials to be clear and easily understood.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

- \* 3. When the court promises to do something by a certain time it is performed.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
When our court promises to do something by a certain time it is performed.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect services to be performed according to the communicated timeframe.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

- \* 4. The court performs its services correctly the first time.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our court performs its services correctly the first time.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect the court to perform its services correctly the first time.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

# Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

\* 5. Court employees deliver prompt and courteous service.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Court employees at our court deliver prompt and courteous service.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users have an expectation that services will be delivered in a prompt and courteous manner.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

\* 6. Customers are provided opportunity to make suggestions and offer feedback.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Customers of our court are provided opportunity to make suggestions and offer feedback.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect to be provided an opportunity to make suggestions and offer feedback.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

\* 7. Court employees have the knowledge to answer customer questions.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees at our court have the knowledge to answer customer questions.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect court employees to have the knowledge to answer their questions.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

\* 8. The behavior of the court's employees instill confidence in its customers.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The behavior of our court employees instill confidence in our customers.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect the behavior of court employees to instill confidence in its customers.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

\* 9. Court employees understand the specific needs of the court's customers.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
At our court, employees understand the specific needs of our customers.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect court employees to understand their specific needs.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

\* 10. The court has the customer's best interest at heart.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our court operates with the customer's best interest at heart.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn
Court users expect the court to operate with the customer's best interest at heart.	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn	jn

# Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

## 4. Influencers of Service Gaps

This section contains 13 questions which seeks your candid appraisal of attitudes and arrangements that may impact service quality. Please indicate your agreement level with the following statements as they pertain to your court.

As in the previous section, the leftmost button indicates strong disagreement and the rightmost button signifies strong agreement. If your feelings are less strong, check an answer in the middle that best represent your viewpoint.

Again, this study is interested in your feelings so there is no right or wrong answer.

- \* 1. Court leadership (judges and executive-level managers) is fully supportive of service quality improvement efforts.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Court leadership (judges and executive-level managers) is fully supportive of service quality improvement efforts.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

- \* 2. Court staff receive regular training to maintain subject matter knowledge and professional competency.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Court staff receive regular training to maintain subject matter knowledge and professional competency.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

- \* 3. Adequate rewards and recognition are available for employees who demonstrate customer service excellence.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Adequate rewards and recognition are available for employees who demonstrate customer service excellence.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

- \* 4. Communication across all organizational levels is good.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Communication across all organizational levels is good.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

- \* 5. Court employees are empowered to make decisions that enhance customer service delivery.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Court employees are empowered to make decisions that enhance customer service delivery.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

# Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

\* 6. The court has established internal procedures, time standards, or other measures to reduce court delay.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The court has established internal procedures, time standards, or other measures to reduce court delay.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

\* 7. The court has internal procedures or guidelines that instruct staff on assisting self-represented litigants.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The court has internal procedures or guidelines that instruct staff on assisting self-represented litigants.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

\* 8. The court has been reviewed to determine whether physical barriers exist that could impede access.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The court has been reviewed to determine whether physical barriers exist that could impede access.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

\* 9. The court has established protocol for assisting persons who require interpreter services - sign language and linguistic.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The court has established protocol for assisting persons who require interpreter (sign language and linguistic) services .	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

\* 10. The court's website contains clear, accurate and current info on services, procedures and contact information (see below if no website).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The court's website contains clear, accurate and current info on services, procedures and contact information (see below if no website).	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

Type "no" here if court lacks a web presence

# Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

\* 11. Court staff and security personnel receive regular customer service training (see below if diversity topics are included).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Court staff and security personnel receive regular customer service training (see below if diversity topics are included).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Does training include diversity topics (type "yes" or "no" here).

\* 12. A customer-focused culture exists at our court.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree, Nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A customer-focused culture exists at our court.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. (Optional) Please complete the following statement:

Service quality at courts like mine could be improved if

## 5. General Information

Please indicate below the response that most accurately represent your circumstances.

\* 1. Which title best categorizes your position at the court?

- Court Administrator    
  Deputy Court Administrator    
  Court Manager/Supervisor    
  Chief Clerk of Court    
  Chief Deputy Clerk of Court

\* 2. In which class of court do you primarily manage? (check one only)

- Superior Court    
  State Court    
  Juvenile Court    
  Probate Court    
  Magistrate Court    
  Municipal Court    
  Special Court

3. Please indicate the approximate population of the county where your court is located? (skip if municipal-level court)

- Less than 10,000    
  10,000 - 26,000    
  26,000 - 50,000    
  51,000 - 75,000    
  76,000 - 100,000    
  100,000 - 125,000    
  125,000 - 150,000    
  More than 150,000

## Georgia Court Manager's Survey on Service Quality

4. If you wish to be considered for the Wal-Mart gift certificate valued at twenty dollars (\$20.00, please indicate your name and email and/or telephone number in the space below. Again, I will award a gift certificate to every twentieth eligible person to complete the survey online (one survey per person please).

Thank you again for participating.

## **APPENDIX C – Open-ended Comments**

The following are open-ended comments offered in response to question #13: “**Service quality at courts like mine could be improved if ...**”

### **Superior Courts**

1. ...there were more training opportunities for Deputy Clerks and Bailiffs.
2. ...everyone would work together.
3. ...more cohesiveness between offices/divisions.
4. ...there were more hours in the day or less people to serve. I enjoy one of the best circuits in the state
5. ...monthly/quarterly circuit meetings would be very helpful.
6. ...I had adequate funds and time to implement improvements
7. ...more space for storage
8. ...we strive to serve the public to the best of our ability. We cannot give legal advice and we try to explain that to customers. Also if the customer is asking for services we do not perform I have my staff make phone calls to give them the info they are looking for or give the a direction to go in to help them.
9. ...domestic action forms be provided for pro se parties
10. ...we had better communication with all departments. Some departments show lack of organization.
11. ...all departments reported to the same manager. It is very hard to assess this when there are so many different elected officials involved.
12. ...there were more bilingual persons available in the Clerk's Office.
13. ...we had more room, more people and more equipment.

### **State Courts**

1. ...adequate staffing, resources and funding existed.
2. ...employees have training and the court took our needs & responsibilities to heart. Court personnel are on the bottom. Attorney's needs are met prior to everyday needs of court personnel.
3. ...larger budget
4. ...the court clerk was trained more. Such as knowing more about results from certain citations such as DUI, Driving w/out license, etc.
5. ...our financial budget was larger.

### **Juvenile Courts**

1. ...Juvenile Court were given the same status as other classes of courts.
2. ...there was more space and new building facilities.
3. ...funding & resources
4. ...budget cuts were not in effect and if many decisions did not have to be processed through the local county governing authority.
5. ...there were more funds
6. ...more Judges, handicapped accessible courthouse
7. ...we had better communication with all departments. Some departments show lack of organization.

### **Probate Courts**

1. ...adequate staffing, resources and funding existed.
2. ...more training were available and shared with other courts. Customer service training is virtually non-existent, you just learn as an individual as to what works for your office. Education in this area would be beneficial.

3. ...more people would take the time to listen
4. ...people scheduled appointments; there was cooperation from law enforcement; the public was better informed.
5. ...there was enough funds to upgrade to more advanced methods of delivering service via new technology. Scanning documents to make them available online, etc.
6. ...we had courthouse security. We don't have anyone at the doors checking to see who comes in.
7. ...we had additional court staff to fill additional positions that would allow us to provide the professional and expedient service that the citizens of our County deserve. Currently my staff is extremely over worked as we have a staff of only 5 Clerks and one Judge. This County is growing by leaps and bounds, but has become difficult to convince our County Commissioners. I have made changes to our software programs to keep our processes streamlined, however, there are only so many program changes to be made.
8. ...the staff was larger and absence due to training did not place a burden on the office.

### **Magistrate Courts**

1. ...we had more resources to review records.
2. ...everyone would work together.
3. ...we had a part-time clerk to help with the heavy workload
4. ...everyone has a judge as effective, efficient & knowledgeable as ours.
5. ...politics were routinely set aside in decision making efforts.
6. ...we had a stand alone computer for customers, for research and forms. Our Courts website is in process of making available court forms on the web site.
7. ...if customers would stop asking the mostly legal advice, such as how should I file my case? Or what should I do? Those type of questions.
8. ...more space available for public to read, study and fill out forms and other paperwork necessary to file an action in our court.
9. ...we strive to serve the public to the best of our ability. We cannot give legal advice and we try to explain that to customers. Also if the customer is asking for services we do not

perform I have my staff make phone calls to give them the info they are looking for or give the a direction to go in to help them

10. ...everyone did what was expected of them.
11. ...local governing authority supplied much needed personnel and adequate facilities to conduct the court in the professional manner that it should be conducted in.
12. ...domestic action forms be provided for pro se parties
13. ...the Magistrate Courts were more uniformed, this would help customers know more of what to expect from our court.

### **Municipal & Special Courts**

1. ...we had the funds to pay for all the services needed ie interpreter
2. ...we used applications for indigent defense. and some level of security provided for court staff
3. ...access and fairness considerations remain uppermost in the minds of court staff.
4. ...we could afford more personnel.
5. ...the city had the support of all the council members and more money budgeted for more training to better serve customers.
6. ...budgeting procedures would allow more updated technology, extensive customer service training and staff increase to handle all aspects of court procedures.
7. ...more training was available.
8. ...too much to say to type
9. ...we had more staff.
10. ... better clientele
11. ...the City had the support of all the council members and more money budgeted for more training to better serve customers.
12. ... we had more employees

13. ...there were more bilingual persons available in the Clerk's Office.
14. ...there was more than one person to handle everything, and training was done more.
15. ...we have a more diversity court staff. We need to promote diversity in court personal. Improve customer service. Some courts still mistreating people at the window. The just hire the wrong people to do this job.
16. ...more staff
17. ...there were more employees. At present time I am the only employee.
18. ... more training available
19. ...routine training was available for a municipal court clerk. Employees were recognized for exceeding expectations instead of across the board pay increases.
20. ...computer use was available in courtroom-- its a work in progress
21. ...we had 3-4 kiosk in our lobby for customers to pay faster.
22. ...we had fewer number of people on some of the calendars and one of our judges would slow down.
23. ...internal communication was better.
24. ...the judge and upper management noticed how hard we work and provide us with feedback on what good jobs we do. I try and praise my asst clerks on what good jobs they do daily. Also, upper management needs to listen more to the clerk's office on ways we can speed court proceeding and make the basic court experience a more pleasant one