

## Metropolitan King County Council

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## MANAGEMENT LETTER

DATE: January 9, 2006

TO: Metropolitan King County Councilmembers

FROM: Cheryle A. Broom, County Auditor

SUBJECT: Auditor Review of Feasibility Analysis of the Potential for Consolidation of Court Administration Functions

This management letter summarizes our review of the report "Feasibility Analysis of the Potential for Consolidation of Court Administrative Functions" prepared by the Superior Court, Department of Judicial Administration (DJA), District Court, and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in response to a 2005 budget proviso. In this proviso, the Metropolitan King County Council directed the courts, DJA, and OMB to analyze the administrative and support functions of the courts and DJA and evaluate the potential for the consolidation of functions, staffing, and space needs.

As part of its 2005 work program, the King County Auditor's Office was asked by the council to review the approach and process used to analyze the potential for consolidating the county's court administrative functions, and to review the resulting report.

### Summary and Recommendation

The feasibility study includes a wide range of administrative consolidation options, ranging from improving collaborative efforts to more substantive operational reforms. The report describes some collaboration efforts already underway and identifies others that show potential for future implementation. Such changes would require further analysis and legal and administrative changes to implement. The feasibility study did not prioritize any of these consolidation options or provide recommendations for future action. However, the report indicates the need for staffing studies of some administrative functions.

The Auditor's Office supports further study to consolidate court functions and share resources as part of broader efforts to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of court operations. With regard to the District Court staffing study funded by the council, we support District Court's decision to conduct a more comprehensive staffing analysis than can be provided by a time and motion study. We recommend that this study, as well as those under consideration by Superior Court and DJA, include analyses of staffing needs in relation to performance goals and workload factors, and assessments of the efficiency and effectiveness of existing practices. Taking such a comprehensive, in-depth approach increases the likelihood that the resulting staffing plan will address workload concerns and meet performance expectations.

## **Consolidation Feasibility Study Methodology and Results**

From April to June 2005, representatives from Superior Court, District Court, DJA, and OMB formed a work group to examine and compare all functional areas within the three judicial agencies. The group considered a wide range of consolidation and partnering options and developed a consolidation feasibility report in August 2005. The report identified ongoing consolidation and partnering initiatives as well as potential options that warrant further review. According to this report, the Superior Court, DJA, and District Court have already begun collaborating on some initiatives including several that involve Municipal Courts within King County. Examples of these ongoing initiatives include:

- Coordinating jury management practices;
- Sharing interpreter resources among Superior and District Courts;
- Space sharing;
- Appointment of District Court judges to Superior Court under state portability rules; and
- Holding Superior Court calendars at the Bellevue District Court to improve court access for Eastside customers.

In addition, the report identified 13 consolidation options that warrant further consideration, including cost-benefit and staffing studies. Some of these options would primarily impact internal or administrative operations, such as:

- Conducting joint management staff training;
- Sharing video conferencing systems;
- Developing a joint strategic technology plan;
- Collaborating on information technology security;
- Conducting staffing studies;
- Co-locating technology staff;
- Coordinating handling of anti-harassment orders; and
- Increasing the uniformity of local court rules.

Other options were customer service oriented, including:

- Developing a joint court website;
- Expanding availability of Superior and District Court records management systems to all court locations;
- Allowing customers to file and obtain copies of court documents at all locations; and
- Operating joint call center and cashiering functions.

The consolidation feasibility report also suggested increasing the use of problem-solving courts (i.e., expanding District Court's Mental Health Court to Superior Court defendants), indicating that such an expansion could provide better access to justice.

## **Future Efforts and Evaluation of Staffing Needs**

The feasibility study did not prioritize these consolidation options or provide recommendations for future action. Because the report does not indicate how the courts and DJA intend to proceed with regard to consolidation activities, we cannot comment on their plans. In addition, while the report identified a range of potential options for future work, including several different staffing studies, it did not identify the service improvement goals or problems that each option was intended to address. In conducting further analysis, it would be beneficial for the courts and DJA to explain the problems (including quantified assessments of their magnitudes, to the

extent possible) that would be addressed by the proposed initiatives and studies, and describe the expected outcomes. Furthermore, as future consolidation efforts are considered, it would be valuable for the courts and DJA to evaluate and prioritize them in light of their overall strategic goals and objectives.

The consolidation feasibility report indicated that further analysis is needed to reevaluate the staffing needs of some functions. In the third quarter 2005 operating omnibus supplemental budget, District Court obtained \$60,000 (revenue backed) to conduct a "time and motion, or equivalent" study to determine the court's support staff requirements. District Court has shared its preliminary plans with us and its intention to conduct a more comprehensive staffing analysis than a time and motion study. We support this decision, and as District Court and the other judicial agencies begin studying their staffing needs, we would like to offer some technical guidance to strengthen their staffing plans.

#### *What level of staff is sufficient?*

One of the most important elements of an effective staffing plan is having clear criteria to determine what level of staff will be sufficient. Such criteria can exist in the form of goals for operational effectiveness or service level performance, such as processing files within a certain period of time, or keeping backlogs and customer wait times within established minimum levels. In addition to planning the number of positions needed to meet performance or coverage expectations, staffing needs can also be driven by the hours of coverage that a position or "post" needs to be covered. In these cases it is important that the correct analysis is used to calculate the full-time equivalents needed for complete coverage.

#### *What is the connection between staffing levels and workload?*

Another important element in building an effective staffing plan is having a detailed understanding of the underlying workload factors that impact staffing needs. A strong staffing plan will establish a connection between the various types and levels of workload and the staffing levels needed to meet performance expectations. This helps management in several ways:

- If workload or performance problems occur, detailed workload information can help managers understand the source of the problem, how significant it is, and how to address it.
- Because workload can fluctuate and change, data on historical workload levels and expected trends can help predict how staffing needs may change in the future.
- Detailed workload information and an understanding of how it affects staffing needs can enable managers to adjust their staffing plans without completing costly new staffing studies every few years.

#### *Limitations of Time and Motion Studies*

We would like to provide some comments on "time and motion" studies because this term was used in the language requesting funding for District Court's current staffing study. Time and motion studies provide detailed information on the amount of time required to complete certain tasks. While they can provide important information about the resources needed to support current operations, they do not answer important questions such as:

- Are current practices and organizational structure effective and efficient?
- Are individual workload levels appropriate?
- Could alternative processes be beneficial?

Additionally, time and motion studies provide a “snapshot” of current staffing needs without an analysis of *why* needs are at this level, what factors are driving them, and how needs might change in the future. Such studies also do not provide information on how to link staffing levels to a desired level of performance. As a result, staffing plans that are based solely on time and motion studies can quickly become outdated as workload levels vary and change, and may not produce the desired performance outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, an effective staffing plan will be framed around performance or service level goals and employ appropriate methods to determine the staffing levels needed to meet these goals. The plan should include a quantifiable connection between underlying workload factors and staffing needs, to prevent the plan from becoming outdated as workload changes, and should also include regular reviews of the effectiveness and efficiency of existing practices. Taking a comprehensive, in-depth approach such as this increases the likelihood that the resulting staffing plan will address workload concerns and meet performance expectations.

We therefore support District Court’s effort to pursue a comprehensive staffing study and recommend that this study, as well as those under consideration by Superior Court and DJA, include a detailed analysis of staffing needs in relation to performance goals and workload factors, and assessments of the efficiency and effectiveness of existing practices.

Ron Perry, Liz DuBois, and Wendy SooHoo conducted this review. Please contact Ron or Liz at 296-1655 if you have any questions.

cc: Ron Sims, County Executive  
The Honorable Judge Richard Eadie, Presiding Judge, Superior Court  
The Honorable Corinna Harn, Chief Presiding Judge, District Court  
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