

Director's Message



2001

On September 11 the Judicial Conference had begun its 141st session at the Supreme Court when the Chief Justice was informed the building must be evacuated. Within minutes we set up an emergency center three blocks away at the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building to enable Conference members and committee chairs to communicate with their chambers and families, and to explore accommodation and travel options for stranded judges. The Administrative Office's emergency response team went into action and was in constant contact with the courts in New York and U.S. Marshals Service headquarters in Washington D.C. I directed our Budget Division, Office of Information and Technology, and others to clear any hurdles in providing emergency funding and equipment to impacted courts.

A week after the first-ever cancellation of a Judicial Conference session, a ballot was faxed to members so that time-sensitive matters could be resolved. The results were communicated to judges nationwide through J-Net and to the news media by video press conference.

I wrote to the Attorney General to make certain he would provide the Marshals Service with the necessary resources to protect judges and courts. Within days of the attacks I met with congressional appropriators to seek additional funds for Judicial Branch security needs, an effort that proved fruitful. Congress provided \$95 million in supplemental funding for court security. This will pay for a supervisory deputy marshal responsible for coordinating security in each circuit and each district.

The Administrative Office's new Office of Emergency Preparedness has helped numerous courts develop their own

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Director Leonidas Ralph Mecham

crisis response, occupant emergency, and continuity of business plans. We have supplied courts with guidelines for handling mail to minimize potential exposure to anthrax. Acting on policies adopted by the Judicial Conference, Administrative Office staff made arrangements for a contractor to test courthouses for potentially dangerous biological and chemical hazards. We are actively exploring greater use of video conferencing to minimize travel, and are relying increasingly on e-mail to communicate with courts.

We will continue to take aggressive steps to safeguard courthouses and the people who work in and visit them each day. Throughout history the federal courts have been a stabilizing force in American life. It is essential that courts continue the business of dispensing justice, and that the Administrative Office continues to build upon its tradition of excellence in service to the Judiciary.

One of my most important duties is to look continuously for ways to foster better relations with Congress. Far too often the Judiciary is the forgotten branch of government, and it is our job to make certain our voice is heard. The many Judicial Conference representatives and other judges who appear at congressional hearings are invaluable. Hardly a day goes by that we do not speak with members and their staff by phone, send letters to House and Senate offices, or discuss strategies with Conference committee chairs and my Legislative Council.

Despite a Congress that began with the uncertainty of who would occupy the White House and concluded with the uncertainty that accompanies a war, the Judicial Branch fared well. The fiscal year 2002 budget is an 8.4 percent increase over the previous year; lawyers appointed to represent indigents under the Criminal Justice Act will see their compensation rates increase from \$55 for out-of-court and \$75 for in-court work to a flat rate of \$90; and 21 new courthouse construction projects will be funded.

While I am pleased that judges will receive a 3.4 percent pay adjustment in 2002, the Administrative Office will continue to push for the catch-up in compensation that is overdue and deserved. I look forward to standing beside the Chief Justice and the Judicial Branch Committee in this effort.

Over the past two years a number of new benefits have been provided to judges and Judiciary employees. More than a quarter of all court

employees now take part in the flexible benefits program, which allows each participant to, in effect, increase their annual take home pay by about \$2,000. The long-term care insurance program, health benefits premium payment plan, and the commuter benefits program all contribute positively to the quality of life of Judicial Branch employees. We are pursuing legislation to expand the list of available benefits, as well as authority to use Judiciary funds to defray some of the program costs in coming years.

The Administrative Office is proud of its careful use of taxpayer funds. In cooperation with judges and court executives, this year we published the first *Handbook on Management Oversight and Stewardship*. It contains a comprehensive collection of guidance and policies relating to the oversight of court administrative functions, and should help assure that chief judges have the necessary guidance and internal controls to operate their courts prudently. I also am pleased that this year the Judicial Conference unanimously adopted a progressive and responsible use policy for courts that access the Internet through the data communications network. I believe this policy is reasonable. The Administrative Office will assist the Committee on Automation and Technology in its continued work on this issue.

We have contracted with experts who have studied federal court security, the probation and pretrial services system, and lawbooks and libraries. In each area, recommendations are being reviewed carefully and implementation plans developed as part of Administrative Office efforts to refine key Judiciary programs and services.

The Case Management/Electronic Case Files system already is having a positive impact on court management and public access. Today, more than two million documents are in the system. For two years Administrative Office staff worked closely with the Committee on Court Administration and Case Management to study the difficult issues relating to privacy that have arisen as a result of the new electronic access to case files. This year the Judicial Conference adopted a policy that has earned wide support.

An effective communications plan is the cornerstone of any successful business. Reality and necessity are hastening change in the way the Judiciary communicates. The Administrative Office's commitment to reducing the mail it sends the courts was accelerated significantly this year. We have compiled accurate and targeted e-mail lists that will enable nearly all mail to the courts to be sent electronically, so that important

information will reach those who need it in a matter of minutes. Working closely with the courts, the Administrative Office selected and began installing a new e-mail system this year. That project should be complete midway through 2002.

The design and effectiveness of J-Net are being studied with the expectation that a revamped web site will even better serve the courts. Each year more Federal Judicial Television Network shows are educating and informing judges and court staff. News shows and interviews about congressional hearings and issues also are broadcast on the network.

As we set our sights on 2002, some needs stand out. There are 100 judicial vacancies and, regrettably, it has been over a decade since Congress last enacted an omnibus judgeship bill. District courts located on the southwest border and elsewhere, as well as several appellate courts, are in dire need of new positions. When the 100 vacancies are combined with the 54 judgeships that need to be created, the shortages are even more pronounced. The Administrative Office will continue to actively voice these judgeship concerns. Following two years of decline, bankruptcy filings jumped 14 percent this year. No new bankruptcy

judgeships have been created since 1992. This, too, will be high on our legislative agenda. The past decade of courthouse construction has been unprecedented in terms of growth and innovation. More needs to be done. Old buildings must be repaired or replaced. Courthouses need to be equipped with the latest technology. All federal courthouses must be secure, and all active district court judges must know they will have their own dedicated courtrooms.

The comprehensive list of issues the courts will face in 2002 is uncertain, yet my commitment to action is firm. When automated systems are outdated, the Administrative Office will reform and modernize them. When impediments to efficient court operations are encountered, we will remove them. When program shortcomings are identified, we will remedy them. Should tragedy strike at the foundation of our government, we will do everything possible to make certain that the Third Branch is prepared. Judges and court staff have come to expect excellence from the Administrative Office. I am confident that in 2002 we can and will deliver.