



GLOBE EDITORIAL

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The courts better themselves

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NOT so long ago, a visit to a Massachusetts courthouse was like a visit to a musty 19th-century relic. But the state judicial system has been wrenching itself almost into the 21st century because of the work of its staff, the leadership of its chief justice, and the advice of a special committee, which released a pivotal report in 2003. A celebration of its fifth anniversary last week was welcome evidence that an essential government institution can improve itself, if it has the will.

The committee, headed by former Boston College president J. Donald Monan, realized that much of the responsibility for court problems rested with the Legislature, which insisted on a fragmented organizational chart and the ability to make patronage appointments to court staffs. But the committee came to understand that, with the right leadership, the courts could make progress on their own. The Supreme Judicial Court, overseer of the state judiciary, responded in 2003 by appointing Robert Mulligan, a veteran Superior Court judge, as the chief administrative justice.

Since then, Mulligan and his management team studied the workflow in every courthouse in the state. They set performance goals for the courts - maintaining, for instance, that a robbery suspect should be tried within 180 days of arraignment - and created an evaluation process for judges.

The result has been more uniform staffing levels throughout the system. Holyoke District Court had 61 percent of the needed staff early in 2005; today it has 81 percent. Worcester Superior Court had 56 percent in 2005, now that figure has risen to 76 percent. And Framingham District Court had an overly generous 118 percent in 2005: That has been lowered to 88 percent.

Improvements in staffing, information technology, and other areas have reduced the number of cases that remain unresolved past the time limits set by the new standards. That figure stood at 73,580 on Jan. 1, far from perfect, but a great improvement over the 177,129 delayed cases on Jan. 1, 2006.

Authoritative confirmation of this success has come from the National Center for State Courts, in Williamsburg, Va., which is giving Mulligan its 2008 Distinguished Service Award.

Mulligan's term expires in October, and he hasn't said whether he will accept reappointment. Margaret Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court, told the Globe last week that she is confident the judiciary has other competent managers.

Some obstacles remain, though: The Legislature still approves individual line items for individual courts and gives judicial administrators limited flexibility to move money around. Lawmakers would be wise to give the courts the power to complete their campaign for excellence. ■

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