

WEB-ONLY

## Massachusetts courts slash backlogs

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March 4, 2008

BOSTON — The Massachusetts state court system has recently slashed backlogs and cut case processing time, according to newly released data about the courts' progress since an outside panel gave the court poor marks for administration five years ago.

Since the March 2003 Visiting Committee on Management in the Courts report, the state court system has adopted four of the 10 court performance measures advocated by the National Center for State Courts in Williamsburg, Va. The courts have developed time standards for each type of case in each trial court department. They also now measure three key indicators of court performance: the age of active pending cases; the clearance rate, or the comparison between cases coming in and leaving the system; and the adherence to a certain trial date for cases.

In the past few years, ending cases past the time standard guidelines dropped to 73,580 on Dec. 31, 2007, compared with 87,506 the prior year and 177,129 at the end of 2005, according to a report issued at a Feb. 27 symposium on the court system's administrative progress since the 2003 report. More than 300 lawyers and court personnel attended the symposium about the report, which is colloquially known as the Monan report after its chairman, Boston College Chancellor J. Donald Monan S.J.

Last year, the percentage of cases resolved or disposed of within time standards climbed steadily from 83% in the first quarter to 89% in the fourth quarter.

The court has also developed staffing models for all seven of the state's trial court departments to objectively distribute resources and allay fears that courts closer to Boston get more funding than Western Massachusetts' courts. A Web-based case management system in limited use will eventually be rolled out to all trial court departments.

Paul Burke, president of the National Association for Court Management and director of court operations for the Massachusetts Housing Court, said he believes Massachusetts is the only state using some of the performance measurement tools across all of its court departments.

"We have to run a business behind what goes on in the courtroom," Burke said.

As the court system has adopted the performance measures, it's also experienced a cultural shift, said Robert Mulligan, chief justice for administration & management of the Massachusetts Trial Court.

"The organization has changed to become much less risk averse and more willing to change things," Mulligan said.