

## Case Study

## Shelby County, Tennessee

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– Van Sturdivant,  
Chief Administrative Officer, Circuit and Chancery Courts



### The Challenge

With a population over 925,000, Tennessee’s Circuit and Chancery Courts of Shelby County require nine judges and three chancellors to manage an annual civil caseload of approximately 9,000 cases, currently managed by 60 internal users. Prior to 2000, the demands of the 30th Judicial District Clerks’ Offices included manually docketing case-related information in 25- to 50-pound docket books housed throughout the courthouse. With the increase in available automated systems, the Courts knew a change would be required in how they did business.

The process began when the Courts decided to collaborate with us to automate their processes through a new case management solution. Within a year, the case management solution went live and was working well. In spite of this automation success, the Shelby County Civil Court Services were still largely paper-driven. Pleadings could only be filed by attorneys and litigants at the courthouse in downtown Memphis.

“In the past, we had a 50-foot counter with nine employees assisting document filers in lines that were often three or four people deep during peak business hours. We also had attorneys who often needed to file late in the day. They would show up at 4:30 p.m. with three to four lawsuits to file, thus forcing our employees to work overtime. This was expensive for the County and didn’t make the employees or the attorneys very happy,” said Van Sturdivant, Chief Administrative Officer.

As court staff and attorneys accessed paper files, some documents would be returned to the file out of order or not at all. The next person accessing the file would spend valuable time searching

for necessary documents. Judges would spend equally valuable time in court searching for specific documents within the paper file, sometimes delaying proceedings. The need to move away from paper became obvious. In 2011, Shelby County decided to research solutions that would reduce, and possibly eliminate, dependence on paper files. They began looking for an e-filing solution to help them reach their goal.

### The Solution

Shelby County selected Conduent e-Filing Solution and went live just six short months later. “The Conduent team was invaluable during this implementation. They were literally an extension of our own team, making the entire implementation seamless,” said Maury Wessels, Court Technology Coordinator. “The short implementation cycle allowed Shelby County to almost immediately recognize the benefits of a paperless solution.” On-site help desk staff were available to lend a hand when slight problems occurred.

The significant decrease of people in the courthouse has been noticeable. “Once we got going with e-filing, we were amazed to realize how quiet it was downstairs. Now, instead of our employees helping lines of people, they’re busy reviewing cases electronically and assisting the occasional walk-in. It has been a nice change for everyone,” said Wessels.

The Conduent e-Filing Solution allows registered attorneys (and pro se litigants) to file and update all cases electronically. Getting a specific date stamp on a filing can be critical. Access to e-filing allows attorneys or pro-se litigants to work until midnight to complete a filing, instead of hurrying to the courthouse to meet a 4:30 p.m. deadline.



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E-filing is not free. There is always a cost involved to provide access and process payments. Although the state of Tennessee allows local jurisdictions to assess a fee to help cover these costs, Shelby County felt that this move was important enough to absorb all additional costs. They wanted everyone who wanted to file electronically to be able to do so and not have costs be a roadblock.

Throughout the process, the Court was very transparent on what was happening and why they were implementing this new change. “We met with all the judges and demonstrated the product. The judges liked what they saw and approved the concept from the beginning,” said Sturdivant. Judges who were tentative to embrace electronic signatures were allowed to migrate at their own pace.

The County also worked closely with the local bar association to provide information to attorneys in the area. “The attorneys were eager to have an e-filing system. They liked, and used, the federal system regularly and were anxious to have the same services available to them locally,” stated Wessels.

To familiarize attorneys with the system, Shelby County provided demonstrations at bar meetings, which provided continuing education credits for anyone who attended. They also produced overview videos and posted them on YouTube for access at any time. Electronic access to cases means that all documents are in the files at all times and multiple people can access a case at the same time – from anywhere.

### **The Results**

Shelby County courts went live with e-filing on June 25, 2012. All new cases (whether filed electronically or manually) entered the electronic

workflow process; no new paper case jackets were created. Cases existing prior to the go-live date are maintained within their paper case jackets and remain in that state until closed.

Three years in, the County has made substantial progress toward decreasing their dependency on paper. Today, 44 percent of all new cases are filed electronically, with the percentage rising every year. A significant number of cases are originally filed in person but are updated electronically. That number also continues to rise. “There are a handful of attorneys who still need to write checks for their original filings and need to come to the courthouse, but they use the e-Filing Solution for all their actions after the initial filing,” said Wessels.

Because of the location of major businesses in the Memphis area, Shelby County has a large number of major lawsuits, which don’t move quickly. These cases usually contain large volumes of documents. Judges now have the means to view documents at any time as they review cases set on their dockets. Judges and chancellors benefit from having the entire case file available electronically.

### **The Future**

Looking forward to future enhancements, the Shelby County Courts would like to take advantage of their system to enhance notifications. “There are a lot of email addresses stored in the system and we want to start using them,” said Wessels.

While the Court currently sends all notifications via U.S. Postal Service, they plan to start using available emails to send notifications instead of mailing paper. This will not only save the County money on printing and mailing, but will also provide tracking capabilities and timely updates on cases. Parties to a case will know immediately when changes are made or when judges issue rulings or opinions, and will be able to instantly access documents associated with the change. The Court also plans to use email to advise attorneys of stagnant cases and pending case dismissals in an effort to keep cases moving judiciously.

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