

# Case.net is going to get a lot more accessible

The Missouri Court system back in 1994 included in its goals the launch of an electronic system that would provide online access to case information and also allow attorneys to file documents with the court online rather than having to deliver documents to the courthouse. That was almost 30 years ago.

It took a long time to go from concept to reality. Years passed but the dream continued. Finally, in 2009, the State Court Administrator's technology staff began work creating the system and two years later, the Missouri Supreme Court became the first court in the state to join the e-filing system. County by county, other courts followed. On-site work at each courthouse was required by the court administrative system folks. It wasn't until 2016 that all courts were on-board.

But it didn't take that long for reporters to discover that the system had only limited blessings for them. They could see a docket online but the pleadings they needed to do their job still, for many, required a trip over to the courthouse to see the paper file. Not easy if your office was not in the same town as the courthouse. Not easy if you were working on a breaking story at midnight. And then there's "probable cause statement," a key document for most reporters covering criminal stories but never accessible online – covering arrests of suspects without that document made such stories almost impossible.

Missouri Press Association representatives and the Missouri Press-Bar Commission worked on this project with attorney Joe Martineau, of St. Louis, who represents the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, for a number of years, both in the filing of pleadings seeking a higher-court order granting the media access to the Missouri eFiling System, and in urging the granting of access by the Missouri

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Office of State Court Administrator, to no avail. Money to make such a change was one reason. Another reason was concern over how to maintain confidentiality of certain materials in court pleadings that justifiably should not be made public.

To their credit, judges in the Missouri Supreme Court and other Missouri court administration officials understood the media's urgent need and supported access, but the resolution of this issue moved very slowly.

However, it's exciting to be able to confirm that the end of this tunnel is in sight. In June, the Supreme Court approved a number of rule changes related to e-filing of documents in Case.net. These rule changes will begin the process of shifting the burden of protecting confidential information onto the shoulders of attorneys filing pleadings, so that court clerks are not asked to make those determinations.

And then, click-able access to most pleadings in Case.net will be made available to the public without

requiring a special password for access!

In making the announcement, Missouri Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul C. Wilson said, "Today's orders will ensure court documents that are currently open to the public will be truly accessible to the public." In short, anyone wanting to see a public document contained in a court file will be able to look at it online, from their home, rather than be required to go down to the courthouse and ask that a file be pulled.

The new plan will go into effect on July 1, 2023 and will only apply to pleadings filed after that date, so reporters need to be a little more patient, and will also not be able to rely on this system for historical research of case filings made prior to that date. However, Beth Riggert, Communications Counsel, did say that access to documents filed prior to that date will be available still to reporters (and the public) who go to the courthouse and use the public access terminals at courthouses.

There will still be filings containing information that will not be made public, but now it will be up to the lawyers filing such documents to ensure that private information is redacted from the documents which are filed and accessible via Case.net.

This is exciting news for all reporters in Missouri and Missouri Press Association appreciates the hard work of all those who have pushed for this change since the Case.net start date, especially the judiciary who worked internally to make this happen!



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