

Public Defender eyes \$120,000 annual savings

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by Joe Wilhelm Jr.
Staff Writer

Will upgrade jail video-conferencing

Shrinking budgets are forcing government offices to do more with less and that's what the Public Defender's Office of the Fourth Judicial Circuit has done in serving its clients.

The Public Defender's Office has been using Polycom video conferencing systems to communicate with incarcerated clients for the past five years.

Recently, the office reviewed the equipment and discovered there was another solution that was cheaper and provided the same level of service.

"For a number of years there has been video-conferencing technology between the PD Office and the Duval County jail, but it was proprietary and accompanied by a hefty price tag and various other fees, which are passed along to the taxpayer," said Public Defender Matt Shirk.

"Our Director of Information Technology, Joe Frasier, has brilliantly developed a system using a personal computer and some other hardware," said Shirk.

"Once he applies the off-the-shelf software, we have a video-conference system that does everything we need, only at a fraction of the cost. Taxpayers will get considerable relief as we adopt this technology," he said.

Florida Statutes require that the City provide the Public Defender's Office with office space, utilities, telephone, custodial, library, transportation and communications services necessary for the proper and efficient operation of its offices.

Over the next several months, 11 new Public Defender Jail Video System (PDJVS) units will be installed in the Clay County Jail, which to date has not had the capability.

Duval County, which presently uses jail video-conferencing, is expanding the number of units and switching to the PDJVS for substantial cost savings.

Seventeen units will be installed in various detention facilities in Duval County, including 13 at the Duval County Jail, three at the Juvenile Detention Center and one at the Montgomery Correctional Center. This will allow assistant public defenders with webcams to access their clients in video conferences. The service will also be available to private attorneys.

The Public Defender's Office reported the PDJVS units cost about \$2,700 each compared to about \$7,000 per unit (including an annual maintenance fee of at least \$1,200) for the Polycom system.

The Public Defenders Office estimates that Clay County taxpayers will save \$47,259 in the next fiscal year and Duval County taxpayers will



Photo by Joe Wilhelm Jr.

Joe Frasier, director of information technology for the Public Defender's Office, displays a functioning Public Defender Jail Video System unit he maintains at the Montgomery Correctional Center.

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save \$73,037. Those figures do not reflect the savings in attorney time and travel from using the video-conferencing with clients. It also could reduce the cost of guard services required to bring prisoners from their cells for the meetings.

“This new system will facilitate inmates meeting with their attorneys without requiring detention deputies moving the inmates to visitation rooms and providing security clearance for the attorneys,” said Sheriff Rick Beseler.

“It will speed up the process, making the criminal justice system more efficient and saving money at the same time.”

Shirk recognized Beseler and others for their support of the new technology.

“There are a lot of people in our local government who are helping make this transition from the old system to the PDJVS,” said Shirk.

“Clay County Sheriff Rick Beseler and Clerk of the Courts James Jett are helping us outfit the jail in Green Cove Springs with this important capability,” said Shirk.

In Duval County, he credited City Council member Ronnie Fussell, “who saw the massive disparity in cost between the old system and the PDJVS and gained us Council support that was necessary for us to move forward.”

Fussell was appointed by new Council President Jack Webb to chair the Public Health and Safety Committee and will look for more ways to save money.

“These are the types of innovative ideas that will help us save taxpayer dollars,” said Fussell. “After meeting with Mr. Shirk and Mr. Frasier, I thought it was a great idea, and whenever you can save money, we need to look at it.”

The new technology also has to pass the performance test.

“We don’t always go for the cheapest way to do things,” said City Chief Administrative Officer Kerri Stewart.

“When it comes to technology, it also has to fit our business model. It has to be able to perform the tasks we need it to in an efficient manner. All new technologies are fully vetted before they are approved,” she said.

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