



DIGITAL JUSTICE:  
IMPLEMENTATION OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE COURTROOM

*VACo Achievement Award Submission FY2014  
Buckingham County*

## DIGITAL JUSTICE: IMPLEMENTATION OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE COURTROOM

### **PROJECT OVERVIEW:**

The federal judiciary is constantly updating its courtrooms to reflect technological developments. Achieving the same results at a local government level can be challenging logistically and financially. However, the benefits of a largely electronic courtroom include better information presentation, reduction in cost of trials through the use of teleconferencing, accuracy of court records, and overall expediency of a trial. The goal of the project was to upgrade the Buckingham County Courtroom with digital media that improves the local legal system through innovative approaches that are mindful of taxpayer dollars.

With input from Buckingham's Commonwealth Attorney regarding the most urgent needs for technological improvement, our locality implemented a system with the following attributes and associated benefits:

- 1) **Evidence Presentation** - At a central location within the Court, a hub was installed that has the capability of interconnecting a laptop that can broadcast evidence across a network of screens. These screens were installed at various points within the Courtroom for review by the Judge, Prosecution, Defense, jury, witness, and Court audience. This hub can also handle document projectors, any Apple devices, and a host of other digital media for widespread viewing.
- 2) **Protection of Witnesses** - This system allows display of a closed-circuit television feed. The closed-circuit television feed allows juveniles to be located in a different area of the building for their protection.
- 3) **Accuracy of Court Record** – An interactive device has been installed at the witness stand that allows the witness to circle, highlight, demonstrate, and/or clarify information put forth by the litigants. This can be broadcast on the multiple screen system and can be saved and printed for the court record as an exhibit.
- 4) **Expansion of Space** – The Courtroom can be used as adjunct meeting space for purposes outside of litigation, including public safety, citizen awareness, and/or local government interoperability meetings.

All aspects of this project were designed, constructed/installed, and implemented by in-house County staff. All equipment was off-the-shelf and was adapted for use within the Courtroom to expedite the project and reduce costs that are commonly associated with custom Courtroom technology. Through out-of-the box thinking, Buckingham County has become a leader in the State for Courtroom technology.

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### **ISSUE/PROBLEM:**

Our locality was dependent on paper records and traditional presentation methods within the Courtroom. In a digital age, our Courts were falling behind. Evidence, litigation, and records are largely prepared electronically and should have an outlet in the Court for mass presentation, of which Buckingham County Courtrooms were unprepared. In just the past year, trials within our Courtrooms have seen third-party firms brought in for the purpose of displaying digital media during litigation. Trials involving juveniles have required the assistance of Virginia State Police to protect the witness during hearings. Both situations have brought to light the need to update our Courtroom technology.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

First and foremost, there was a decision to perform all conceptual designs, installation, and implementation using in-house staff. This would allow cost savings to the project and taxpayers by eliminating subcontractors, custom designed systems, and expensive equipment. This afforded additional cost avoidance by yielding the opportunity for in-house training and troubleshooting as a permanent solution.

Through coordination between the Commonwealth Attorney and the IT Manager, the most pressing needs of the Court were presented and included better presentation of evidence, increased capabilities for trials involving juveniles, and easier transition of trial exhibits to court record. To accomplish these three main goals, staff decided on the following methods/equipment:

#### **1) Evidence Presentation**

- A five-port HD video hub was installed in a central location within the Courtroom. This allows five-inputs (laptop, ELMO projector, Apple TV, closed-circuit television, and one optional hub). This port wirelessly transmits information to another hub that converts the HD signal to CAT6 cable. These cables are sent to a receiver and output device (screens).

- Four (4) 19" screens are located for specific viewing at points for the Prosecution, Defense, Witness, and Judge. Two additional 52" screen was mounted for the Jury and Courtroom audience; these devices receives a purely wireless HD video signal to allow mobility within the room. In-house staff custom fabricated brackets for all screens to maintain a low-profile, inconspicuous mounting technique to avoid distraction within the Courtroom.

## **2) Protection of Witnesses**

- One input of Section 1 above was designated for use of a closed-circuit video feed. The video feed originates in a secluded room away from the Courtroom. The witness is displayed on screens per Section 1 above through this video feed. However, the only video displayed to the witness is a feed of the Judge. The Judge is outfitted with a microphone that allows communication between the witness and the Judge. This allows the witness to remain calm, comfortable, and unbiased based on Courtroom activity, the Defendant, or the jury. This technology has been primarily implemented for trials involving juveniles, but has a diverse range of applications in the Courtroom.

## **3) Accuracy of Court Record**

- An interactive device was installed at the witness stand that allows the witness to demonstrate or clarify exhibits by highlighting, drawing, circling, writing, etc. Once the witness has completed requested documentation, the particular image can be saved, printed, and entered as a Courtroom exhibit. This is also connected to the video feeds within the Courtroom for viewing by all parties, which saves time during a trial to pass the exhibit amongst the Courtroom.

While these were the three main goals of the project, there have also been secondary results. The expansion of technology yielded the second-largest County meeting space with capability of digital broadcasting. This meeting space could be used for citizen awareness meetings, adjunct meeting space during an emergency or public safety situation, or for local government interoperability meetings. In addition to the direct benefits mentioned herein, there has been a great deal of research on a nationwide level that correlates the use of technology with the speed of the trial, jury retention, and overall costs of the trial.

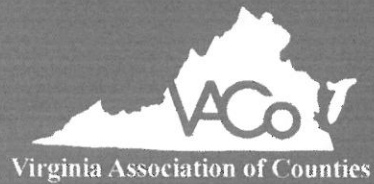
**CONCLUSION:**

All technology was purchased as off-the-shelf equipment and adapted by our staff to fit the purposes intended by this program. Innovative installation techniques and troubleshooting methods during implementation of the equipment affords a user-friendly system that benefits all parties of a trial, including the litigators, witnesses, jury, and Judge.

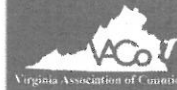
We are proud of our advances, our capabilities to complete this project completely in-house, and our attention to the needs of the legal system. The system allows interconnection of all current electronic devices and allows for future expansion, when necessary. Buckingham has received much interest from other localities to tour our Courtroom and form their own model based on our approach.



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# 2014 Achievement Awards



## 2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

### Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2014.**

#### Program Information

Locality Buckingham County

Program Title Digital Justice

Program Category Information Technology

#### Contact Information

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#### Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name Rebecca S. Carter

Title County Administrator

Signature *Rebecca S. Carter*

## Call for Entries