

Hidalgo County District Clerk Office Strategic Plan 2008-2010



integrity



technology



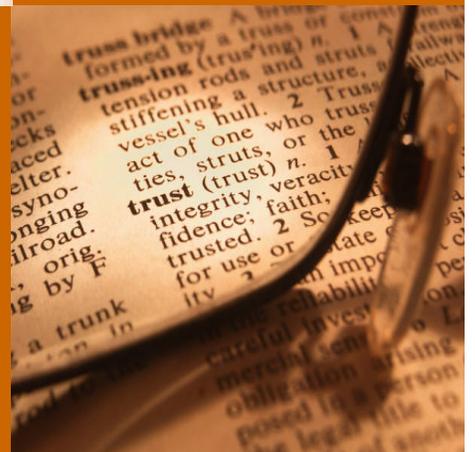
public service



accountability



progress



INTRODUCTION

Mission & Guiding Principles.....	3
Organization Chart.....	4
Who we are.....	5
Overview.....	6

GOAL 1

Optimize Customer Service.....	10
--------------------------------	----

GOAL 2

Capitalize of Technology.....	11
-------------------------------	----

GOAL 3

Achieve Effective Communication.....	12
& Office Transparency	

GOAL 4

Maximize Employee Participation.....	13
& Exemplary Public Service	

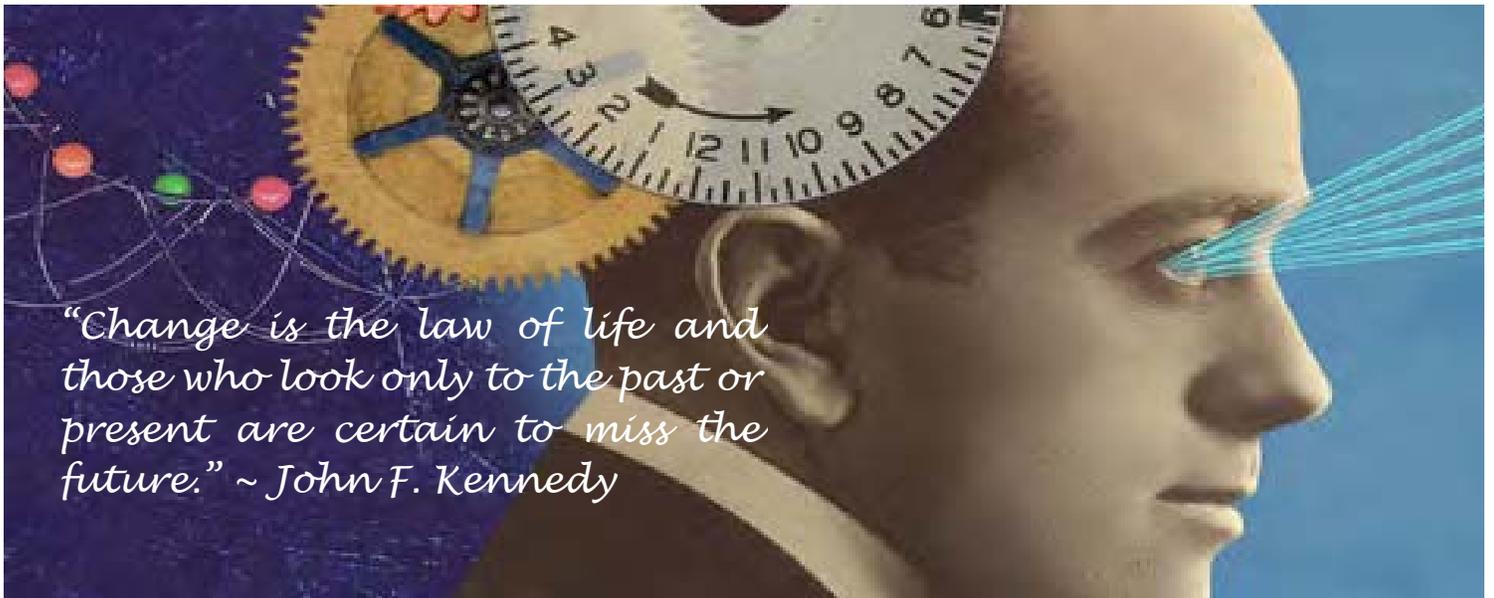
GOAL 5

Deliver Efficient & Responsive Government.....	14
--	----

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES.....	15
--	-----------

ACCOMPANYING INFORMATION

Strategic Planning Process.....	16
Legislative Initiatives.....	17



“Change is the law of life and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” ~ John F. Kennedy

Mission

To provide the judicial system and the public with efficient and accountable service while:

- Preserving the integrity of the court records the office is charged to index and secure
- Managing and safeguarding the collection of fees
- Fostering a positive work environment
- Providing educational opportunities for all employees
- Demanding impeccable work ethics in order to adhere to the Statutory and Constitutional duties of the office
- Sustaining transparency in government operations

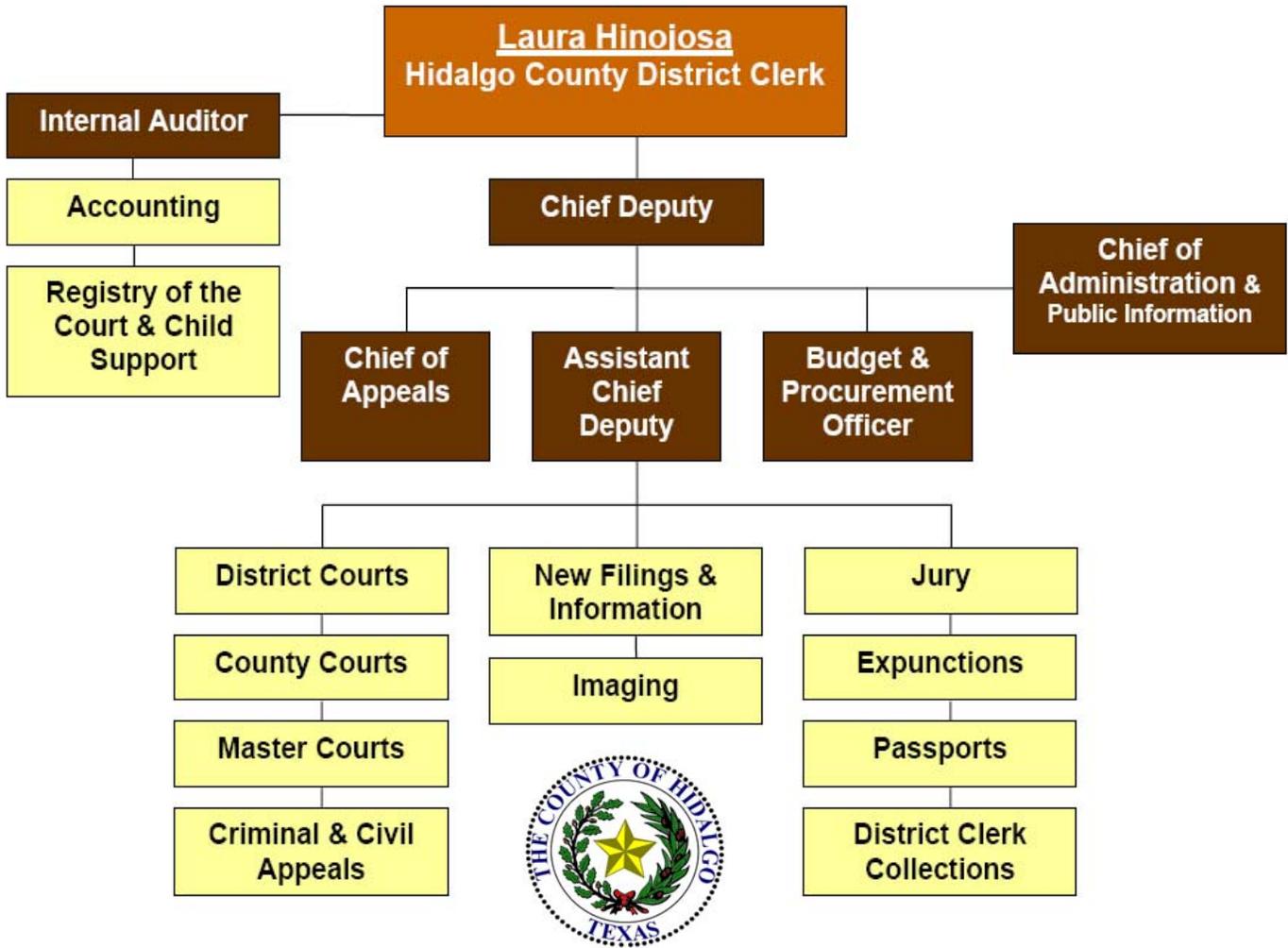
Guiding Principles

- Integrity
- Accountability
- Customer Service
- Communication
- Honesty
- Teamwork
- Work Ethics

Strategic Goals

- Optimize Customer Service
- Capitalize on Technology
- Achieve Effective Communication & Office Transparency
- Maximize Employee Participation & Foster Exemplary Public Service
- Deliver Efficient & Responsive Government

Hidalgo County District Clerk Organization Chart



Introduction



Who We Are

The Hidalgo County District Clerk Office is located on the first floor of the Hidalgo County Courthouse. The organization currently employs sixty-eight (68) staff including the elected official and provides support staff to eleven (11) district courts, five (5) county courts and two (2) master courts. In addition to the assisting the judicial courts, the district clerk office consists of the following support divisions: *jury, appeals, child support and registry of the court, accounting, collections, passports, imaging* and most recently *expunctions*.

The District Clerk is elected by the qualified voters for state and county officers and holds office for four years, subject to removal by information, or by indictment of a grand jury, and conviction of a petit jury. In case of vacancy, the judge of the District Court shall have the power to appoint a clerk, who shall hold office until the office can be filled by election.

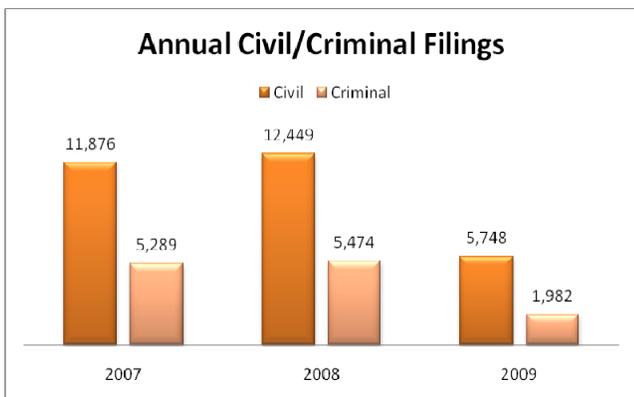
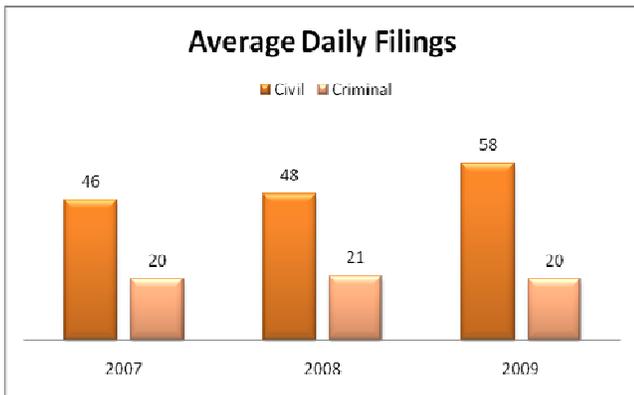
The District Clerk serves in the following capacity:

- Serves as registrar, recorder and custodian of all documents that are part of criminal and civil actions
- Works with the Judges to obtain timely disposition of all court cases
- Is responsible for managing records so that they are easily retrieved for public information; preserved for permanent storage in archives; and disposed of according to the law.
- Is charged with the responsibility of collecting and disbursing court costs, fines and other fees that benefit twenty plus agencies at the state and local level, in addition to child support payments, money placed in the court registry fund that is in dispute, money invested on behalf of minor children for safekeeping until age eighteen, and preparation of the operating budget for the office.
- Is responsible for gathering data and reporting to several state and local agencies such as the County Auditor, County Treasurer, Voter Registration, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Department of Public Safety, Attorney General, Supreme Court of Texas and Office of Court Administration.

Overview

The office of the district clerk has been included in every Texas Constitution since the republic. Article 5, Section 9 of the Texas Constitution provides that there will be a district clerk in every county. As previously mentioned, the district clerk provides support to the district courts in its respective county, serving as the custodian of all court pleadings and papers that are part of any cause of action, civil or criminal.

The district clerk office averages a total of 51 daily civil filings per day and 20 criminal filings. In 2008 the district clerk office totaled 12,449 civil filings and 5,474 criminal filings vs. the 11,876 civil filings and 5,289 criminal filings in 2007.



All active civil judicial records are filed accordingly in our records section of the office.

Criminal records are archived separately in a designated area in the courthouse basement facility. In addition to all active cases, the district clerk has under its jurisdiction 20,000 boxes of disposed records at an offsite records storage facility and are supplied to the courts and public upon request.

From 2005 on, when scanning capabilities became available, records have been imaged in our judicial case system and provide an electronic copy of every document filed. The district clerk office is currently assessing the feasibility of implementing an imaging project to scan all documents prior to 2005. A part of these efforts include working with state legislators to create a technology fee which would supplement a current records management and preservation fee to fund this project, in addition to any other record preservation initiatives.

Registry & Trust of the Court

Each district and county clerk must maintain a registry of the court to receive payments ordered tendered into the court's registry. In addition to money, the court may also order property to be held in the court's registry for the benefit of whomever it is ultimately adjudged to belong.

According to the Attorney General, any money or property deposited with the court to "satisfy the result of a legal proceeding or to await the result of a legal proceeding" falls under the definition of funds and property to be held in the registry of the court.

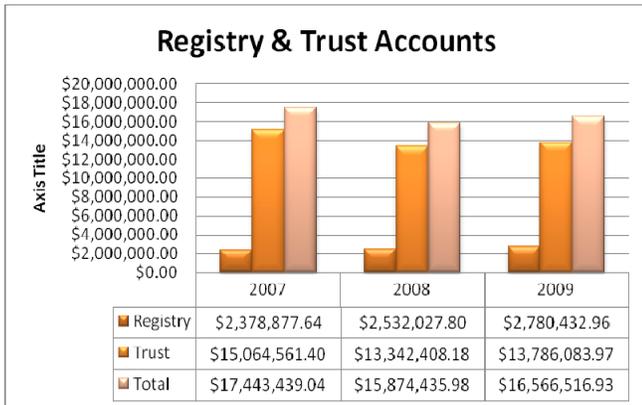
The funds held in the registry of the court do not belong to the county; rather, they are essentially held in trust by the clerk to satisfy the result of a legal pleading or to await the outcome of a legal proceeding. For purposes of the registry of the court, the Attorney General has defined a trust as “an equitable obligation under which the trustee is required to deal with the trust property for the benefit of the beneficiaries who have a vested interest in the trust funds.”

Although the funds in the registry of the court are construed as trust funds, the clerk acts only in a custodial capacity in relation to funds held in the registry of court. A clerk is not a trustee for the beneficial owner and does not assume the duties, obligations, or liabilities of a trustee for a beneficial owner.

In particular, we are dedicated to ensuring that the proper procedures are implemented in safeguarding the safety and privacy of our citizens.

The district clerk office conducts an average of 45 empanelments per year to satisfy the need of our judicial system. The two jury clerks assigned to carry out this responsibility prepare for the jury empanelments by mailing out 4,000 jury notifications on a weekly basis. Out of the 4,000 notifications, only an approximate 600 jurors are summoned for jury duty.

The source of the names of persons for jury service are furnished by the Secretary of State of Texas to Hidalgo County. It further includes the current voter registration lists from all the precincts in the county, and the current list to be furnished by the Department of Public Safety, showing the citizens of the county who hold either a valid Texas driver’s license or a valid personal identification card or certificate issued by the department.

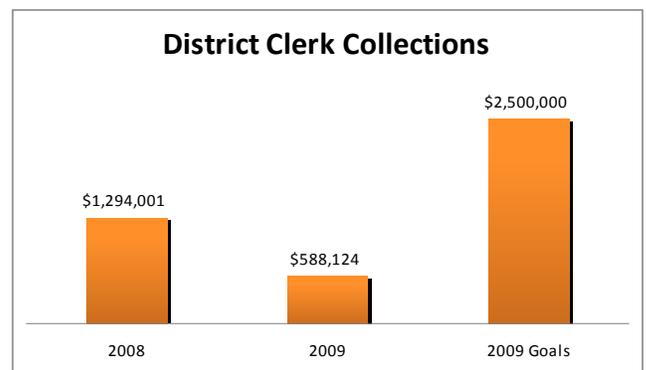


Jury

Jurors perform a valuable role in our justice system. The willingness of all who are summoned to serve is essential to our democracy and system of checks and balances. As the administrators of the jury system in Hidalgo County, we are committed to ensuring that the statutory and constitutional duties of our office are carried out to their fullest potential.

Collections

District Clerk Collections assist in maximizing the collection of court costs, fines and fees under the direction and supervision of the County Clerk’s Office.



The Collection Specialists meet with defendants in order to determine if the individual is eligible for an extension and/or a payment agreement in an attempt to collect outstanding balances. In 2008, District Clerk Collection Specialists collected a total of \$1,294,001, and have set a goal of \$2.5 million for 2009. Already, in the first quarter, District Clerk Collection Specialists have collected \$588,124.00.

Collections Specialist recently attended the Governmental Collectors Association of Texas Annual Conference in Galveston. The association consists of professionals from across the state of Texas responsible for the collection of funds for the governmental entities for which they are employed. The association is devoted to the education, strategies, techniques and tools for judicial collections.

Passports

The district clerk office became a designated Passport Acceptance Facility in February 2009. On June 1, 2009 U.S. citizens entering the United States at sea or land ports of entry will be required to present a passport, passport card, or other travel document approved by the Department of Homeland Security, as a result of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI).

The goal of the WHTI is to strengthen U.S. border security while facilitating entry for U.S. citizens and legitimate foreign visitors by providing standardized documentation that enables the Department of Homeland Security to quickly and reliably identify a traveler.

Hence, it is our goal to provide US citizens in our community with convenient, complete, customer friendly passport services in anticipation of the changes in travel requirements.

From February through May 2009 the district clerk office processed a total of 2,905 applications.

Additionally, it has collected a total of \$88,615.00 in passport fees for the county.

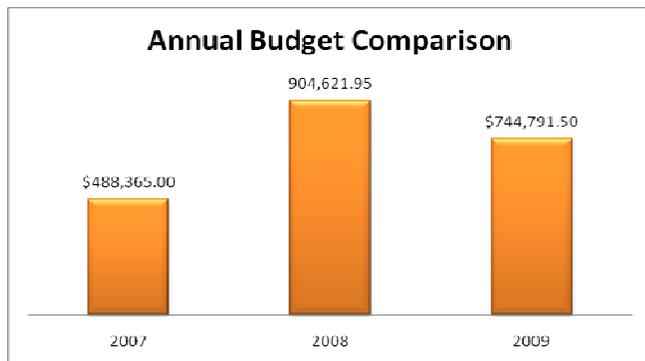
In an effort to better serve the public the district clerk office implemented Saturday passport clinics. The clinics are scheduled to make these services more accessible to the community, particularly working families who otherwise might not be available during county business hours. Our office looks forward to continuing to assist the public with their passport inquires and in making families' passport experience as smooth and pleasant as possible.

Fiscal Year 2007-2009

The district clerk office has undergone many enhancements, both organizational and aesthetic. In order to fulfill these enhancements the district clerk office implemented a needs assessment plan that would also require an increased budget proposal. In January 2007, the district clerk office was approved a budget of \$488,365.00. The budget was mostly composed of staff salaries and basic operating costs. The approved budget, however, failed to reflect the district clerk's office need to keep pace with a growing population, additional courts, a need of support staff and work space, and the need to provide increased high quality services to the public.

In the summer of 2007, in preparation for the 2008 budget, the district clerk office sought an appropriation increase of \$416,316.95 to address an increase in operating costs, competitive administrative and staff salary adjustments, maintenance and facility improvements, and strategic service initiatives. The budget increase request was made to ensure a better level of quality service and access, while maintaining affordability for the citizens of the county.

As a result of securing the 2008 increase, the district clerk office is able to provide its staff and the public with more efficient practices, space, tools and equipment, in addition to better addressing staffing needs, professional and technical training and improved communications.



The district clerk office will assess its budget priorities on an annual basis to request cut backs or increases wherever necessary, as evidenced in the 2009 budget. This will be done to ensure that services remain efficient and uninterrupted, while ethically and conservatively maintaining our fiscal responsibility to the tax payer.

Goal 1



Optimize Customer Service

In government, the citizen is the customer. Customer service, many times, is not a priority in government offices given that citizens must go to the government for most of the services required. Clearly, this does not mean the district clerk office can deliver mediocre services.

The rewards of a good customer service experience are simple: a satisfied citizen is more likely to support policies and programs. There are related benefits:

- An office focused on customer satisfaction can increase efficient transactions and lower costs.
- A satisfied customer is a sign of effective services.
- A satisfied customer can help confirm value propositions and reward politicians by word-of-mouth referrals.
- Customers are a source of insight to generate feedback on service standards.

- Forward-thinking organizations have been able to use new technologies to streamline citizen access and service response times.

The following objectives will be implemented to achieve this goal:

- Objective 1** - Implement effective staff recruitment plan
- Objective 2** - Implement effective staff training and development plan
- Objective 3** - Cross-train staff to provide consistent, uninterrupted service
- Objective 4** - Maintain regular and consistent communication with the public
- Objective 5** - Streamline public services and access through technology
- Objective 6** - Implement a customer service quality control plan

Our office encourages the public's honest assessment of our services as we continue to evolve and improve through valuable input. Our team of outstanding and hardworking individuals is ready to assist you as it is our priority to provide exemplary service while preserving and maintaining the records of the Hidalgo County Judicial System.

We hope next time you visit the district clerk office you'll take a minute to fill out one of our *Public Feedback Forms*. The forms can be an excellent tool for the public to communicate suggestions or concerns on critical services. Once completed, the forms can be deposited into any one of our six customer feedback boxes along our window counters.

Goal 2



Capitalizing on Technology

The district clerk office welcomes advanced technology as a way to improve service delivery and responsiveness to citizens. We truly believe that “electronic” government can break down boundaries and reduce transaction costs between citizens and the county.

By embracing technology we hope to provide a wide range of materials—from information, publications to actual government services—online for citizen use. Some challenges that may restrict the capitalization of technology include budget scarcity as well as cultural norms or a reluctance to change. Another challenge, facing all facets of our strategic plan, may be the political process which is many times characterized by intense group conflict over resources.

Nonetheless, the district clerk office looks forward to working with the judicial system

and the courts in promoting technological innovation and enhancing the quality and coordination of district clerk services.

The following objectives will be implemented to achieve this goal:

Objective 1 - Secure and implement new jury software

Objective 2 - Ensure smooth transition to updated judicial software

Objective 3 - Improve and standardize information resources

Objective 4 - Increase public access to services through technology

Objective 5 - Implement an updated records management plan

Objective 6 - Promote efilings services and develop an efilings service plan

Objective 7 - Reconcile & account for all preexisting fees

Objective 8 - Improve interdepartmental communications and transactions via internet/email

Objective 9 - Implement internet based services to government agencies and the public.

Goal 3



Achieve Effective Communication & Office Transparency

The district clerk office is committed to creating an exceptional level of openness in government. One of those ways is by achieving effective communication with all stakeholders.

We believe transparency promotes accountability and provides information for citizens about what their district clerk office is doing. We propose to do this by disseminating information through our clerks, our phone and window messaging system, and our county website. Additionally, we believe by harnessing new technologies we can inform the public about our services and make them readily available. We also intend on working closely with all media outlets to ensure important information is communicated in a timely manner.

The district clerk office is confident that through effective communication practices and systems we can sustain public trust and uphold the integrity of the office and its mission. By achieving effective communication we believe we can better understand the issues and make decisions for effective change.

We are committed to working together with our judicial system and county departments to ensure efficiency and transparency in our office.

The following objectives will be implemented to achieve this goal:

Objective 1 - Increase internal/external technological communications for dissemination of office information

Objective 2 - Increase public knowledge/education on district clerk services through elected official/office outreach

Goal 4



Maximize Employee Participation & Foster Exemplary Public Service

The district clerk office fosters employee participation and involvement in an effort to make employees feel a real sense of worth in the organization. We believe that by making employee morale and motivation a priority our office can reap the benefits of high productivity and better quality service to the public.

Employee participation may take different forms. But most importantly it starts with communication. Bilateral communication between staff and administrators is key in keeping staff involved in the process. From employee evaluations to staff training, an effort is always made to utilize our staff as a resource. In fact, this strategic plan could not be possible without the feedback and participation of our staff. From the data collection and assessment, to the creation of our mission statement, our office is

committed to working with our staff to create a positive working environment and achieve success through a teamwork effort.

The following objectives will have been implemented to achieve this goal:

Objective 1 - Implement effective employee professional and technical development plan

Objective 2 - Implement effective employee recognition program

Objective 3 - Implement an effective bilateral employee evaluation program for effective communication between administration and staff

Objective 4 - Implement and foster a workplace mission statement, value system and code of ethics

Objective 5 - Build community and camaraderie through an office civic engagement program.

Goal 5



Deliver Efficient & Responsive Government

At the district clerk office our goal is to be more efficient and responsive than we have been in the past. Since 2007 the district clerk office has made great strides in improving service to our judicial system and the courts. Policies and procedures continue to be enhanced, services and processes have been streamlined and better systems of accountability have been implemented. This, however, is just the beginning.

The district clerk office remains steadfastly committed to carrying out this strategic plan and ensuring our office is able to provide exemplary services to the County of Hidalgo. The office proposes to do more with less by ensuring cost effectiveness while providing higher standard services. We also intend on doing more through investment in cutting edge technology and staff training.

The district clerk office is also committed to collaborating with our county departments in implementing programs that will manage risk and reduce costs. Already, our office has initiated a safety committee to help achieve and maintain a healthy workplace. Another initiative is the creation of our Disaster Recovery Plan for the preservation of records, data and equipment. Through planning and preparation we believe we can avoid unanticipated expenditures that contribute to our county's cost of doing business.

Finally, the district clerk office is committed to collaborating with our state legislators to address any challenges or opportunities that may aid our office in fulfilling our constitutional duties as record managers. We are confident that by becoming involved in the legislative process we can contribute to the creation of sound legislation and keep our legislators well informed on matters important to the district clerk office.

The following objectives will be implemented to achieve this goal:

Objective 1 - Ensure the implementation of Goals 1-4

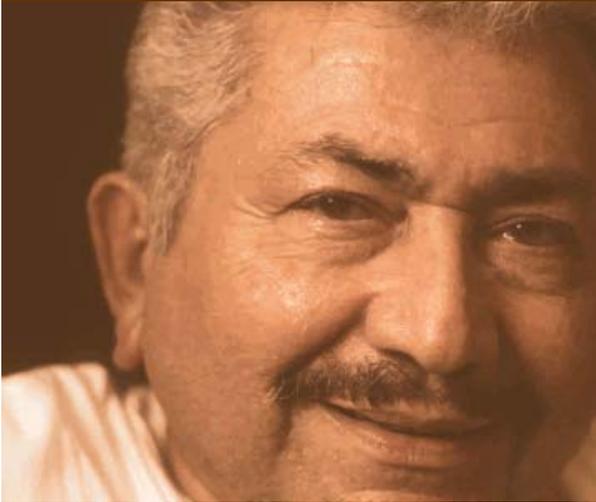
Objective 2 - Do more through investment

Objective 3 - Do more with less

Objective 4 - Reduce expense by managing risk

Objective 5 - Become involved in the legislative process

Challenges & Opportunities



Preperation For The Future

With our strategic plan come challenges and opportunities. The district clerk office is committed to embracing the challenges that may pose a threat to the implementation of our goals. It is also committed to making every effort to convert these challenges into opportunities.

In the spirit of collaboration, the district clerk office is dedicated to working with all stakeholders in ensuring that critical services remain uninterrupted. The office is also dedicated to applying its initial mantra of being *firm, fair* and *consistent* in all business matters, always putting forth what is in the best interest of the district clerk office and the people it serves.

Challenges

- Office space constraints
- Lack of support from internal/external partners
- Cultural norms
- Reluctance to change
- Retention of exemplary staff
- Technology
- Budget scarcity/cuts
- Politics

Opportunities

- Improved systems and technology
- Improved customer service
- Improved policies & procedures
- Improved performance standards
- Improved lines of communication
- Streamlined services
- Positive work environment
- Accountability
- Garnered trust

Accompanying Information



Strategic Planning Process

The Hidalgo County District Clerk Office implemented a strategic planning retreat in December 2008. Through the assistance of Nancy Baird, Training Strategist, we were able to determine where our office wants to go over the next two years and how we're going to get there. The ability to solidify a strategic plan as a newly elected official proved to be challenging due to our inability to assess, at that time, the current state of the office.

Over the past couple years, however, we have made an organization-wide effort to identify and collect data that will help facilitate the necessary progress. We acknowledge that the success of our plan will depend largely on the nature of our leadership and our staff's commitment to execute our plan. Nonetheless, we are excited and welcome these future endeavors with integrity and resolve.

Input From Interested Parties

- Conducted employee interviews regarding employee related duties, processes, and procedures to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
- Reviewed evaluations to capture findings and suggestions about the district clerk office
- Established customer feedback forms for external interested parties to convey any issues, concerns or suggestions
- Reviewed all input to ensure that strategic issues were addressed during the planning and review process

Strategy Development

- Administration and staff created mission statement and guiding principles that drove the strategic planning process
- Administration identified strategies and objectives for accomplishing the goals.

Current Initiatives

- New Jury Software Implementation
- Judicial Software Transition
- Expunctions Project
- Case Exhibits Project
- Imaging Assessment & Implementation Plan
- Fee Reconciliation Initiative
- Employee Recognition Plan
- Domestic Relations Office Initiative
- Safety Committee

Legislative Initiatives

SB 1685, relating to the creation of a district court records technology fund, was introduced by Senator Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa in March 2009 during the 81st Legislative Session. Its identical companion bill, **HB 3312**, authored by Representatives Veronica Gonzales, Armando “Mando” Martinez, and Craig Eiland, was also filed in the House.

The bills would amend Chapter 51 of the Texas Government Code to authorize a county commissioners court to adopt as a part of the county’s annual budget a district court technology fee of not more than \$5 for the filing of a court suit. The fee would be used for the preservation and restoration services performed by the district clerk in connection with maintaining a district court records archive.

Texas Local Government Code 51.317 currently authorizes district clerks to collect a \$5 records management fee, which has proven to be inadequate funding for the required preservation and restoration of court records. The district court records technology fund would supplement the existing preservation fund to assist in the maintenance, storage, security and digital conversion of records. Additionally, the creation of this technology fund would allow district clerk offices to have exclusive jurisdiction of the funding and deter counties from utilizing the monies for purposes other than record preservation. The fee must be adopted by commissioners court before it can be collected.

References

- Darrell M. West, The Brookings Institution (2008). *Improving Technology in Electronic Government Around the World*
- District of Columbia (2001). *Building a More Efficient, Effective and Responsive Government*
- IBM Government (2009), *IT Infrastructure Solution to Help Governments Deliver Constituent Value*



teamwork



preservation



honesty



communication



professionalism



www.co.hidalgo.tx.us/districtclerk