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Judicial Information System - Criminal

by LEWIS R. KATZ

Since September, 1971, the Justice Information System has been publishing reports for the Court of Common Pleas, reporting on the criminal docket. Revised over the period of its existence to better serve the court, the J.I.S. now provides the following printouts:

1) Personal Docket Report, containing a listing of all criminal cases presently assigned to each judge. This report was modified to account for the changeover to the individual docket system. It now provides a special marking for those cases which are six months or older; whether the defendant is on bail or in jail, and if counsel has been appointed. The personal docket report is distributed to each judge, the clerk of courts, the Central Scheduling Office and the prosecutor’s and sheriff’s offices. The report also indicates the number of days since an arraignment and what the next stage of the prosecution is and when it is scheduled.

2) Attorney caseload report, listing all criminal cases for each attorney. In addition to listing each defendant represented by an attorney and whether the defendant is free on bail or in jail, the report indicates the age of each case and the total number of cases involving the particular attorney.

3) Alphabetical listing of defendants, indicating, as well, the judge assigned to the case and the attorney retained by the defendant or appointed by the court. The report provides all of the relevant information about each case including charges and counts, bail/jail status, arraignment date, time elapsed since last stage and the next scheduled stage.

4) A listing of the oldest cases by each type of charge.

5) A listing by surety company and agent of all defendants presently on bail, including the amount of bail and bail forfeitures.

6) Finally, J.I.S. is now producing a Criminal Case Index Report listing in numerical order all active criminal cases in the Court of Common Pleas. The most significant fact about J.I.S. is not that the Court of Common Pleas is computerized but the effect that its computerization can have upon the court and the administration of justice. Only if the courts have control over their dockets can those procedures which make our American system for administering justice unique become capable of being applied. Such control was not possible in an urban court system processing over 3,000 criminal cases a year when done by records kept by traditional means. It was virtually impossible to sift through case records to locate those defendants whose cases, for one reason or another, had been neglected. But these cases are conveniently available now that the computers produce reports every month and specially flag those cases which are approaching the six-months’ time limit. At the same time, each of the reports indicates whether the defendant is in jail or free on bail and special attention can be immediately devoted to those defendants who have been incarcerated for extended periods of time.

Important, also, is the fact that computerization helps to protect the interests of the community. No longer can attorneys inordinately delay a case by simply having it taken from the active calendar and replaced in the file. Defendants who wish to evade court appearances and dates are also reported on every month. In this manner, J.I.S. is helping the courts to further the interests of the community in bringing to trial those cases where delay may be sought by the defendants or attorneys.

Along with the individual docket system, computerization can aid in reintroducing into the justice system those factors which were lost through burgeoning criminal dockets and impersonal courts. A judge is now assigned a case immediately after indictment and with the aid of J.I.S. he is able to keep close tabs on that case and insure both the defendant and community that the case will not be forgotten — that both the defendant and the community will be insured their day in court. The splendor of the American criminal justice system as it was devised for a rural, sparsely populated eighteenth-century America was its ability through due process to strike a fair balance between the community’s interests and defendants’ rights. That balance eroded as courts became overcrowded and judges unable to maintain tight reins over their dockets. While courts today are more crowded than ever, the introduction of 20th century technology brings back to the system a method for judges to keep close tabs on all their cases and, thus, affords an opportunity for achieving, once again, that healthy balance.

Computerization, itself, is not however the cure-all for all the ills that presently plague the administration of justice. It will, however, enable the courts and administrators to more easily pinpoint bottlenecks and develop procedures to ease the flow of cases through the system. Computerization will also permit the public to keep tabs on all participants in the system, to determine who is responsible for the bottlenecks, and then to use the franchise to either replace the bottlenecks or to pressure the legislature for more courts or altered procedures which can better serve the community interest.

J.I.S. and all other technological advances are only

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a means to achieving more perfect justice. While the ultimate goal of perfect justice will never be attained, the introduction of J.I.S. and like innovations does bring the courts of Cuyahoga County more closer to that goal. If nothing else, J.I.S. has insured that the Court of Common Pleas has not reached that state of chaos which sister courts throughout the country are presently experiencing. Far too many court systems in the United States today are wallowing in chaos, totally incapable of either protecting the community’s needs or the due process ideal. Cleveland is not in that number and a great deal of credit can be attributed to the leadership of the Court of Common Pleas and the willingness of the court to strive for something better which it did when it adopted the innovations offered by J.I.S.