

# Nebraska Supreme Court Technology Committee Strategic Plan FY 2023-2025

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## 2 MISSION STATEMENT

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To be a catalyst within the Judicial Branch by enabling and supporting the information technology infrastructure required to meet the mission of the judiciary and the needs of the citizens of the State of Nebraska.

## 3 VISION STATEMENT

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Transform the user experience with a modern, flexible digital platform that will scale swiftly with the changing needs of justice.

## 4 NEBRASKA SUPREME COURT STRATEGIC AGENDA

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Technology serves as the backbone in supporting the six overarching goals within the [Nebraska Supreme Court Strategic Agenda \(July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2023\)](#). Therefore, it is imperative that the current technology infrastructure for the Nebraska Judicial Branch be modernized to support the internal work of the courts and probation, enhance technological access for external court users, efficiently process and manage cases to resolve disputes in a fair and timely manner, and enhance probation and community supervision.

Each of the six goals identified within the [Nebraska Supreme Court Strategic Agenda](#) will not only serve to advance the Judicial Branch’s Technology Strategic Plan objectives, but also support the Nebraska Judicial Branch Strategic Agenda.

## 5 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

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### 5.1 CHARGE

The Information Technology Committee (“Committee”) was created by the Supreme Court in January 2006, to guide the implementation of information technology in the Judicial Branch. The Committee is chaired by a Supreme Court Justice and is advisory to the Division of Information Technology Services, the Supreme Court, and the State Court Administrator. The Committee is authorized to review and make recommendations for the creation and modification of the Judicial Branch’s IT digital strategy, project prioritization, policies, and procedures as it pertains to the use of Information Technology. The Committee’s purpose is to ensure policies, concepts, projects, and IT strategic direction are established

and maintained with a statewide perspective. Committee recommendations will be presented to the Supreme Court, State Court Administrator, and the Chief Information Officer for consideration.

## 5.2 MEMBERSHIP

Committee membership has been specifically designed to be representative of various interest groups and Judicial Branch divisions. Voting members include judges, clerks, probation, and administrators from various judicial districts of the Nebraska Judicial Branch. Additionally, other administrative offices, attorneys, and educators in the legal community are voting members.

# 6 JUDICIAL BRANCH STRUCTURE

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## 6.1 Supreme Court

The Nebraska Supreme Court is the state's court of last resort. Its decisions are binding on all trial courts, as well as the Court of Appeals. The Supreme Court is composed of a Chief Justice and six Associate Justices representing the six Judicial Districts of the State. The Chief Justice represents the State at large and serves as the executive head of the Nebraska Judicial Branch.

## 6.2 Court of Appeals

The Nebraska Court of Appeals is the state's intermediate appellate court. There are currently six judges, who sit in rotating panels of three judges. The Court of Appeals hears appeals of judgments and orders in criminal, juvenile, civil, domestic relations, and probate matters. In addition, the Court of Appeals has appellate jurisdiction over decisions originating in a few state administrative boards and agencies. Its determination of an appeal is final unless the Nebraska Supreme Court agrees to hear the matter.

## 6.3 Workers' Compensation Court

The Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court is the state's court with exclusive authority to administer and enforce all provisions of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act. The Court is composed of seven judges who travel to any county in the state where an accident occurred to hear a disputed case. Appeals from the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court are directly to the Nebraska Court of Appeals, in accordance with the procedures regulating appeals from the state district courts.

## 6.4 District Courts

The District Court is the state's general jurisdiction trial court. In addition, the district court serves as an intermediate appellate court for many appeals from the county courts' criminal and civil dockets, and from administrative tribunals inferior to the district court, including some state administrative boards and agencies. Twelve district court judicial districts serve the state's ninety-three counties and fifty-eight district court judges serve within these judicial districts. Judges are required to preside at trials before the court and sit as the judge and fact finder in bench trials. Judges must hear and rule on pre-trial discovery motions, pre-trial and trial evidentiary matters, pretrial and trial matters relating to rules on pleadings, practice, and procedure before the courts. In matters tried before a jury, a judge must supervise and make rulings on jury selection issues, prepare, and deliver proper jury instructions and decide matters that arise during jury deliberations. The district court's intermediate appellate functions vary depending upon the particular statute governing a type of appeal.

## 6.5 County Courts

The County Courts are the state's limited jurisdiction trial courts. There are 58 county judges in 12 county court districts. Jurisdiction of these courts is established by state law, which provides that county courts have exclusive original jurisdiction in estate cases, probate matters, guardianship, and conservatorship cases, actions based on a violation of a city or village ordinance, juvenile court matters in counties without a separate juvenile court, adoptions, and eminent domain proceedings. County courts also have concurrent jurisdiction with district courts in certain civil and criminal cases.

## 6.6 Separate Juvenile Courts

There are currently twelve separate juvenile court judges sitting in Nebraska's three largest counties: Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy. In the remaining counties, juvenile matters are heard in the county courts. Separate Juvenile Courts have the same jurisdiction and employ the same procedures as the county courts acting as juvenile courts, and handle matters involving neglected, dependent, and delinquent children. The Separate Juvenile Courts also have jurisdiction in certain domestic relations cases where the care, support, or custody of minor children is an issue.

## 6.7 Problem Solving Courts

There are 32 specialized courts in Nebraska operating in all 12 judicial districts including 20 Adult Drug Courts, 3 Veterans Treatment Courts, 2 DUI courts, 2 Reentry Courts, 1 Young Adult Court, 1 Mental Health Court, 1 Juvenile Drug Court, and 2 Family Treatment Courts. The goals of problem-solving courts in Nebraska are to redirect participants out of the court system, while still holding them accountable, helping them to reduce the incidence of the problems that brought them into the court system and ultimately reduce re-entry into the court system.

## 6.8 Probation Services

The probation system is composed of 14 probation districts within the 12 District Court judicial districts. There are 10 probation districts serving both adult and juvenile clients, and 4 probation districts serving adults and juveniles separately. Each probation district has a principal office, and there are 32 satellite offices that augment the principal offices. Probation personnel consist of probation officers, specialized probation officers, techs, intake officers, support staff, supervisors, coordinators, chief deputies, and a chief probation officer who is responsible for the overall district management.

## 6.9 Administrative Offices

The Nebraska Constitution gives general administrative authority over all courts to the Supreme Court and to the Chief Justice as executive head of the judicial branch. The Administrative Offices of the Courts and Probation provide most services to the court and probation systems including developing plans for improvement of the judicial system, serving as a central source of information, and developing coordination within the branch and with other state agencies. The Administrative Offices also help to support and oversee various specialized divisions within the branch.

# 7 CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

The Judicial Branch's Information Technology Division is responsible for the development, maintenance, and support of the trial court, appellate court, and probation integrated case and financial management systems. Each of these critical systems are used daily to support the needs of thousands of Judicial Branch employees and the citizens of Nebraska. These systems also serve as the backbone

for system integration and associated online services available to the public, attorneys, and service providers.

The case management system used statewide by the trial courts is known as the Judicial User System to Improve Court Efficiency (JUSTICE). JUSTICE is an integrated case and financial management system. The Probation case management system is the Nebraska Probation Application for Community Safety (NPACS). NPACS is a case management system used statewide by probation administration and field staff. The Supreme Court and Court of Appeals Legal Entries System (SCCALES) is the case management system used to process cases for the appellate courts.

JUSTICE currently operates in 93 county courts, 93 district courts, and the three separate juvenile courts. JUSTICE supports the daily operations of the trial courts such as e-filing, automated electronic notices (email and text), warrant and protection orders, and fund reconciliation. The appellate court system known as SCCALES is the case and financial information repository for the Court of Appeals and Supreme Court. Both JUSTICE and SCCALES link electronic case files with documents and case data.

The NPACS case management system is used throughout the state and supports effective supervision of adult, juvenile, and problem solving court clients. NPACS also has an integrated voucher system used by third-party providers to issue payment for services provided to probation clients. Additionally, the voucher system is fully integrated with the state's financial management system and used to process millions of dollars in reimbursement requests.

## 8 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

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It is the responsibility of the Judicial Branch to provide a flexible and scalable digital platform for the administration of justice. Investing and maintaining a modern technology infrastructure is imperative to the long-term sustainability of court and probation case management; as is the advancement of the knowledge, skills, and abilities of all those who work for the Judicial Branch. As such, the Judicial Branch Information Technology Services Division has established four strategic goals in support of the Supreme Court Strategic Agenda goals, which include:

- Elevating services and workloads to the Cloud where it adds value
- Modernize case, probation, and e-filing management systems
- Integrate information management systems to improve data sharing, data analytics, and access to justice
- Deliver exceptional options for Courtroom as a Service

The IT Committee was recently chartered to update its IT strategic plan for calendar years 2023 through 2025 based on two key principals: IT infrastructure strategic initiatives and business strategic initiatives.

### 8.1 IT INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

The IT infrastructure strategic initiatives as presented to the IT Committee were for informational purposes only and not eligible for a vote since they are required to support the daily operations of the Judicial Branch. IT infrastructure strategic initiatives are necessary to reduce technical debt within the current environment, ensure the technical infrastructure can support future business and IT needs, and maintain a secure and sustainable environment for the administration of justice. Over the next three

years, the Information Technology Services Division plans to achieve the following IT infrastructure initiatives in support its mission, vision, and strategic goals:

#### 8.1.1 Infrastructure Transformation

- Domain name change from @nebraska.gov to @nejudicial.gov
- Migrate to Microsoft 365 Online tenant
- Elevate services and workloads to the cloud where efficiencies and cost optimization are achieved
- Migrate to a standard, statewide video conferencing solution

#### 8.1.2 Systems Integration

- Explore and implement solutions for the integration of JUSTICE, SCCALES, and NPACS
- Design and build a data architecture to better support criminal justice data exchange

#### 8.1.3 Enterprise Document Management System

- Design and implement an enterprise document management system to support all electronic exhibit media formats and e-filed documents

## 8.2 BUSINESS STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

The business strategic initiatives were comprised of IT needs stemming from various Supreme Court Committees and Commission's strategic plans such as the Access to Justice Commission, Probation Services Committee, Commission on Guardianships and Conservatorships, Judicial Branch Education, and the Dispute Resolution Advisory Committee. Business stakeholders and leadership from each Supreme Court Committee and Commission were asked to provide brief narratives for each business strategic initiative, including strategic alignment, business need and value, funding strategy, vendor resources, and the impact if the project cannot be completed due to higher priority IT needs, staffing and resource constraints, and/or a lack of funding. A total of eleven (11) project priority narratives were provided to voting members of the IT Committee to review and prioritize. The business strategic initiatives, as ranked by the IT Committee in priority order, are as follows:

#### 8.2.1 E-Filing Portal Modernization

This project would transform the current e-Filing environment to provide users with easier navigation, simplified access to information, increased ease of access to court processes, and centralizing the various court applications available online into a single location. The modernization would convert all existing e-Filing applications, as well as other applications hosted by Nebraska Interactive, into a single interface.

#### 8.2.2 Trial Court and Appellate Case Management System Modernization

The JUSTICE and SCCALES applications, which are written in the COBOL programming language, operate on IBM's Mid-Range iSeries servers (also known as AS/400 systems) and both applications are over 30 years old. It is extremely difficult to hire or contract COBOL programmers and the Judicial Branch is at serious risk of continuing to operate under a legacy system that has become very difficult to maintain and enhance to meet the needs of the business. Given this risk, the Judicial Branch will need to begin planning for the replacement of both JUSTICE and SCCALES to a more modern and sustainable case management system for the

future. Additionally, JUSTICE and SCCALES are unable to keep up with the pace of change or support today's business needs. Both systems force users to conform to outdated business practice versus the system working to support the needs and desires of the business.

### 8.2.3 Judge eSignature (Judge Portal)

Implementing eSignature functionality within the Judge Portal will create significant business process efficiencies for all judges *statewide*. When opening a document in the browser, the judge will no longer need to download, electronically sign and/or annotate, save, and reupload. Judges would simply open the document in the browser, electronically sign or annotate such as their district seal, save, and then close the document to continue reviewing additional documents or case information. The easier we can make reviewing and signing documents for judges and all case participants, the more widespread adoption the state will see with e-filing.

### 8.2.4 Case Search Modernization

The goal of modernizing the Case Search application is to increase the functionality with several new features including attaching images to entries on the Register of Actions for all users. Currently, Case Searches by the public do not contain images attached to the ROA. Only Subscribers to Nebraska Interactive receive images when using the application.

### 8.2.5 Self-Represented Litigant E-Filing

Courts must be accessible to anyone who needs to use them, regardless of if they have an attorney. Self-represented litigants are a large majority of court users, especially when it comes to certain case types (e.g., small claims, domestic relations, protection orders). As the Nebraska Judicial Branch, it is our responsibility to assist self-represented litigants in navigating the court process. At this time, the Nebraska Judicial Branch has a dual filing system – attorneys are mandated to electronically file court documents and self-represented litigants are required to file court documents by mailing, faxing or personally delivering a paper copy to the courts. While technology can be a barrier to many self-represented litigants, the options currently provided to them is out-of-date as many, if not most, self-represented litigants have access to a computer and the internet and are computer literate.

### 8.2.6 Probation Case Management System Modernization

This would add new functionality to the system to improve navigation, help officers to do their jobs more efficiently, and improve the overall business process flow of the system. There would be a rebuild of the Search Screen, a new Caseload Page, a new Client page, and a new Supervisor page to help with system-flow and centralizing prominent/important information to reduce user clicks to navigate to frequent places in the system. There would also be some enhancements in several other areas, such as pop-ups to add sanctions/incentives where relevant, automated text appointment reminders, automated forms, updating of data fields within NPACS to keep things consistent, enhancing the Engagements functionality, and removing data fields in NPACS that are no longer used to reduce clutter within the system.

### 8.2.7 Electronic Docket Calendaring System

An electronic docket calendaring system would allow attorneys who log into the e-filing portal to display a calendar of their upcoming court appearances for the next 12 months. Each calendar event would display the case number, presiding judge, courtroom, and whether the

hearing is virtual, in person or hybrid. Clicking on the calendar event would navigate the attorney to the case details with a listing of all document pleadings in the case and the ability to e-file subsequent pleadings. Additional functionality would include the ability for attorneys to search for their hearings by either judge, district, county, or case number.

#### **8.2.8 MCLE and Admissions Online Services**

This project touches every licensed lawyer and judge in Nebraska. The current system for registration and MCLE reporting is inadequately serving lawyers throughout the state and any new system is likely to be viewed as an improvement. For example, to reset an attorney's password in the current system, you must contact a live person at Attorney Services and request your account be reset and a new password sent.

#### **8.2.9 Online Guardianship and Conservatorship Tracking System**

Nebraska Courts, guardians, and conservators of need a case management system that will be responsive to appointing and monitoring guardians/conservators' performance, effective in providing accurate data, and intuitive and easy to navigate for judges, court staff and guardians/conservators.

#### **8.2.10 Online Interpreter Registration and Verification**

This project would provide an online system that would allow Interpreter Coordinators/Schedulers to receive interpreter requests, using multiple methods, and be able to schedule interpreters to the appropriate language, court, and date/time. Requests would be received from the JUSTICE system once a language need is entered and will also be created by the coordinators/schedulers. It will also allow probation officers to request an interpreter need.

#### **8.2.11 Online Dispute Resolution**

An Online Dispute Resolution system would provide an asynchronous online process that allows litigants to directly negotiate via text at a time of day that works best for them and without having to travel to the courthouse. This could be during standard business hours or during the evening/night hours. If they are unable to reach a settlement directly, a mediator is available to assist.

While the Information Technology Services Division aspires to accomplish each of the business strategic initiatives over the next three years, the division can only begin working on a few of the top ranked initiatives due to limited staff and funding. Several of these initiatives are also dependent on vendor resource availability.