

Goal II

independence and accountability

Superior Court of California,
COUNTY OF BUTTE

3C-P-O | COURT CLERK CAREER PROGRESSION OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM

A Better Path to Promotion

More than five years ago, the Superior Court of Butte County faced a crisis in the court clerk's office. Morale was low and clerk turnover was high. Few promotions were given, and seniority

was often the sole deciding factor. There was also a perception that favoritism was tainting the workplace, and labor grievances were on the rise.

Court leaders turned that situation around in 2004 with the Court Clerk Career Progression Opportunity (3C-P-O), a self-directed program that enables clerks to be promoted to the advanced-journey level. The heart of the program, a structured certification process, tests an employee's technical skills and reviews the employee's work habits and interpersonal behaviors.

The program evolved out of a multicourt grant from the Administrative Office of the Courts in 2002 to design a career progression plan for the court clerk classification series. Supervisors and managers from the Superior Courts of Butte, Glenn, Sutter, and Yuba Counties collaborated for six months to develop a uniform court clerk classification and initial criteria for certification. Butte County ultimately refined that design, adding further materials and criteria for the 3C-P-O program.

Court clerk trainees who successfully complete their one-year introduction attain the Court Clerk II level, at which they're performing at least one major assignment in a court division or work unit. The career program encourages clerks—but does not require them—to then become certified in one of the court's six divisions: traffic, criminal, juvenile, family, probate, and civil.

Under the 3C-P-O program, employees don't compete for a limited number of promotions, as was the case in the previous system. In another change from traditional promotions, employees must demonstrate skill mastery *before* advancing to the next level. To become certified, clerks must have an oral interview with supervisors, lead clerks, and certified clerks, and must pass one of two skill assessment evaluations that measure a range of competencies.

“Gone are the days in which having the most seniority is the criterion for promotion to the next level.”

Once certified in a division, clerks have to remain current in that area of law, even if they are not working in that division, so that the court can reassign them for operational purposes as needed. Aside from normal duties, clerks at the certified level may get opportunities to give input on the training and promotion process, train other employees, act as lead clerk for special projects, or help develop future test items.

After at least two years at the certified level, clerks may pursue certification in another division by passing the other of the two skill assessment evaluations. In either evaluation, full competence in an ancillary component and a basic working knowledge of the courtroom can substitute for a clerk's ability to fully perform all required duties in the courtroom (see "High Levels of Competence").

The Court Clerk III level—clerks with two certifications—represents a pool of highly skilled generalists. These advanced journey-level clerks can fill in where they are most needed, giving improved service to the public and greater flexibility to the court in making courtroom assignments and responding to shifts in workloads.

With this new program in place, the court now seeks to attract, encourage, and reward employees who want to gain and retain professional skills—and who value those skills. Labor relations have improved, and the county is using less time and fewer resources to resolve personnel matters.

Impacts

- ▶ Court clerk turnover due to job dissatisfaction—as indicated by exit interviews—has decreased by 75 percent since the program began.
- ▶ All court clerks now have written career progression plans; of 57 clerks, 18 currently hold certification in one court division, and 5 hold dual certification.
- ▶ Two advanced journey-level clerks have been promoted to leadership positions in the past two years.

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HIGH LEVELS OF COMPETENCE *To be promoted, court clerks must demonstrate various competencies. Fundamental to all levels is an ability to do work that is accurate and timely, to demonstrate an attention to detail and knowledge of courtroom etiquette and protocol, and to work with minimal supervision. The other competencies are*

- ▶ **Case processing**—the clerk can perform all duties associated with a court division and demonstrates accurate knowledge of legal and court procedures
- ▶ **Courtroom**—the clerk performs all courtroom clerking duties related to the division and has sufficient knowledge about proceedings, legal forms, document formats, and computer applications
- ▶ **Basic working knowledge**—the clerk understands the "why" of clerk duties and can provide relief clerk services or serve as courtroom clerk in specified hearings in the division
- ▶ **Ancillary component**—the clerk performs all duties associated with an ancillary component (such as appeals or juries)

