Siskiyou/Modoc Joint Court

Better Service to Rural Residents at Lower Cost

The border area of Siskiyou and Modoc Counties is sparsely populated and isolated in a high-elevation valley, where winter driving is precarious. Many of the residents may have low incomes or low levels of education, and lack even such resources as working vehicles. Public transportation does not serve the area.

It is a hardship, at the very least, for residents to have to travel 70 to 100 miles to Alturas or Yreka, the county seats of Modoc and Siskiyou, respectively, for court proceedings.

The presiding judge of the Superior Court of Modoc County broached the idea of developing a joint court, to serve residents of both counties. Court leaders in Siskiyou County liked the idea and applied for funding to bring it to fruition. In 2000–2001, the Administrative Office of the Courts awarded a mini-grant for the counties to set up a pilot joint court.

The Siskiyou/Modoc Joint Court began in January 2002 and convenes one morning a month in the border town of Tulelake, with a Modoc judge presiding one month and a Siskiyou judge the next. The same judge holds an afternoon joint court session in Dorris, 25 miles to the west, in Siskiyou County, attended mostly by Siskiyou residents.

Siskiyou provides the court clerk, bailiff, and interpreter. Because the population is predominately Spanish-speaking, the joint court clerk is bilingual, and court customers in the area are generally familiar and comfortable with Siskiyou's court interpreters. Culturally, the residents prefer face-to-face contact rather than phone or Internet access for court interactions. The joint court staff gives them personal contact in their own area with people they already know.

For Modoc County residents, the joint court hears only traffic infractions, although plans to hear other types of cases are being evaluated.

Learning Along the Way

Using grant funds, the Superior Court of County hired a consultant to research and define the legal issues involved in forming a joint court and to chart how to proceed. With the consultant's report in hand, the two courts began the pilot project, working out more details as specific needs, solutions, and resources were identified.

Other courts that want to replicate the joint court project have been advised by Siskiyou/Modoc personnel to keep plans flexible. Not all factors are known when a joint court is started. Partners need to recognize and respond to project needs in mutually beneficial ways as they arise.

Staff members should expect extra work trying to follow two courts' sets of rules and requirements. For example, someone needs to guide judges unfamiliar with the rules, forms, and processes of the other court; and residents are apt to call the wrong county with questions about their case. The joint court clerk has learned to ask questions about a case so that correct and timely referrals or answers to callers' questions can be given.

Impacts

- The Siskiyou/Modoc Joint Court pilot project continues, without supplemental funding, to serve Siskiyou and Modoc court customers monthly.
- On average, the court hears 5 to 10 cases apiece from each county during a typical monthly session. About half of the parties otherwise would have had to travel greater distances to court, sometimes in treacherous weather.
- Every other month, each court saves the cost of having a judge preside in an outlying court branch.
- The two courts have developed a more cooperative relationship. As neighboring counties, Siskiyou and Modoc not only face similar geographical challenges but also share similar court customer demographics. The project encourages further partnerships between them to meet the needs of litigants in the region.

Above left: Judge Chris Stromsness presides over a case at the joint court.

Above right: Court interpreter Michelle Carlson assists a Spanish-speaking defendant.

Superior Court Dorris/Tulelake Branch, Tulelake City Hall, Tulelake, CA

Project contact: Liz McFarland, Court Clerk, 530-397-3168, lmcfarland@siskiyou.courts.ca.gov