

How Maricopa County Cut Court Wait Times In Half

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Maricopa County Justice Courts

In the beginning of 2016, defendants in the Maricopa County Justice Courts system had to wait an average of 6.9 days from the time of their initial court appearance (IA) to the time of their arraignment, when they are formally charged. In March of 2017, it was less than 3 days. So how did Justice Courts cut wait times by more than half?

It started with a realization, according to Presiding Justice of the Peace C. Steven McMurry. “We woke up to the fact that we were keeping people in jail too long. We never intended to do that. We were putting out warrants because they didn’t pay their fines but the part we weren’t paying attention to—the part we weren’t being responsible for—was how long it took between the time they were arrested and the time we actually saw them.”

The answer: the Video Appearance Center (VAC). The system, launched on June 17, 2016, allowed people in custody to be taken to one central location where a judge could appear, via video conference, to hear their cases. This led to a vast reduction in the need for prisoner transport since inmates could see a judge on video rather than needing to go to courthouses as far out as Gilbert or Gila Bend.

Wait times immediately plummeted. In just the first month, the median time between IA and arraignment dropped to 3.72 days. For March of 2017, it was 2.5. The result: Justices of the Peace are processing cases faster which means fewer inmates to house in county jails. This fits with Maricopa County’s broader goal of reducing average jail stays.

“This is a win-win for the community,” said Board of Supervisors Chairman Denny Barney, District 1. “When defendants who are eligible for release are released faster, we limit the amount of money the county is spending on them. We also allow the defendants a chance to retain their jobs and hopefully settle their cases faster so they can get on with their lives.”

All Maricopa County Justice Courts now use the VAC. It has proven so successful, other cities and towns in Maricopa County have asked to use the facility for their own prisoners who are being held in Downtown Phoenix jails.