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Atlantic County's consolidated municipal court is a model for New Jersey, by Julio Mendez

Julio Mendez For The Press

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People gathered in Mays Landing in May to dedicate Atlantic County's new consolidated municipal court, the first in New Jersey. Eric Conklin, Staff Writer

Julio Mendez For The Press

Municipal court reform is not new in New Jersey. Beginning with Arthur Vanderbilt in the early 1950s, every chief justice has called to reform municipal courts. Reform initiatives often met with significant pushback, primarily based on the desire to maintain local control and keep the status quo. This is known as “home rule” in New Jersey.

In recent years, New Jersey municipal courts faced criticism for revenue-driven practices and concerns about lack of judicial independence. The latest reform initiatives were triggered by such practices: courts imposing excessive fines, fees and contempt assessment, and often issuing bench warrants as a collection tool even for minor traffic offenses. Two Supreme Court committees, as well as the New Jersey State Bar Association, issued reports confirming the concerns and making recommendations to eliminate revenue practices, and enhance justice.

Municipal courts are not a small operation, with filings of 6 million cases per year, and processing more than \$400 million a year in financial payments. There are 515 municipal courts in New Jersey. Yet half of the courts average less than 2,000 filings per year, and close to a quarter of the courts handle less than 1,000 cases per year. The cost to local taxpayers of having so many small courts is immense.

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There is hardly any justification for having so many municipal courts. Consolidation of municipal courts is an important component of reform.

A consolidated court provides municipal judges and staff with greater independence. It improves customer services, facilitates oversight, and achieves efficiencies. Pooling resources allows for the availability of social services to address issues such as substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence.

Some argue that the best solution is the total assimilation of municipal courts into the Superior Courts, consistent with the court unification promise of the 1947 state Constitution. Politically, that is not likely. Consolidation is a solid middle ground. The judiciary has actively promoted consolidation of municipal court across the state. Shared and joint courts have expanded in recent years.

Atlantic County took the lead in establishing the first countywide municipal court in the state with full jurisdiction. Legislation was enacted in summer 2021 to create the legal framework. The doors of the central court opened in January 2022.

What Atlantic County has accomplished in a relatively short time has been extraordinary. It is the first time in New Jersey that a countywide municipal court has begun operating. It is an example of government working and making a difference. County Executive Dennis Levinson spearheaded the consolidation process in the summer of 2020. This was a bipartisan initiative. So far 10 of the 23 towns in the county are part of the central court, with total filings close to 70,000. Other towns are considering the move.

Changing the home rule status quo took a monumental effort. It could not have happened without the full commitment of the county, the courts and the state. Importantly, it took courage on the part of many municipal leaders to make the decision to consolidate their courts.

The Atlantic County Central Court streamlines operations, resulting in taxpayer savings on average of close to 30%. The central court improves customer service. Cases are heard every day in a central location that is open five days per week. There is improved security provided by the county sheriff. The court also coordinates services with local agencies to address concerns such as substance abuse, employment and domestic violence.

The consolidated court provides another layer of separation and independence for judges and staff. Atlantic County central court judges were recommended by a committee with participation by the judiciary. There is greater oversight by the judiciary. State judiciary staff is on site coordinating and assisting the county court in the fair administration of justice.

All these steps enhance judicial independence. And they remove revenue driven practices in the local court system.

There will be growing pains, but the collaboration of all key stakeholders will lead to making this court a model for the rest of the state.

Cutting-edge technology improvements allow the expansion of municipal courts' virtual operations. The various online tools permit attorneys and self-represented litigants to negotiate resolutions, enter pleas and conduct hearings online. Defendants can appear without having to take time off from work, school or driving long distances to appear in court. Attorneys can appear and handle cases from their offices. Distance is less of a concern, as close to 80% of the cases are handled online.

There is still work to do, but the arc of justice is significantly tilting in the right direction. At a moment of history when people's trust in the institutions of government and the courts is at an all-time low, these meaningful steps take even greater significance.

Atlantic County central court is a model leading the way, offering a better brand of justice.

Retired Assignment Judge Julio Mendez, 2017 chair of the N.J. Supreme Court Committee on the Operations of Municipal Courts, is a senior contributing analyst for the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.