

EXECUTIVE DIGEST

TRIAL COURT SERVICES DIVISION

INTRODUCTION

This report, issued in June 2002, contains the results of our performance audit* of the Trial Court Services Division, State Court Administrative Office (SCAO).

AUDIT PURPOSE

This performance audit was conducted as part of the constitutional responsibility of the Office of the Auditor General. Performance audits are conducted on a priority basis related to the potential for improving effectiveness* and efficiency*.

BACKGROUND

The SCAO was created by the Supreme Court of Michigan, in accordance with Article VI, Section 3 of the State Constitution. The SCAO's mission* is to provide leadership and promote effective, efficient, equitable, uniform, and accessible court and justice system services to advance the highest quality of justice in Michigan. The SCAO performs its duties under the direction of the Supreme Court and is responsible for providing administrative oversight and management or technical assistance to the judges and staff of Michigan's 244 trial courts.

The Trial Court Services Division of the SCAO is the primary source for management support for the trial courts. The Division's responsibilities include implementing Supreme Court administrative policy; conducting legislative

and policy analysis for the Supreme Court and the SCAO; providing performance and procedural standards for trial court operations; providing various publications, procedural manuals, and standard court forms for use in everyday operations within the courts; administering court reporter/recorder testing and certification; and serving as liaison to trial court-related associations. The Division's Family Division Unit provides management assistance and addresses issues related to all substantive jurisdictional areas of the family divisions of the circuit courts.

As of August 31, 2001, the Trial Court Services Division had 35 staff and Michigan's trial courts were comprised of the following:

Type of Court	Number of Courts	Number of Judges	Number of Staff
Circuit	57	210	5,326
District	104	259	3,190
Probate	78	106	415
Municipal	5	6	28
Totals	244	581	8,959

AUDIT OBJECTIVE,
CONCLUSION, AND
NOTEWORTHY
ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Audit Objective: To assess the effectiveness of the Trial Court Services Division's management assistance and support services provided to trial courts.

Conclusion: We concluded that the Division was generally effective in its management assistance and support services provided to trial courts. However, we noted reportable conditions* related to friend of the court grievance reporting, the Division's Foster Care Review

Board unit (FCRB) documentation of follow-up reviews, and FCRB annual reports (Findings 1 through 3).

Noteworthy Accomplishments: The Division initiated and managed the development of a series of minimum standards and guidelines to establish benchmarks for evaluation of court administration and to promote uniformity of trial court administration Statewide. The standards and guidelines were called for by the Supreme Court of Michigan's Program for Reforming the Judicial Branch of Government. At the time of our review, the Division and the SCAO had publicized standards relating to domestic violence batterer intervention, case file management, collections, communications, data, digital audio/video recording systems, and facilities. Other standards were in the process of development. The Division supports the standards and guidelines by providing training and management assistance to judges and court staff and by responding to individual court inquiries. In addition to the Division providing the standards and guidelines to trial courts and assisting them in their implementation, the SCAO has made the documents available on its web site.

In October 2000, the Division initiated the Court Interpreter Certification Program to train and certify foreign language interpreters to assist citizens who participate in the judicial system, as needed. Michigan is one of 27 member states of the National Center for State Courts Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification. As of the time of our review, the Division had conducted two training sessions

and certified 7 interpreters in Spanish and 5 interpreters in Arabic. The Division plans to expand the program in the future to include additional languages, such as Russian or Vietnamese, as funding permits.

In December 2000, the Division made all SCAO-approved court forms available through the SCAO web site in an effort to enhance the general public's interaction with the trial courts. At the time of our review, there were approximately 800 court forms available for use by the general public and trial court judges and staff. The Division is also considering the development of a court forms search function on the web site so that users can more easily locate needed forms.

**AUDIT SCOPE AND
METHODOLOGY**

Our audit scope was to examine the program and other records of the Trial Court Services Division. Our audit was conducted in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* issued by the Comptroller General of the United States and, accordingly, included such tests of the records and such other auditing procedures as we considered necessary in the circumstances.

Our audit included examination of the Division's records and activities primarily for the period October 1, 1998 through August 31, 2001. We conducted a preliminary review of the Division's operations to formulate a basis for defining the audit objective and scope. Our review included interviewing Division personnel; reviewing applicable statutes, policies and procedures, and other

reference materials; and obtaining an understanding of the Division's operational activities.

We assessed the Division's Friend of the Court Bureau's (FOCB's) compliance with applicable statutes and policies and procedures. We reviewed FOCB's operations and activities relating to the management assistance it provided to circuit courts in the operations of local friend of the court offices.

We assessed FCRB's compliance with applicable statutes and policies and procedures. We reviewed FCRB's operations and activities relating to its oversight of the local citizen foster care review boards.

We gained a general understanding of the court reporter/recorder testing and certification process and the management assistance projects that the Division performed at the trial courts. We surveyed court administrators regarding management assistance and support services provided to the trial courts by the Division.

AGENCY RESPONSES

Our audit report includes 3 findings and 3 corresponding recommendations. The SCAO's preliminary response indicated that it agrees with the findings and has complied or will comply with the recommendations.