

2017 CSAC Challenge Awards

Sonoma County Clerk-Recorder – Marriage License Signature Project

Issue Area: Government Finance, Administration & Technology

Population: Suburban

Executive Summary

Overview

The Sonoma County Clerk-Recorder's Office leveraged technology to change state policy related to marriage licenses and digitized signatures, resulting in increased accuracy and efficiency.

Challenge

The Sonoma County Clerk-Recorder's Office is responsible for issuing and registering marriage licenses. The office issues over 3,200 marriage licenses annually, and then registers them in a separate process when a license is returned after the ceremony. A member of the Clerk-Recorder staff signs the license at each step – as the issuing clerk and the registering clerk. Traditionally, the license had a wet signature from all parties; the couple, witnesses, officiant and staff members. Occasionally, a staff member would omit their signature in error. If a license was missing either the issuing or registering clerk signature, it required research to discover which staff member needed to sign, and outreach to the couple to replace any certified copies. It was time intensive, and could have legal ramifications as the certified copies that may have been issued would need to be reclaimed from the couple and reissued. This could cause processes such as updating legal names and health benefits to be delayed.

Innovative Solution

The software application used in the Clerk-Recorder's Office has the ability to capture digitized signatures of staff members and print them on forms issued by the system. The signatures are unique to the log in and password of each staff member, and there is no ability to print another person's signature. Electronic signatures were being used for form letters, fictitious business names and certifications to the California Secretary of State. The Sonoma County Clerk's Office reviewed the security requirements set by the state for digitized signatures and believed that the system would comply.

In early 2016, Sonoma County proposed a pilot program to California Department of Public Health (CDPH), wherein the issuing and registering clerk signatures on the marriage license would be applied digitally by the system and would no longer be able to be omitted. The state researched the security requirements for digital and digitized signatures, and their legal counsel asked for a signed declaration that the security requirements complied with state law. The Sonoma County Clerk and their legal counsel agreed. The state then agreed to allow Sonoma County to issue licenses with digitized staff signatures while they studied the results.

Starting in April 2016, the Clerk's Office digitally applied both the issuing clerk and registering clerk signatures during the two processes. During the pilot program, 3,818 signatures were applied by the system, as opposed to a clerk, saving time and ergonomic strain. Efficiencies were also gained by not having a signature mistakenly omitted and the subsequent correction process at the state and county level.

Originality

Sonoma County was the first to propose this idea to the California Department of Public Health, and was willing to work with them on studying the legality, security and effectiveness of the project. Sonoma County believed that this project would not only benefit their office and operations, but also benefit the other counties in the state. The success of the pilot project changed a long standing policy at the state level, allowing counties to utilize technology to enhance their services related to marriage licenses.

Cost Effectiveness

There was no money budgeted for the project. The Chief Deputy Clerk-Recorder made the necessary programming changes within the existing software parameters, once permission had been received for the pilot project. Over the six month pilot program, it is estimated that over 10 hours of staff time was saved, simply by not having to sign the license manually. The amount of time saved from not having to correct errors and omitted signatures is much greater, but unmeasured.

Results

In September 2016, CDPH consulted with the Sonoma County Clerk-Recorder's Office to gather information regarding the success of the program. The state also evaluated the quality of the marriage licenses that had been transmitted to their offices by Sonoma County with the digitized signatures. The state subsequently issued an all-county letter authorizing the usage of digitized signatures on marriage licenses for all counties throughout the state.

The ability to apply saved staff signatures onto forms and vital records improves accuracy, provides better customer service and saves time. The pilot program in Sonoma County was successful enough to change a long-standing policy at the state level. The state authorization extended the use of digitized signatures on marriage licenses to all counties in California. The other California Offices that issue marriage licenses can benefit immediately by the policy change and increase the efficiency, accuracy and customer service of their offices.

Project Contact

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