



**State of the Court**  
1999 Address of Chief Judge Aspen



## FEDERAL BAR ASSOCIATION STATE OF THE COURT ADDRESS

Friday, January 15, 1999

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The past year has been an eventful one for the Northern District of Illinois. In addition to being joined by new judicial officers in 1998, the Court pursued technological innovations in a number of areas. We also made significant renovations to the Court's facilities. Throughout the year, judges managed a heavy workload in a manner that carried on our tradition of effective and efficient judicial administration.

### Calendars and Workloads

A total of 9,157 civil cases were filed during the calendar year. This figure is about 2% below the total filings for 1997, but remains higher than the totals for previous years. The slight decrease that occurred in 1998 was due in part to a decline in prisoner petition cases.

Despite its heavy caseload, the Court continues to dispose of civil cases more quickly than any other large district. The median disposition time for civil cases closed by our court is five months. No other large court closes civil cases this quickly. The national figure for median disposition time is about eight months.

A total of 856 felony defendants were commenced in 1998. Drug-related offenses and charges of fraud account for more of these criminal cases than any other single offense. The number of felony defendants commenced was more than 17% higher than the total for 1997.

A trend that continued in 1998 is the increasing utilization of magistrate judges. This is especially apparent when we look at civil cases reassigned to magistrate judges on consent of the parties. A total of 434 civil consent cases were reassigned to magistrate judges last year. The number of consent cases has grown steadily over the past several years. The 434 consent cases in 1998, for example, is more than double the total for 1994. Considering that consent cases require the agreement of the parties, the figures suggest that the bar and litigants share the district judges' confidence in the Court's magistrate judges.

### New District and Magistrate Judges

The Court had four vacant district judgeships in mid-1998. After a long wait, one of these vacancies was finally filled with the elevation last fall of Rebecca Pallmeyer to a district judgeship, filling the vacancy created when Judge William Hart took senior status in mid-1996. The Court welcomed Judge Pallmeyer enthusiastically, in no small measure due to our familiarity with her ability, based on her years of service as a magistrate judge.

We ended the year with three vacant district judgeships. One of these judgeships has been vacant since October of 1996. Unfortunately, nominations that were before the Senate Judiciary Committee lapsed with the end of the last congressional session. As some of you may know, the Senate currently appears to be otherwise occupied. We remain hopeful that progress will be made soon toward filling our vacant judgeships.

There were changes in magistrate judgeships as well in 1998. When Rebecca Pallmeyer became a district court judge, Arlander Keys succeeded her as Presiding Magistrate Judge. In the short time he has served in this position, he has done an outstanding job. In July Magistrate Judge Nan Nolan was sworn in. Magistrate Judge Sidney Schenkier was sworn in last November. In addition, the Court reappointed Magistrate Judges Edward Bobrick and Ronald Guzman in 1998.

### **Technological Innovations**

Several significant technological improvements were made in 1998. Video conferencing equipment has been added to one of the courtrooms in the Eastern Division. A number of judges have explored the use of video conferencing for evidentiary and other proceedings. More frequent use will probably be made of this option in the coming year. Video conferencing equipment is scheduled to be installed soon in the Western Division courthouse.

Last year also saw the court become connected to the judiciary's satellite TV system. Called the Federal Judiciary Television Network (FJTN), this system allows judges and employees in all of the District's judicial agencies to attend broadcasts of presentations covering a very wide range of subjects. Employees have also used the FJTN on several occasions to participate in interactive programs that have brought together staff from districts around the country for the purpose of classes and panel discussions.

One of the most promising technological developments of 1998 is the Court's web site, opened on the Internet in April. The address for the site is <http://www.ilnd.uscourts.gov>. If you have not yet visited our site, I encourage you to do so. It provides information about the Court's daily calendar as well as information about the motion practice and standing orders for district and magistrate judges. You can check the site to learn who is serving as emergency district judge or duty magistrate judge each day. The site provides access to both the Court's local rules and federal rules of procedure. In addition, the site includes a directory of the Clerk's Office, downloadable versions of common forms, a schedule of fees, and links to dozens of legal research sites. You can also use the site to communicate by E-mail with me or with Mike Dobbins, the Clerk of Court.

Our site registered approximately 25,000 visits from June through the end of December. It is currently visited about 200 times daily.

In the coming year, we will be actively exploring new ways to use the web site to its full potential. An example of this effort will be judges using the site to post copies of memorandum opinions and orders. Another feature now being tested in Judge Zagel's chambers is a posting that lists motions granted by the Judge. Instead of calling chambers or coming to the courthouse to learn that a motion has been granted, your staff can save your time (and ours) by simply checking the web site. I will be showing you these and a few other features of the web site in few minutes.

Two other technological improvements that we will be working on in 1999 are worth noting. One of these is the development of facilities for the electronic presentation of evidence in courtrooms. These facilities may be used to provide video and multimedia presentations in court. The second project is the installation of an interactive electronic public information kiosk in the ground floor lobby of the Dirksen Building. This kiosk system may be expanded throughout the building.

### **Renovating Facilities.**

Substantial improvements were made to our facilities during the past year. The District Court Clerk's Office on the 20th floor was completely renovated. This project was completed ahead of schedule. The renovation improved facilities for those who visit the

Clerk's Office as well as for the deputy clerks who work there.

We also added a new service on the 20th floor in the form of drop boxes where documents may be filed during the hours from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. These boxes are located in both the North and South elevator lobbies. Their practical value is obvious to anyone trying to file a document after the Clerk's Office closes for the day. Detailed information about the drop boxes may be found on our web site.

Significant improvements to courthouse facilities will continue to be made in the coming year. As part of our long-range plan, four new district judge courtrooms will be opened on the 12th floor. These courtrooms are scheduled to be put into use by September of this year. We will also open four additional magistrate judge courtrooms this year on the 13th floor.

### **Other Upcoming Events**

The Court is nearing the completion of a project that will result in a comprehensive renumbering of our local rules. The new numbering system is designed to make the numbering of local rules consistent with the numbering of corresponding federal rules. The renumbered rules will probably take effect in the spring.

Last year the Judicial Conference of the United States Courts approved a pilot program to establish a limited number of public information officer positions in district courts. This Court will be one of those with a public information officer. In February this position will be filled by Christopher Allen. Chris comes to the Court from the Office of the Lt. Governor of Illinois, where he has been serving as Director of Communications.

<b>Overview of Activity in the Northern District of Illinois: 1994 - 1998</b>					
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Civil Cases Filed	8,151	8,168	9,006	9,401	9,157
Felony Defendants Commenced	794	764	789	728	856
Civil Cases Reassigned on Consent to Magistrate Judges	209	234	345	417	434
<b>Source: Data for 1994 through 1997 are taken from statistical reports published by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. Figures for 1998 are based on internal ICMS reports.</b>					