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Digital recordings study committee recommends keeping court reporters

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Digital recordings study committee recommends keeping court reporters

Brian Wellner The Quad-City Times | Posted: Tuesday, January 26, 2010 10:10 pm | (4) Comments

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[Buy this photo](#) This steno type machine used by court reporters may be replaced by audio technology. (File photo by Larry Fisher/QUAD-CITY TIMES)

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A report on the reliability and costs of digital recording technology to replace court reporters in Iowa courtrooms is out, along with a letter from the majority of the study committee that says while the technology is fine, they value court reporters.

Ten of the 18 members of the Digital Audio/Visual Recording Technology Committee signed a letter saying they don't think the technology should replace live court reporters. Bobbi Alpers, chief judge of the

judicial district that includes Cedar, Clinton, Jackson, Muscatine and Scott counties, was one of them.

The technology is commonly referred to as DART.

“It is not feasible simply to install DART equipment as a replacement for certified stenographic court reporters,” the letter sent to Iowa Chief Justice Marsha Ternus early this month said. Court reporters, the letter said, are an invaluable asset to the state’s judicial system.

“We have seen firsthand on a daily basis the reliability and high quality of court reporting in the state,” the letter said.

Court reporters help manage courtrooms and assist trial judges with high volumes of cases, the letter said.

The letter also said DART will not achieve a reduction in costs as hoped for by the judicial branch.

Several judges who sat on the committee signed the letter.

When asked about the letter Monday, Alpers said the committee spent many hours studying the use of digital recordings.

“I think that both the report and the letter really speak for themselves and I don’t have any further comment at this time,” Alpers said.

The Iowa Judicial Council created the committee last May to study DART. Overall, the committee found the technology could reliably record spoken words during court proceedings and that accurate transcripts could be prepared from those recordings.

To come to their findings, committee members visited state courthouses in Illinois, Utah, Alaska and Arizona to see the technology in use. They surveyed judges, attorneys and court managers in those states.

Most who have used DART in their jurisdictions for several years gave very high ratings to the reliability of their digital recording systems, clarity of the recordings and accuracy of the written transcripts from the recordings, surveys said.

In Iowa, DART was tested in courtrooms throughout the state. Judges in those courtrooms reported back to the committee that DART was user-friendly, the recordings were “very clear” and the system operated “very reliably” during the test period.

DART has a significant start-up cost: an estimated \$8.29 million to install a high-end audio-only system or \$10.34 million for a high-end audio-video recording system, the committee’s report said.

The committee’s report is available on the Iowa Judicial Branch Web site at www.iowacourts.gov.

The technology was being studied as court reporters already were losing their jobs with the state. In a round of cuts, the judicial branch let go 26 court reporters, leaving 148.

Jeanne Jacobs, a certified Scott County court reporter, found at least one hole in the DART report.

“The report did not compare the cost of purchasing, installing and maintaining DART with the cost of maintaining the status quo, certified court reporters,” she said.

Some state lawmakers are bristling at the idea of eliminating a requirement for court reporters at certain trials and court proceedings.

Rep. Jeff Kaufmann, R-Wilton, sees no guarantee the state will save money by replacing court reporters with recordings because of the costs of facility upgrades and paying technicians.

He said the most important concern is the integrity of the written court record that appeals are based on, as well as the integrity of the justice system as a whole.

“When you’re looking at an issue that could affect the very integrity of the system and then not have a guarantee of any significant savings, I don’t see the logic in this,” Kaufmann said.

(Charlotte Eby contributed to this report.)

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Posted in State-and-regional, Local on *Tuesday, January 26, 2010 10:10 pm* Updated: 12:05 pm. | Tags: Digital Recording Technology, Court Reporters, Visual Recording Technology Committee, Bobbi Alpers, Dart, Chief Justice Marsha Ternus, Iowa Judicial Council, Jeanne Jacobs, Rep. Jeff Kaufmann, 100 Days Of Music

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