

Press Release

The United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida now has in place a test system for receiving electronic filings via the Internet. With the ultimate goal of making electronic filing available to all litigants in all cases, this Court is gradually "phasing in" the general availability of electronic filing. As part of a pilot program, law firms which practice before the Court are being randomly selected and given the opportunity to file documents via the Internet in pending civil cases. Currently, 30 randomly-selected firms are participating in the pilot program that commenced December 8. On April 7, the electronic filing system will be opened to all litigants in civil cases. Shortly thereafter, criminal cases will be opened to electronic filing, in a similarly gradual manner.

As a precursor to the national Case Management/Electronic Case Files program, which will not be implemented in this District until late 2004, our pilot program is designed to prepare our customers for a totally electronic case transaction environment, as well as to provide them a convenient alternative to mail, courier, or in-person filing. Our electronic filing project, which uses state-of-the-art Internet programming and security features, allows authorized users to log on to our system and upload their filings directly to a secure server. That server records the time and date and notifies Court personnel of the filing. When the deputy clerk opens the filing, it is stamped with the date it was uploaded by the user, and a stamped electronic copy is returned to the filer. Thereafter, the filing will be rapidly docketed and uploaded into the Court's system. Filings may be submitted 24 hours a day, seven days a week. No matter what time filings are actually docketed, they will be file-stamped with the time and date they were uploaded by the filer.

The program is designed to be user-friendly and the process is as simple as sending an e-mail with an attachment. After filling out an authorization form and receiving a log-in and password, all that is required to access the system is a personal computer running a standard platform such as Windows or Macintosh, Internet access and a browser such as Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer, word processing software or a scanner, and software capable of converting documents into Portable Document Format (PDF).

The benefits of electronic filing are numerous: 24-hour-a-day-filing; a document that is file-stamped with the time and date on which the upload was completed; high priority and rapid docketing; elimination of the need to provide courtesy copies and envelopes; and, the cost savings realized by eliminating postage and courier fees.

There are no added fees for electronic filing and only a few restrictions on what may be filed. For now, case-initiating documents must be filed in the traditional manner and voluminous documents may not be transmitted electronically. However, the Court is working to increase the capacity of the system and to broaden the scope of its applications. The local and federal rules governing documents filed in the traditional manner, with very few exceptions, will also apply to electronic filings. A copy of Administrative Order 2002-36 outlining electronic filing rules and procedures is attached.

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