



Cook County Clerk 2020 Election Guide

**Candidate:
Jacob Meister**



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Questions

Please answer the following questions in 400 words or less.

1. Given the myriad of issues a victim of gender-based violence faces when trying to access the criminal or civil court system, what is the Clerk of the Circuit Court's role in making information accessible to victims and ensuring immediate safety for victims?

I am dedicated to treating the users of the courts — the public, lawyers and judges — as valued customers. On day one, I will name a Chief Customer Service Officer (CCSO) who will be responsible for making the Clerk's office user-friendly and efficient. Special attention will be given to ensuring that victims of domestic violence and others in emergent circumstances are given immediate attention and that orders and other paperwork are processed immediately, the victim is provided with adequate free copies of all orders and documents and orders are promptly transmitted to law enforcement and others who need to be put on notice.

The CCSO will be responsible for ensuring that:

(a) there are knowledgeable representatives at customer service information desks at key locations in every courthouse so that the public can quickly get information and avoid having to stand in long lines;

(b) bilingual services are quickly available in all major languages;

(c) customer service centers that are easy and efficient to navigate and minimize wait times are established at every court location;

(d) courtroom services are friendly and efficient for lawyers, judges and the public.

By modernizing the system and implementing technology that meets the needs of all stakeholders, the Clerk's staff will also have the tools needed to run a more professional and efficient office. I will also ensure court personnel receive proper ongoing training. These actions will provide users of the Courts a better experience that ultimately saves time and returns the focus to justice.

While our courts are equipped to handle the legal issues, we need to be cognizant that human lives are often at issue. I will work with social service and victim assistance agencies to make sure that resources are available at every courthouse for those who need assistance, especially emergency assistance.

2. The clerk's website currently does not allow anyone to view court orders in protective order cases and clerks occasionally refuse to print copies of orders. Survivors often need copies of orders to give to school or work. Particularly in emergency situations, the ability of a school administrator or law enforcement officer to see the order without having to obtain it physically could save lives. Do you have plans to allow remote access to the court files or court orders?

Although mandatory electronic filing has been implemented statewide, the Tyler Technologies system being used has not been properly customized to meet the needs and complexity of the Cook County court system. The current system as implemented in Cook County is cumbersome, riddled with errors and inefficient compared to online systems available in other courts around the country, including the federal Pacer system. In addition, digital docketing and electronically filed documents and orders are not available as part of an online case management system that is accessible to the parties and the public after filing, making it even harder for judges, lawyers and litigants to navigate the court system. Perhaps hardest hit are those who need access to court documents -- such as orders of protection --and cannot wait to visit a courthouse during work hours, just to obtain a copy of a court document.

A fully digital case management system is the lifeblood of every modern court system and Cook County lags far behind court systems around the country. All case information and documents should be digitized and available online in realtime. Recent attempts to implement a new case management system in the criminal division has been a failure — essential information is often incorrect or unavailable and users have not been properly trained — and, as a result, the rollout in other divisions has been wisely postponed. The County's investment in this new system is in jeopardy unless the next clerk is able to fix it. I will implement vigorous training for all users, including Judges, Clerk's staff and attorneys so that the benefits of the new case management system can be realized. In addition, the new case management system must be further customized to meet the specific workflow of each operating division so that the case management system helps create efficiency and transparency.

I will also push to implement an Integrated Justice Information System (IJIS) and ensure that the Court's computers integrate with all stakeholders in the justice system, including all municipalities in the County, the Sheriff, municipal police, State's Attorney, Public Defender, Department of Corrections, private attorneys, and others who rely on timely and accurate information from our court system. Capital investment in a countywide IJIS will ultimately ensure prompt dissemination of information, achieve significant savings and ensure errors are minimized.

3. With the recent transition to e-filing, the clerk's office, particularly in the domestic relations division, is overwhelmed with pro se litigants who are attempting to sign up

and use the e-file system. What are your plans to improve pro se litigants use of e-filing at the courthouse?

In order to remove barriers to the justice system for *pro se* litigants who are required to electronically file into a confusing and cumbersome electronic filing system, I will introduce a new countywide "access to justice" program. Currently, the only assistance for *pro se* litigants seeking to file electronically is at a courthouse, during business hours. Long wait times are typical. This "unintended consequence" of the mandatory electronic filing system has created tremendous hardship for those who cannot afford a lawyer, do not have access to a computer, lack the technical knowledge of the court's e-file system or cannot afford to miss time from work just to file a document. On day one I will begin the process of installing computer filing kiosks in public libraries around the county and having regular e-filing training seminars for reference librarians and others, thereby allowing *pro se* litigants the resources and assistance needed to electronically access the court system in their own neighborhoods, on evenings and weekends. Everyone in Cook County should be able to access justice in their communities, not just at a courthouse. This program can be implemented with minimal financial investment and will make a large difference in the lives of the people who are most often negatively affected by the newly mandated electronic filing system.

4. A recurring problem experienced by both lawyers and pro se litigants is vague or inconsistent policies throughout the court system. Procedures for the same activity can vary courthouse to courthouse and even courtroom to courtroom. Is procedural and document consistency from courthouse to courthouse a priority?

- **If so what are your strategies to make procedures in the clerk's office transparent and consistent?**
- **If so, what role, if any, would technology investment have in the development of equitable and consistent access to justice?**

With approximately 400 judges, each with their own standing orders and courtroom procedures, the Cook County court system is often difficult to navigate, even for seasoned attorneys. For *pro se* litigants, especially those with emergent circumstances, limited English language skills, a lack of computer skills or access, impairments or disabilities, the task is often nearly impossible. As clerk, it will be a priority to make the courts as transparent and navigable as possible. Standing orders and courtroom procedures will be available on the clerk's website, in every courtroom and customer service office. In addition, I will work with the Office of the Chief Judge to try to streamline courtroom procedures, to the extent possible and to make sure that the websites of the Circuit Court and the Clerk of Court are better integrated so that users don't need to navigate between multiple websites, in order to find basic information.

5. Court orders are frequently handwritten by attorneys, advocates, and pro se litigants. This leaves important court outcomes both difficult to read and potentially inaccurate. What are your plans to ensure court orders document the judges' decisions and are accessible (understandable) to litigants?

The Clerk's office must move from a paper-based to a digital system. All active files stored in the county records center should be digitized and incorporated into a new case management system and the current system which is based on judges and lawyers writing orders by hand in triplicate will be replaced by a digital "minute order" system, with the vast majority of orders being recorded electronically in real-time by trained courtroom personnel. The transition from paper records to a digital case management system will require training of courtroom personnel across all departments and divisions of the court system. I have a detailed plan for training court personnel, which includes working with our community colleges to develop a curriculum so that all courtroom staff will be certified paralegals in Cook County courtroom management.

6. How will you ensure that orders of protection, civil no-contact orders, stalking no contact orders and related court orders are properly transmitted to the sheriff's office in compliance with the Illinois Domestic Violence Act? How will you correct the issue of clerks not providing these orders in a timely manner?

I am dedicated to implementation of a countywide and ultimately a statewide Integrated Justice Information System (IJIS) to ensure that the Court's computers integrate with all stakeholders in the justice system, including all municipalities, the Sheriff, municipal police, State's Attorney, Public Defender, Department of Corrections, Secretary of State private attorneys, and others who rely on timely and accurate information from our court system. Capital investment in an IJIS will ultimately ensure prompt dissemination of information and minimization of errors. Among other things, the IJIS will automatically transmit information and documents to the Sheriff, including orders of protection, no contact orders, and mittimus.

7. Per the Illinois Domestic Violence Act, the clerk of the issuing judge shall file a certified copy of that order with the sheriff charged with serving the order upon the respondent. Current practice is that if a respondent lives out of county, the clerks provide basic information to petitioners and require them to get the respondent served with orders of protection. What will you do to ensure clerks are complying with the law instead of putting the onus of service on the petitioner?

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8. How will you ensure that data (including how many petitions for protective orders have been filed, dismissed or issued) will be accessible to the community?

My plan to modernize the Clerk's computer system will mean greater transparency. The implementation of a new case management system means that more information and tools will be accessible online to the public, practitioners, and other stakeholders who need access to court files and data. Detailed electronic entries will be made available online, along with links to related documents, so each case can be easily tracked and participants in the court process and others who rely on timely accurate information -- including the public, those conducting background checks and academics who rely on statistical information for scholarly research -- have access to correct and timely information. A modernized system that is accessible online will result in much greater accuracy, efficiency, transparency and cost savings.

I will fully comply with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and will work with academics, researchers and others to make data publically available for those conducting research about important criminal and civil justice issues, including matters relating to domestic violence.

9. What are your plans to ensure that court documents and clerk assistance are accessible in various languages so both victims and respondents understand court outcomes, particularly in cases where victim safety is tied to a court order only provided in English?

Customer service will be a top priority and one of my first tasks as the clerk will be to name a Chief Customer Service Officer (CCSO). The plan includes ensuring that bilingual services are quickly available in all major languages at every court location. In addition, online information and many court forms will be provided in multiple languages, where possible.

10. What are your plans to work with the victim advocacy community? How will you ensure that there are feedback processes that prioritize victim safety?

It is important that the advocacy community and the Cook County Court system are working together to ensure that we make victim safety a high priority. As the next Clerk of the Circuit Court, I will work to ensure that my office includes the advocacy community at the table

when we are outlining our plan to address the issues of victim safety in Cook County. This is the only way to ensure that our resources are reaching the victims and communities where they are needed most. Often time when an individual is interacting with the court system it is at a low point in their lives and this is most true about victims of gender-based violence. By maintaining a strong open channel of communication between the Clerk of the Circuit Court office and the advocacy community I believe we will be best able to meet the ever-changing needs of Cook County.