

***In Tribute to Dwight D. Opperman: A History of
The Conference of Court Public Information Officers
Salt Lake City, Utah
Ron Keefover, Kansas Court PIO
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This history of the Conference of Court Public Information Officers (CCPIO) is written as a tribute to Dwight D. Opperman (1924-2013), whose continuous support and generosity have sustained CCPIO since its creation more than two decades ago. It is being presented at CCPIO's 22nd annual meeting in Salt Lake City, UT, as a formal recognition of our deep appreciation and admiration for Mr. Opperman and his commitment to the work of our organization and the importance of improving public understanding of the courts and their work.

The courts, the bar, and the public have all benefited from Mr. Opperman and his work. As the long-time Chief Executive Officer of West Publishing Co., he took an early and active interest in improving the nation's legal system. Under Mr. Opperman's leadership, West Publishing was widely recognized as a leading innovator in the delivery of digital content. When West Publishing was sold in 1996, its successor company – Thomson Reuters – became an international leader in the delivery of news and information.

Mr. Opperman had a keen interest in advancing the rule of law, and the public's understanding of it, demonstrated by not only his own work in these areas but in his generous support of the endeavors of others. Among the many organizations to which he made a personal and financial commitment are the U.S. Supreme Court Historical Society, American Bar Association (ABA), National Center for State Courts (NCSC), American Judicature Society and National Judicial College.

Mr. Opperman's support of the Conference of Court Public Information Officers (CCPIO) began in the late 1980s, before the organization formally existed. Then-Supreme Court Public Information Officer Toni House asked Mr. Opperman to provide a grant to the Institute of Court Management (ICM) to hold the first-ever annual meeting of court communications professionals. While ICM and the NCSC had occasionally conducted courts and the community conferences, few courts had funds available to pay for their PIOs to attend.

Courts and the community conferences had been held in 1983 at NCSC headquarters in Williamsburg, VA, and in 1984 in New Orleans, LA, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the ABA's Public Relations Section. The idea for a formal organization of court public information officers took seed at a 1985 presentation during a courts and the community conference in Denver. That meeting was attended by court staff that had been identified by state court administrators and/or Chief Justices as having court communications responsibilities.

During that meeting, an effort was made to identify the number of full- and part-time court PIOs around the country.

A similar workshop was presented the following year in Williamsburg. However, when it was offered in 1987, there were insufficient registrants to warrant its presentation, due to a national economic downturn at the time. Over the next several years there were few educational opportunities for court PIOs. A core group stayed in contact through periodic phone calls, but there was no formal training or coordination of PIO communications. At the same time, the fledgling role of court communications professionals was beginning to expand to more states and into the federal courts. The needs of the profession were rapidly changing, yet many PIOs worked in one-person offices and lacked the opportunity to network with others who dealt with similar issues. That all changed in 1992 when Mr. Opperman provided a grant to the ICM to convene a meeting of court staff that performed public information duties.

The 1992 meeting launched by ICM and the NCSC and underwritten by the Opperman grant, was the first-ever national conference of judicial public information officers. Fittingly, it was presented in Washington, DC., and was coordinated by ICM's Mary Brittain and others from NCSC. According to a note written at the time by the U.S. Supreme Court's PIO Toni House, the conference was to "provide the first opportunity for court public information specialists, the preponderance of whom work for state systems and usually toil in isolation from fellow practitioners, to meet one another, exchange ideas and problems, and receive advanced training in media relations."

Toni continued, "Sitting where I do, I have long seen the need for the development of a corps of professional judicial public information providers – on both the state and federal level – who could serve, as we do here, as a buffer between the courts and media. An annual national conference is a step in that direction (and one, I admit, for which I have agitated over the last four or five years.)"

On Dec. 2, 1992, about 25 court PIOs and others identified by state court administrators as having court public information duties, gathered at the Hotel Washington for a two-and-half day educational program filled with topics that were of specific interest to professional court communicators. A highlight of the gathering was a reception and building tour at the U.S. Supreme Court. This insider tour was led by Toni House and longtime friend and collaborator Tom Hodson, a former U.S. Supreme Court Fellow and state court judge currently serving on the University of Ohio faculty, who to this day volunteers his time to mentor Court PIOs.

This first meeting was a huge success, and Mr. Opperman continued his generous support of CCPIO and its work. Toni, Tom, and others at the NCSC and the ICM took charge of making future conference arrangements, enabling a core group of Court PIOs to continue meeting

annually at locations throughout the country. Those attending the educational programs from 1992 to 1998 ranged from full- and part-time court public information officers to deputy state court administrators and in a few cases, state court administrators, who saw communicating the courts' story as a central part of their responsibilities. Conference topics included professional training on such things as conducting a media interview and designing newsletters, annual reports and other printed materials in the early 1990s to issues relating to the growing number of high profile trials and the evolution of the digital age, including the onset of the Internet and websites.

A Court PIO milestone occurred in 1996 when the first Court PIO listserv was developed for court public information officers. *Courtpio*, as it was known, was based on cutting edge technology, and for the first time provided participants with an easy and immediate way to communicate.

Set up by Ron Keefover, the Kansas Judiciary PIO, the letter offering free subscriptions to the service was mailed to those attending the 1996 meeting by Bob Henderson, then Court PIO for the Washington state courts, and his assistant at that time, Wendy Farrell. "It was great to see you at this year's Court PIO Conference in Charleston," Wendy and Bob's 1996 invitational letter reads. "This conference is a great way to catch up with one another each year, but as Ron Keefover mentioned last month, we can keep up on a daily, even minute-by-minute basis, via an Internet, Court PIO listserv."

Today the listserv has 135 subscriptions, including several court PIOs from abroad and retired and affiliate members as approved by the Board of Directors. Hardly a day goes by when the listserv is not active, whether the discussion is about a reporter collecting information about court budget cuts, requests for help, or a preview of the agenda of the upcoming annual meeting.

Of the 49 Court PIOs on the list in 1999-2000, about a dozen are still subscribed, including Ron Keefover, Kansas Supreme Court PIO (listserv manager); Craig Waters, Florida Supreme Court PIO; Kathy Arberg, U.S. Supreme Court PIO; Joan Kenney, just retired Massachusetts Supreme Court PIO; Tom Darr, Deputy Court Administrator, PA Courts; Art Heinz, PA Court PIO; Sally Rankin, MD circuit court administrator, Princess Anne, MD; Amanda Todd, Wisconsin Supreme Court PIO; Joe Tybor, Illinois Supreme Court PIO; David Sellers, Director of Public Affairs, U.S. Administrative Office of the Courts; and Osler McCarthy, Texas Supreme Court PIO.

Those early meetings and the listserv heightened the resolve of Toni and others who were regular attendees at the Opperman-funded conferences to organize a formal association of Court PIOs. While such an organization was a frequent subject of discussion on the listserv, it wasn't until soon after Toni's death on Sept. 29, 1998, that the idea became a reality. If Toni wasn't going to be around to lead us, who would? Who would decide to meeting locations and the topics

for the educational programs? Who would do the necessary work to hold the group together? The response by those attending that year's Court PIO conference (Baltimore, Nov. 9-11, 1998) was to appoint a steering committee that would "discuss the options" for establishing a formal organization that would take court PIOs into the next century. Members of the steering committee included Marcia Skolnik, former Los Angeles Court PIO; John MacDonald, former Arizona Supreme Court PIO; Tom Hodson; Kathy Arberg, the new PIO for the U.S. Supreme Court; Tracy Sinan, former Missouri Supreme Court PIO; Ron Keefover, Kansas Supreme Court PIO; and three staff members of the NSCS.

The steering committee presented its report at the group's meeting in Scottsdale, AZ, the following year. The report noted that it had been prepared in consultation with Roger Warren, then executive director of the NCSC, and William Vickery, president of the Conference of State Court Administrators. The committee recommended that NCSC serve as the new organization's secretariat (which continues to this day) but included an acknowledgment that such services would now require approval of the Conference of Court PIOs Board of Directors. Those attending the Scottsdale conference voted to approve the steering committee recommendations and directed that the group become an IRS-approved non-profit. A slate of officers was to be elected at the next annual meeting, which had been scheduled for November 2000 in Orlando.

Ironically the Orlando meeting took place over election day and served to highlight the role of court PIOs. The contested presidential election almost immediately required the attention of Florida Supreme Court PIO Craig Waters and later involved Supreme Court PIO Kathy Arberg. The event also resulted in changing the CCPIO annual meeting to August when PIOs were less likely to be unable to attend because of the press of court business.

The first elected officers of the newly formed CCPIO included Ron Keefover, President; Sally Rankin, then-Maryland Supreme Court PIO, and now a Maryland Circuit Court Administrator, president-elect; Sue Allison, former Tennessee Supreme Court PIO, Secretary; and John MacDonald, former Arizona Supreme Court PIO, treasurer. They took office at the Conference's 2001 meeting in Memphis, TN.

The current Board of Directors includes Karen Salaz, district court administrator, Greeley, CO, president; John Kostouros, Communications Director, Minnesota Judicial Branch, president-elect; Beth Riggert, Communications Counsel, Missouri Judicial Branch, secretary; Kathryn Dolan, Indiana Supreme Court PIO; Barbara Hood, former Communications Counsel, Alaska Court System; and ex official members past presidents Kathy Arberg, Ron Keefover, Sally Rankin, David Sellers, Tom Darr, J.W. Brown, and Joan Kenney.

Meeting locations since Mr. Opperman's first 1992 ICM grant in order include Washington DC, New Orleans, San Francisco, Boston, Charleston, San Diego, Baltimore, Scottsdale, Orlando,

Memphis, Austin, Seattle, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Phoenix, Columbus, Denver, St. Paul, Atlanta, Washington DC, St. Petersburg, and this year-- Salt Lake City.

While court systems nationwide have been forced to deal with dramatic budget cuts, the role of the PIO has become increasingly important. Someone must inform the public about the impact of the funding cuts; someone must handle the many issues relating to high profile trials; and someone must manage the court's Facebook page, Twitter account, and website. Court PIOs have become an integral part of a court's professional management team.

The history of CCPIO continues to be written. However, there is no question that the organization would not have been formed and the profession would not have thrived had it not been for the commitment, vision, and generosity of Dwight Opperman.

On behalf of CCPIO, it is our great honor to present this history of CCPIO.

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