

# STRONGER *Together!*

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TEXAS COURT CLERKS ASSOCIATION

## Letter from the President

### Landra Solansky



Dear TCCA Members,

I hope this issue of the Scribe finds you doing well and getting back to some sense of normalcy. As I reflect over the last 18 months and the challenges we faced during the pandemic, I can't help but be proud to be a part of such an amazing organization. I have watched many of you continue your journey in the Certification Program, I have heard stories of clerks working from home while home-schooling children, I have seen friends fight back tears as they share the stories of loved ones in nursing homes that could not have visitors and unfortunately - many of us have lost friends, family members and co-workers during this difficult time. The strength of this group inspires me every day.

**Resilience** is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. I think this one word perfectly describes the Education Committee. Pat Riffel and her team have taken the Education Committee to a whole new level. It was truly amazing to see this group reinvent the way we provide education to our members. Chapters did a great job of finding topics and speakers that were willing to utilize zoom and the response from the membership was incredible. There were many challenges and obstacles to overcome, but they performed their duties with dignity and grace. Thank you to everyone that worked to make these trainings possible.

**Dedication** is described as self-sacrificing, devoted and loyal. This is the word that best describes your TCCA Board of Directors. Your Board worked behind the scenes during the past year to make sure the business of the association was taken care of. Several Board Members traveled to San Marcos in February to attend the Spring Board Meeting while others attended virtually due to the Winter storm. I am blessed to serve next to these members and I appreciate everything they do for us.

Now to the future – I am excited to say that we are in full swing Conference Mode! The 2021 Conference is scheduled for November in San Marcos. We plan to offer a mini-Legislative Update and I want to share a few details about our speaker line-up.

Many of you are familiar with Scott Shellstrom from his “Unleash Your Inner Da Vinci” presentation at the 2019 Conference. Mr. Shellstrom will present “Unleash Your Networking Power”, a program that provides tools, techniques, and strategies to ignite powerful networking.

Our security class will be (BMAP) The Bomb-Making Materials Awareness Program. This session is sponsored by the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)'s Office for Bombing Prevention, in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The program is designed to promote awareness and reporting of suspicious activity to prevent intentional misuse of common consumer goods used to make improvised explosive devices. TCCA will be the first Court related organization in the United States to receive this training.

“Healing Neen” presented by Tonier Cain, a trauma survivor and internationally recognized trauma informed care expert. Ms. Cain focuses on heightening awareness of the characteristics and effects of trauma and improving the performance of service providers, government agencies and others who interact with trauma survivors.

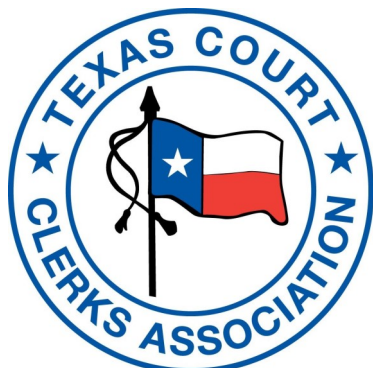
Dr. Diana Poor will be presenting “The Intersection of Leadership and Cultural Diversity”. Dr Poor is a retired 22-year Lieutenant of the Houston Police Department. Upon her retirement, she was appointed Deputy Director/Chief Data Officer within the command of the Office of Planning and Data Governance. Dr. Poor’s presentation is powerful and informative. I had the privilege to attend one of her sessions several years ago, her message is on-point with the challenges we face in society today.

**TOP SECRET SPEAKER** -Hassan Bozorgnia – this speaker happens to be the Husband of our very own Vice-President and Conference Planning Committee Chair – Jennifer Bozorgnia. Hassan did an impromptu session for the TCCA Board and Audit Committee at our 2021 Spring Board Meeting. All I will tell you about this special session is.... **YOU DON’T WANT TO MISS THIS!**

I look forward to finally seeing you in person this November and I encourage you to register as soon as registration opens to secure your spot.

Sending virtual hugs to you all!  
We are TCCA Strong

Landra



<https://www.texascourtclerks.org/>

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## *In Loving Memory of Sherry...*

It has been very difficult losing one of our staff members, it doesn't seem real. Sherry came down with COVID, got pneumonia, ended up in the hospital, and according to her children; "she fought tooth and nail to the very end". Sherry was only 55, and will be greatly missed by everyone who knew her.

Sherry started with College Station Municipal Court on December 10, 2008, and loved interacting with every citizen that she came in contact with. She received many compliments from people that she helped over the years. Her calming demeanor put them at ease from the moment they approached her window.

Sherry was very proud to achieve her level II certification in AY13. In 2017 she submitted the application for the Municipal Traffic Safety Initiative for College Station Municipal Court, and was awarded 1 of 6 1<sup>st</sup> Place winner for a mid-sized court. The award is still prominently hanging in the court lobby.

Anyone who knew Sherry, and would like to send condolences to the family, use the following address...thanks.

Brown Family  
9635 Elmo Weedon Road  
Bryan, TX 77808

- Marie Barringer, Court Administrator, College Station Municipal Court



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Principal Office: Austin, Texas. The attorney responsible for the contents of this advertisement is Carmen Perez.



# Keys to Surviving in the Court World

By. Andrea M. Goff Fontanes

What would a world without an established judicial system be like? Most of us would envision absolute chaos, am I right? When I first began my judicial career, just over 10 years now, I have come to understand the importance of the mark we create in our communities through municipal courts. Since the municipal courts are the most visited courts in the judicial branch of Texas, we have this important task (whether we want to or not) of projecting a positive influence on the judicial system of Texas. Understanding the importance of this great task is a huge cornerstone of our mission as representatives for municipal courts. In my opinion, there are four key items that help us to accomplish a positive perception to the public. These four keys are: following the *Code of Judicial Conduct*, *always listen*, *practice patience* and *establishing strong networks* (not the computer kind).

First key to remember, which is a big one, following the *Code of Judicial Conduct*. *The Code of Judicial Conduct sets out the basic standards and offers the guidance needed to establish and maintain high standards and personal conduct for all judges in Texas. Although it is stated as a code of ethics for judges, it is important to remember that we are held to the same standards as our judge. Serving under the direction of our judges and being held to these same standards helps remember that our positions are important. Anything that we do unethically, improperly, or irresponsibly will ultimately put the judge we serve as being accountable for our actions and how the court may be perceived in the eyes of court patrons.*

Here is a quick example on how the perception of the court can be viewed by your actions the very first moment as they walk into the door. A individual walks inside of the court building and goes up to the court windows to ask about a citation. Instead of greeting them, you are observed sitting at your desk, very loudly laughing and joking around with someone in the office (let's say the other person is a police officer). What would be your first thoughts about this situation if you were in their shoes? Do you think it would be viewed differently if it was another court clerk or if it was a judge?

Understanding the guidance and standards of the *Code of Judicial Conduct* would perhaps eliminate this type of situation from happening all together or at least help to react in a way that would put the person at ease if this were to happen. *The type of situation above could be a very innocent conversation about your personal lives, but to the person on the outside it could be perceived as otherwise. To be aware of these types of instances and following the standards set out in the Code of Judicial Conduct would be setting yourself up for success in your role as an officer of the court. Being an officer of the court, you must lead by example on what the standards are in your court. Setting and establishing standards will allow all court users to be able to perceive the court in a positive way and will allow for better communication with anyone that steps foot in your court.*

Allow for better communication by always listening, this is the second key to help accomplish a positive perception in your court. Logically, the first thing most people do when they receive a citation is to call the court. Most of them call the very same day that they received the citation (making them overachievers or very distraught individuals (this is a whole separate topic in itself)). Once they have you on the phone, they want to tell you everything, literally, everything. When you have this individual on the phone, do you immediately berate them or tell them to shut up? No, at least, I would most definitely hope that you wouldn't do that, but you'd take a deep breath and listen.

Continued on next page...



Listening is one of the key concepts in communication. Active listening is what makes these types of situations cool down, ideally. Majority of the time listening to their concerns and issues will calm them down enough for you to explain what they must do next on their case. Every case type and circumstance may be different depending on the actions they will need to take, but the one thing that will never change is listening. Listening will always require patience and most individuals will appreciate the time you took to let them vent and walk them through the court process, allowing for their experience to be positive.

Listening and patience go hand in hand. Patience is the third key to project a positive view of the court. Take a big deep breath, listen and perhaps think before speaking (because there are those times when you really want to say something back), this will allow for the individual to not be encouraged to prolong the negative energy they are projecting. Practicing patience when allowing an individual to vent (as with listening), will get them to calm down as well as yourself in a stressful situation (most of the time, but I do realize this is will not work in every case, there are those that will not calm down no matter how patient you are being with them). Practicing patience in our line of work will allow for us to become better at what we do and learn how to get us through all kinds of stressful situations.

Networking is the last key to help allow the public to view the court positively. The last key is not a direct influence, but does indirectly influence the perception. An indirect influence to help in the positive perception of the court is by having an established network of support to ask for guidance when experiencing stressful and different types of situations. In essence, by gaining knowledge and support through strong networking allows for development and improvement, making us better for all court patrons that come into contact with our courts. Having the skillset and experience handling stressful situations and individuals allows the court to be effective, efficient and allow for the fair administration of justice.

A fact that is ingrained in us from the start as court clerks: municipal courts are the most visited courts in our judicial system. Allowing for the positive perception of our courts will influence how individuals judge the court system as a whole. The importance of the four keys to help accomplish this positive perception in our courts are: following the *Code of Judicial Conduct*, *always listen, practice patience and establishing strong networks*. *It can be daunting to always be looking out for something or someone, the task of being a court clerk is not an easy one. It does not matter if you signed up for it, have been thrown into the position and are just beginning, the job is not easy.*

Always remember we are all here to help each other and good luck to you on your endeavors.

\* Another fantastic tip: The Texas Court Clerks Association is a great networking organization.

### **Helpful information for you:**

You can find the *Code of Judicial Conduct on Texas Municipal Court Education Center (TMCEC) website, plus other great and helpful information for you to be successful –*

<https://www.tmcec.com>

**Level I, Chapter 3** is where the *Code of Judicial Conduct is specifically found:*

<https://www.tmcec.com/files/9915/8273/3787/Level I Ch 3.pdf>

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# Hybrid Courts, a Pandemic, Culture, and Change

By Edinia Espinoza, Management Analyst, City of San Antonio

The Greek philosopher Plato once said, “Necessity is the mother of invention”. I think he was on to something because often the driving force behind innovation is need. Most courts today, and more recently over the last year, have needed to implement process changes or adapt to new ways of doing old things. These changes in processes and operations have included pushing boundaries on what we consider court appearances. Of course, there is the law to contend with. Innovative courts have often had to wait for the law to catch up with progressive ideas that toe the line or surpass legal boundaries set by statute. In Texas, our Supreme Court has issued numerous Emergency Orders to help courts adapt to the changes. To date, 37 Emergency Orders have been issued ([TJB, 2021](#)).

One way courts have had to adapt over the last year, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, is by creating hybrid work environments. In *“The hybrid workplace probably won’t last”* (Levy, 2021) the *Boston Globe* challenges the stability of the hybrid workforce as a permanent business solution. However, the *Globe’s* contention with the hybrid workforce has more to do with employees who work from home as a permanent solution. *If this is the case, according to the Boston Globe, let us look at the hybrid workplace concept from a different angle. Could a long-lasting hybrid workforce solution be that employees work from home and the office? What does the real-world application of this concept look like for courts?*

The San Antonio Municipal Court has been utilizing this system for well over a year, and in fact, was considering this type of workforce business solution right before the pandemic. With the need to adapt to world events, court administrators of the San Antonio Municipal Court made quick work to strategize an effective and efficient way to ensure the continuity of full court operations with modified court services and a flexible working environment for court staff. The solution was simple: rotate staff to work from home and at court. Though the implementation of the solution was simple, it was less so with equipment and technology, where the court encountered challenges with familiarity on using advanced technology. The hybrid solution ensured staff continued to have a connection to the workplace and their peers, as well as establish a system that accomplishes tasks that cannot be performed at home. The Court implemented this concept across all teams. The result was that staff appreciated the ability to work from home some days, which cut down on day-to-day travel expenses and ready for work time, as well, they were happy to come into work on the days they were assigned.

Thomas J. Allen, a professor of management at MIT ([The Allen Curve](#)), found that “...communication between people in an office increased exponentially the closer their desks were...the more often we see someone face-to-face, the more likely it is that we will also telephone that person or communicate by another medium.” What we can hypothesize is that workers who are exclusively working from home have less interaction with their peers, resulting in them feeling disconnected and disengaged, therefore directly impacting success amongst teams. For the hybrid system to be fully effective for the San Antonio Municipal Court, it was critical to safeguard the community created amongst court staff to protect the quality of service delivery to the public and staffs’ level of job satisfaction.

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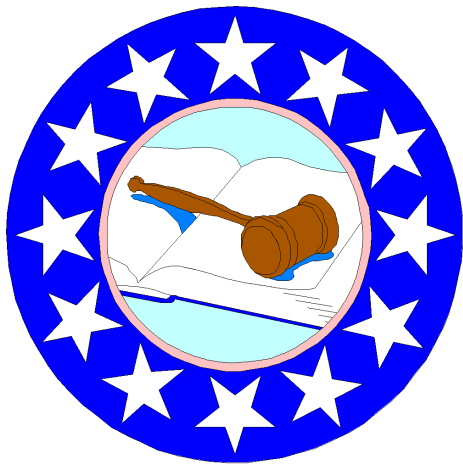
What is accomplished by the implementation of a hybrid workplace? The San Antonio Municipal Court was able to 1) limit the number of people inside the building, 2) maintain continuity of court services and, 3) ensure a sense of community amongst peers and continued collaboration across teams. Cristina Banks, director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Healthy Workplaces at the University of California, Berkeley said, “The lifeblood of the company is the mix of people, the spontaneous interactions.”

Is your court suited for a hybrid workplace? To consider this type of work environment, it is important to consider your court’s culture. The various cultures are important in the decision-making process. There’s work culture, team culture, customer service culture, and many others. The importance in looking at culture has to do with success of the change process. As a student of change management principles, I can tell you that it is the staff buy-in that drives success and failure in change, as well as level of success. When staff is invested and feel personally tapped into the change process, they will be your change champions, and will offer their subject-matter expertise to ensure change success.

Consider what Brian Ostrom and Roger Hanson, from the National Center for State Courts, have to say about culture, “...knowledge of an organization’s culture is a crucial factor when searching for ways to improve operational effectiveness.” (Ostrom, Roger, 2009) Their article, [“Understanding and Diagnosing Court Culture”](#) lends practical advice to the administration of court services across all types of courts, as they relate to culture. Their scholarship is integral when considering a major change in court operations.



As for the San Antonio Municipal Court, it will continue a hybrid work environment in those areas of the court suited to the flexibility of staffing, long after the pandemic. Though the pandemic drove the change, it was the willingness of the culture to adapt that made and continues to make the hybrid work environment successful. A recent article in the *San Antonio Express-News*, [“S.A. companies consider a hybrid return”](#), from contributing business reporter Richard Webner, suggests many other companies will continue to employ their hybrid work offices beyond the pandemic, especially when the culture supports it. I believe it is a worthwhile exploratory opportunity for many courts to consider a hybrid court as we move into the next stages of opening our cities to full services. For those courts who find themselves in a season of need for change, a hybrid court may be the solution for you.



# Central Texas Chapter

Greetings and Welcome to 2021! Looking back it's hard to believe we've been living amongst a Global Pandemic for over a year. There was a lot of mention last year about barely being able to wait until 2020 was over and what 2021 would bring. Well, 2021 is here and so are the new virtual training sessions. Although I think we can all agree that "virtual" training isn't the same experience as "in-person", I think we can equally agree that it is much more convenient. I know I certainly miss seeing everyone in person and getting to catch up but I can also say I've saved a lot of miles on the old pick-up truck.

One thing virtual training has done is allow for much greater participation. Instead of having an attendance of a handful or so members with in-person training, we've been able to reach dozens of members online. Oh yea, all this virtual training is FREE as well to anyone across the state. Please check out the TCCA website for upcoming training opportunities.

If you have any educational topics you would like to see in the upcoming months, please let us know. Also, we are always looking for volunteers to help out the Chapter at different levels. If you are interested in learning more about getting involved, please visit our Chapter page on the website and reach out to any Board member. We'd be thrilled to hear from you and value your input!

Respectfully,

Chad Eixmann  
Central Texas Chapter President

## North Texas Chapter

North Texas Chapter Members,

As we begin to regain some semblance of life pre-pandemic, let's take a moment to highlight the many positive results and accomplishments that were experienced in 2020! Not only have we learned a lot about our own professional resiliency, but we've also created new meaning when it comes to *"access to justice."* *For the first time in history, our courts have come to the people we serve instead of requiring them to come to us. That's monumental, y'all! Through virtual opportunities, we're overcoming the traditional obstacles we often hear about our judicial system – and our courts are leading the way! That's definitely a positive result worth celebrating!*

Additionally, we're extremely proud of our very deserving North Texas chapter award recipients for 2020. All of them represent the type of court clerk we strive to be! While we couldn't celebrate them all together, each of their cities made special accommodations to ensure their accomplishments were recognized (pictured below). If you haven't already, make sure to watch the award presentation during January's business meeting recording – which is available on the North Texas Chapter's TCCA webpage! Congratulations to:

### **Font Line Awards:**

Marlene Ruiz, Hurst

Janie Mercado, Richardson

### **Professionalism Awards:**

Carolyn Stout, Fort Worth

Michelle Lowe, Willow Park

Sharon Jennings, Corsicana

### **Excellence Award:**

Rebecca Vinson, North Richland Hills

Lastly, THANK YOU to our amazing members who dedicate so much of their time to ensuring our chapter's success! The education, networking and membership opportunities that are provided are a result of everyone's continuous work. We're always looking for more people to get involved! This is an excellent time to become a board member! If you're interested, make sure to look out for upcoming chapter nominations!

Have a great summer, North Texas Chapter!

Jennifer Bozorgnia, NTX President



Janie Mercado, Richardson



Rebecca Vinson, North Richland Hills



Marlene Ruiz, Hurst



Carolyn Stout, Fort Worth



Michelle Lowe, Willow Park



Sharon Jennings, Corsicana





## SOUTH TEXAS CHAPTER

— TEXAS COURT CLERKS ASSOCIATION —

This past year has been all about **improvise, adapt, and overcome**. We have overcome quite a bit over the past 12 months. Our board is excited about what this past year has brought – we have had virtual educational opportunities, testing opportunities, and opportunities to bring our courts to the 21<sup>st</sup> century through virtual court hearings, to remote working, and ability to provide more access to justice. We have had the opportunity to **trust the process** and ensure we are doing all we can to be flexible with the changes we have been faced with.

I wanted to take this moment and remind you all that the board is here for you to engage with, share ideas with, or call on the phone and ask for help.

- Tiffany Totah, President, City of Victoria
- Adrienne Dill, Vice President, City of Corpus Christi
- Elizabeth Montes, Treasurer, City of Victoria
- Amanda Ellis, Secretary, City of Cuero
- Crystal Vasquez, Director at Large, City of South Padre Island
- Laura Garza, immediate Past President, City of Corpus Christi

Please know if this is anything I can do to help you or if you are interested in engaging with our Chapter, please reach out to me directly at [ttotah@victoriatx.gov](mailto:ttotah@victoriatx.gov).

Your South Chapter President,

Tiffany Totah



# Freedom Trail Chapter

The 2021 year so far has been anything from boring. We have been through dealing with not only the pandemic (although, thankfully, it is toning down at this point), seen snow, hail and tornadoes. We have survived through the brunt of it and it is already the spring time. I don't have too much to say, but wanted to tell everyone to keep your head up and keep moving forward. We are just about half way through the year 2021 already. I look forward to seeing you at one of our chapter events this year, make sure to periodically check on the Freedom Trail Chapter's page and the Texas Court Clerks Association event's page for upcoming opportunities.

So far this year, the Freedom Trail Chapter has hosted one virtual education opportunity, one virtual prep session and three testing opportunities.

If you have any ideas or comments on educational opportunities for our chapter, reach out to **Debbie Landrum**, City of Fair Oaks Ranch at: [dlandrum@fairoaksranchtx.org](mailto:dlandrum@fairoaksranchtx.org)

Take care and be safe everyone.

Kindest regards,

**Andrea M. Goff Fontanes**

Andrea M. Goff Fontanes, CMCC, CCM  
Helotes Municipal Court Administrator

As always you can reach out to me or any of our board or committee members below for any questions or concerns about the Freedom Trail Chapter:

**President:** Andrea Goff Fontanes, City of Helotes: [agoff@helotes-tx.gov](mailto:agoff@helotes-tx.gov)

(Website and Membership Chair)

**Vice-President:** Debbie Landrum, City of Fair Oaks Ranch: [dlandrum@fairoaksranchtx.org](mailto:dlandrum@fairoaksranchtx.org)

(Education Chair)

**Secretary:** Maribel Garcia, City of San Antonio: [Maribel.Garcia2@sanantonio.gov](mailto:Maribel.Garcia2@sanantonio.gov)

(Nomination Chair)

**Treasurer:** Stacy Martin, City of San Antonio: [Stacy.Martin@sanantonio.gov](mailto:Stacy.Martin@sanantonio.gov)

(Scholarship Chair)

**Historian:** Christina Zelenak, City of Castle Hills: [czelenak@castlehills-tx.gov](mailto:czelenak@castlehills-tx.gov)

**Legislative Chair:** Fred Garcia, City of San Antonio: [Fred.Garcia@sanantonio.gov](mailto:Fred.Garcia@sanantonio.gov)

## COVID-19 and Virtual Courts



In the past 16 months COVID-19 has affected every aspect of our lives. As Court Clerks, we have seen a job that has largely remained unchanged for decades, change dramatically to meet the challenges of the global pandemic. Defendants frequently call and say, “I can’t make my virtual appointment,” illustrating their lack of understanding that their “appointment” is actually a court date, with a real judge, a real prosecutor and being videoed in a real courtroom. Texas courts have reported outrageous behavior by defendants during virtual dockets; behavior such as a shirtless male waiting intently for his scheduled Zoom docket or defendants seeking privacy for their virtual hearing in a public restroom or even driving a vehicle. In-person courtroom settings provide the familiar social cues of what’s acceptable which virtual dockets are lacking. Fortunately, people are beginning to understand that behavior that is inappropriate during in-person court, is also inappropriate during virtual court.

Other challenges have emerged for court professionals as it is our job to modernize processes to meet the Court’s needs utilizing email, mail, telephones, and virtual court applications. In February 2021, the Texas judiciary reported that the one millionth Zoom hearing occurred February 4, 2021; what was once novel is becoming normal.

While Texas’ court clerks have learned how to navigate the virtual environment, the staff is instructing defendants in real time on how to use the apps. There is also a question of how to address the needs of defendants who do not have smart phones or access to computers. Still, there are other defendants who are not tech-savvy and require assistance from court staff navigating e-court. These technical issues have created an additional ask of court staff who are already struggling to keep up.

The number of misdemeanor cases filed in municipal courts fell 22% in fiscal year 2020 according to the Office of Court Administration Annual Statistical Report. The case clearance rates are also down across the state. In mid-March 2020, Texas courts ceased normal operations by order of the Texas Supreme Court. Many courts closed their doors to the public, others closed only their lobby but continued regular hours via telephone and email; all courts cancelled dockets and trials.

Some defendants found themselves unemployed and did not have the financial resources to take care of their citations. Many people ignored their citations, so their cases went unadjudicated. Courts have been left scrambling to create a fair process for those unable to pay court costs and fees or who were unable to participate in virtual dockets.

Overall, 2020 was a learning experience for everyone. We did an admirable job transitioning court operations into the Information Age. Approaching is a time we will be able to hold in-person court again, but virtual dockets may be part of the permanent future equation. The jury is still out on that. One day we will look back and nostalgically remember the year that justice and technology collided, and we were at the tip of the spear.

By Darlena Wills,  
Deputy Court Clerk  
Georgetown, TX

# THE POWER OF YOUR CIRCLE

It has been said many places and different ways that you are a reflection of the company you keep. If you look around and see that your circle does not contain your biggest cheerleaders then it is time to clear the board and create your own personalized circle. Don't let negativity drag you down and discourage you from reaching higher goals/levels. I have been doing some independent reading recently and started a book this week that talks a lot about failure, disappointment, vulnerability, and courage. (Dare to Lead by Brene Brown). These are all things that I am sure each of us can relate, struggle with on a regular basis, and need our inner circle to overcome. I want to share three things that Brene outlines in the beginning of her book.

1. You can't get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability.
2. Self-awareness and self-love matter.

And most importantly.....

3. Courage is contagious

She goes on to say "I've never met a brave person who hasn't known disappointment, failure, even heart-break." I hope that this sentence resonates as deep with all of you as it did for me.

What TCCA has done for me is to bring me out of my shell and forced me to spread my wings more than I ever felt comfortable doing before. Many individuals in this organization believed in me when I wanted to give up on my certification, had confidence that I was capable in a leadership role, forced me to grow, and I am ever grateful that they are in my circle. Many of you have reached out here and there and I am always honored to be "paying it forward", and helping any time I am able. Each one of us has our own special gift and (unfortunately) mine is the gift of gab. I love to visit with people, share ideas, and generally help any way I can. I hope that each one of you have realized the potential you have within and start venturing out into your own. Keep reaching out and growing your circle, these contacts will morph from professional contacts to some of your closest friends.

Ladies and Gents if we have learned one thing during this pandemic it is the power of networking and your inner circle. The Corona virus has taught me that I am lacking in the technological realm, and Gulf Coast Members I apologize for our chapter's lack of presence during this last year. The board and I have been discussing what we can do to get back on task, and hope to serve you better. Please contact the board if you have ideas and topics that you all would like to see featured in the coming year.

Your Gulf Coast Chapter President,

Chrissy Dahse

# Zoom Meeting

Audio only

With video



I am excited as we near the opportunity to meet in person again! I am prepping to shed my pandemic look of sweats, hoodies and my hair in a bun cause I don't care look and working to get back to my pre-pandemic self, combed hair, business casual clothes and a face full of make-up to see you ALL! Needless to say, I have missed seeing everyone and hope all is well.

The Northeast Texas Chapter has had a few changes in its board members and committee members and I would like to introduce everyone!

- Lisa Sechrest, City of Quinlan, President
- Stacie Chitty, City of Lindale, Vice President
- Julie McGowan, City of Van, Secretary
- Donna Dugger, City of Center, Treasurer
- Laura Rex, City of Big Sandy, Education
- Lona Maxted, City of White Oak, Immediate Past President

Also, our chapter would like to give a BIG SHOUT OUT to KAREN ARMSTRONG! Karen served the Northeast Texas Court Clerks Association for the past 23 years! We all congratulate Karen Armstrong on her retirement from her years of servitude with the courts. While she will be missed by all of us, she certainly deserves her retirement. Karen's hard work and diligence have greatly benefited our local chapter and the Texas Court Clerk Association as a whole. I can only hope the association as a whole can strive to follow her stellar example. We wish Karen the best in her future journey and wish her a fun and fruitful retirement!

*Lisa Sechrest, Northeast Texas Chapter President*

# Conference

Here we go! #TCCAVISION2021 is right around the corner and your Conference Planning Committee has been hard at work to ensure this year's conference exceeds expectations. We're excited to share a few things attendees should look forward to:

First, after the last year, we now know more than ever how important our relationships are – both professionally and personally. Taking a vision and making it come to life is rarely accomplished by a single individual, but instead by a team, sharing that vision and growing it towards an organization's mission. Even more fitting now than it was when we selected it in 2020, our theme, "Vision 2021: Insight into Building Valuable Connections" emphasizes these fundamental truths and rallies around how we – as court professionals – use these connections to best serve our communities.

With that in mind, our educational line-up this year will encourage attendees to develop themselves to influence stronger, more valuable connections within their current and future relationships by including a variety of topics focusing on leadership, diversity and perspective, along with court-related issues like security and updates as a result of the 86<sup>th</sup> legislature.

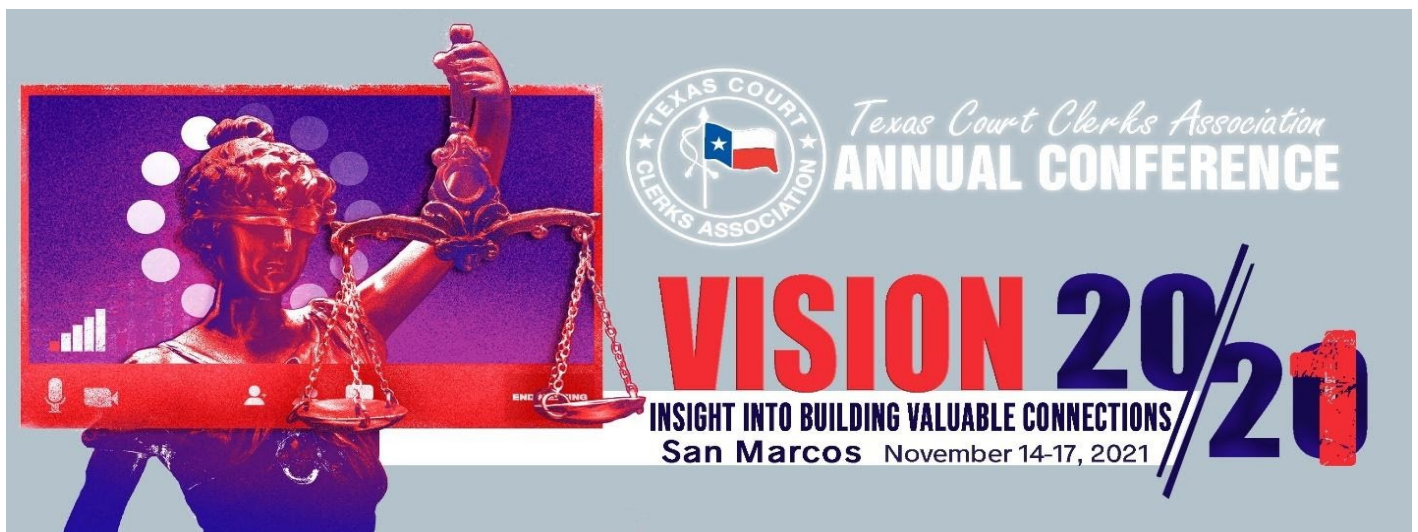
Second, with the changes our courts have faced lately, many of us have also identified new and evolving needs to more efficiently do business. Therefore, we're thrilled to also welcome back our exhibitors to our traditional Exhibitor Hall giving our attendees opportunities to learn about tools and resources they may not have needed in the past.

Additionally, while in the Exhibitor Hall, attendees won't want to miss our Merchandise table. The Merchandise Committee has done a fantastic job gathering information and creating new items based on *your feedback!* (Our online store will also be available beginning the Wednesday, November 17<sup>th</sup>).

*\*While the annual business meeting and awards ceremony will be available virtually (for education credit), to take full advantage of what this year's conference will offer, we're looking forward to welcoming delegates back in-person only. Considering all state and local COVID protocols for the time we're meeting, we'll ensure a safe learning environment without sacrificing networking opportunities with each other or our exhibitors.*

Don't miss out on the TCCA Annual Conference, November 14-17, 2021 in San Marcos, TX at the Embassy Suites!

**Texas Court Clerks Association:**  
***Vision 2021: Insight into Building Valuable Connections***  
*November 14-17, 2021*  
*The Embassy Suites and Conference Center*  
*1001 E. McCarty Ln.*  
*San Marcos, TX 78666*



# TCCA Speaker - Scott Shellstrom



What if you could hire Leonardo da Vinci as your next keynote speaker? Scott Shellstrom is the modern day da Vinci, and inspires teams everywhere to rediscover their own ability for creativity and innovation.

As a former advertising executive, Scott knows that creativity is more than an art, it's a skill. His skills have placed him on some of New York City's most prominent improv comedy stages, and his paintings on some of the most prestigious gallery walls. He knows how to perform, both as a television host on the Travel Channel, as well as the first white guy on Soul Train.

Scott's presentations will unite and excite your team as they collaborate and support one another using proven techniques of improvisational theater. He ignites productivity and inspires unique solutions to everyday challenges. He teaches how to prosper from perspective and see more than what the picture first portrays. (And if that wasn't enough, just wait for his masterpiece painting... done in four minutes... upside down.)

## TCCA Member Appreciation Week

### March 22nd - 26th

Thank you to all who participated in this year's Member Appreciation Week challenge. This year's focus used the **TCCA** acronym for each day's focus. It was a fun way to encompass the TCCA organization as a whole. There were so many comments and posts, which made the daily winner selection a challenge in itself. Here are the daily focus points, winners and their comment / post.

#### Day 1 Challenge focus – **TEACH**

Viveanne Lucas...*"I just enjoy Pat Piffel's presentations. She is so excited about what she is teaching! She teaches in an upbeat and laid back manner that makes it easy to learn and soak up all the information she is presenting."*

#### Day 2 Challenge focus is **COMPLIMENT**

Renee Flores...*"I'll never forget when our court started having defendants do the RED program (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) and the young lady turned in her certificate to me and said thank you because it really made a difference in her and for her. Plus I always liked it when the defendants finish a payment plan and say we don't want to see each other again unless it's a hello at the grocery store, lol!"*

#### Day 3 Challenge focus is **COMMITTEE**

Lisa Brady-Howard...*"The very first committee I served on was the Historian Committee and I LOVED it!!! I enjoyed going around meeting people and taking their pictures and making memories that can be captured forever!!! I loved being the paparazzi!!!"*

#### Day 4 Challenge focus is **ACHIEVEMENTS**

Tiffany Totah...*"WOW!! Where do I start? 2020 was QUITE the year but is was a year of GROWTH and celebration for the City of Victoria Municipal Court.*

*First: We applied, and were awarded the Achievement of Tyler Excellence through Tyler Technologies for 2021!! We "officially" get our recognition for this at the end of April!*

*Second: We applied and were selected for the TMCEC – Municipal Traffic Safety Initiatives Award – New Applicants! We officially get our recognition for this at the end of this month!*

*Third: We applied, and were selected, for the National Center for State Courts Implementation Lab for Remote & Virtual hearings. We will be participating in focus group discussions with courts from across the nation on how to improve the virtual and remote court platforms!*

*Fourth: Education Education Education! Staff attended webinars and virtual training opportunities throughout 2020 and Elizabeth Yates Montes achieved Certified Court Clerk Level II and obtained her SECOND Associate's degree!! I also completed the Certified Court Manager program and began the requirements for Certified Court Executive!*

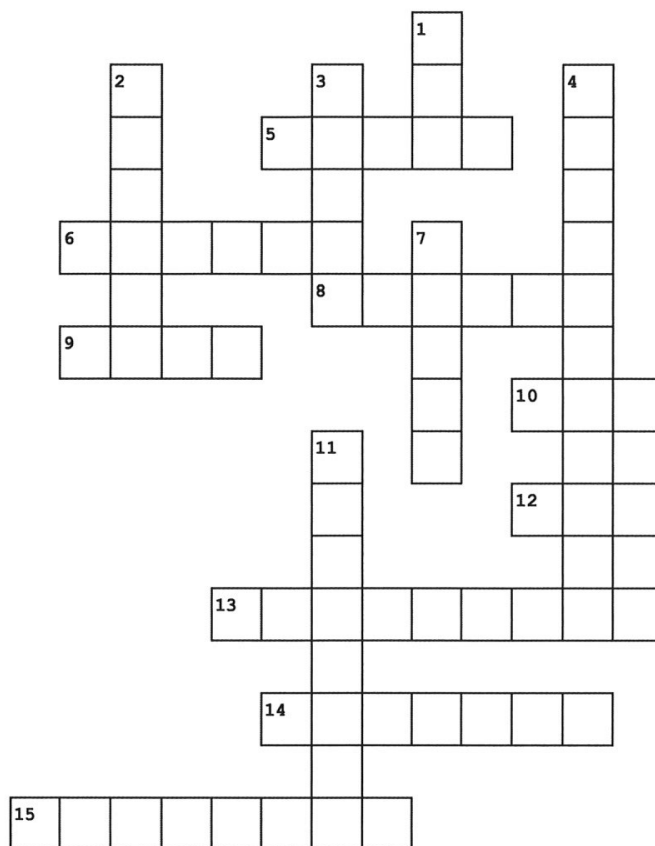
*Super proud of the City of Victoria team!!"*

#### Day 5 Challenge focus is **IMPACT**

Chrissy Sonsel Dahse...*"ICM...definitely where I met my people! My classmates are the ones who pushed me to finish my L3 when I had all but given up after finishing so much of the process and almost timing out because life had just gotten in the way."*



## Still Just a Bill



### Across

- 5. it's great to learn, because knowledge is this
- 6. a meeting of members of the same party
- 8. moral principles that govern behavior or conduct
- 9. after this, a bill can go back to congress and start all over again
- 10. a bill hopes to be this one day
- 12. it can happen while in committee
- 13. it can be a long wait while sitting here
- 14. runs from January 12th to May 31st
- 15. where the idea for a bill is first introduced

### Down

- 1. affirmative response
- 2. 2748 bills were filed here in the 87th session
- 3. 6043 bills were filed here in the 87th session
- 4. a branch of government
- 7. what is Landra's role on this TCCA committee?
- 11. meeting area



## TMCEC Attorneys Discuss Virtual Court in Post-COVID Future (Part III)

The COVID-19 Pandemic forced courts to re-examine fundamental processes and procedures in unprecedented ways.

In Part I, TMCEC Deputy Counsel Robby Chapman and General Counsel Mark Goodner discussed issues that courts would face as the pandemic hit and court shutdowns accelerated following the declaration of a State of Disaster by the Governor more than 14 months ago. In Part II, the attorneys looked at the municipal court world as 2020 ended and courts hit their stride with virtual court. Now, as COVID-19 numbers drop, vaccine numbers increase, and restrictions on courts are easing, Robby and Mark turn to Part III of the discussion. After more than a year of virtual court, many court professionals hope that some form of virtual court extends beyond the pandemic. In this discussion, the attorneys look at what the future may hold.

*\*It should be noted that proposed legislation represents no assurance that law will, in fact, change. Discussion regarding filed bills is merely an exercise in discussing future possibilities, not definite outcomes.*

### **Where do our courts stand with virtual proceedings more than 14 months into the State of Disaster?**

**MG:** Robby, you and I have spoken at more than a dozen seminars at this point in the year. There was certainly a “ramping up” period as people became more and more comfortable with the idea of remote or virtual proceedings throughout the state. Well over a million virtual proceedings have now happened. One thing that we have tried to say repeatedly was that at some point, absent new statutes, the ability to hold remote or virtual proceedings will be minimized. Now that we are in the middle of session, however, there are some efforts to extend the courts’ ability to hold these proceedings remotely.

**RC:** Yes, it is interesting looking back at how quickly and efficiently our municipal courts moved processes and procedures online. That “over a million virtual proceedings” number you cited is based on an OCA press release from February. As I know that you have also pointed out in our presentations, that number could substantially exceed one million today as we speak. That is impressive on both a state and national level.

That said, you and I have both reminded courts over the last year that change in the criminal justice system can be like turning a big ship. I think more apt imagery in hindsight may be that it is like rolling a boulder up a hill! At some point, municipal courts reached the summit. If courts need to hold virtual proceedings, the heavy lifting is done at this point. Most courts now have the nuances of the OCA Zoom down, court notices drafted with “eCourt” language, and processes for virtual court proceedings in place. We are all ready for that boulder to start rolling down the other side without all the struggle. The issue is that our authority to conduct these proceedings is much more limited going forward without emergency orders from the Texas Supreme Court. To continue in the same manner as we have been for more than a year, there needs to be some kind of legislative action. None of us want to be flattened by that boulder.

### **What efforts have been made to study the possibility of a continuation of remote proceedings in municipal courts?**

**MG:** The Supreme Court created a Remote Proceeding Task Force, and in January of this year, TMCEC attorneys contributed information to the task force. We wanted to pinpoint areas of the law that required open court proceedings and appearances (such as Art. 45.0215 pleas by minors, Art. 45.0211 pleas in family violence cases, and Section 106.10 pleas to Alcoholic Beverage Code offenses) and those areas of the law that already anticipated or allowed appearance through an Electronic Broadcast System or Videoconferencing (such as Art. 15.17 magistrate hearings, Art. 45.0201 regarding reconsideration and *capias pro fine* show cause hearings, and Art. 45.046 commitment hearings). So, there is some limited permission for virtual proceedings now, but lawmakers must carefully consider important constitutional issues such as *What constitutes open court? and Can remote proceedings satisfy public trial requirements?*

**RC:** These are issues that I think had to be addressed in very short order at the height of the pandemic. We have discussed the meaning of “open court” in a virtual setting many times during our Q&A sessions at the regional judge and clerk seminars. The solution offered by OCA has been to stream Zoom proceedings through YouTube. But there may still be legal issues involved. What are the rules on retaining recordings of those virtual court proceedings? *Can they be simply deleted as the state recommended? Do a city’s social media policies come into play if the court is maintaining a YouTube channel? And then there are practical considerations. How much server or cloud space would need to be set aside if a court of record retained a Zoom hearing? Are there issues transcribing that video recording vis-a-vis an audio recording on appeal? With more time to create the framework for permanent statutory authority, I am hopeful to see such details further addressed.*

### **What bills should municipal court personnel keep an eye on regarding virtual proceedings?**

**RC:** There are two primary bills that we have been watching that would extend the authority to conduct virtual court along the lines of what our courts have come to expect: S.B. 690 and H.B. 3611. Our courts shouldn’t make the mistake, however, of becoming attached to these bills too soon. It is important to remember that the vast majority of bills don’t make it all the way through the process. And the final hurdle before becoming law is the Governor’s decision whether to veto a bill.

Another bill to watch late in the game is now H.B. 3774. This appears to be an omnibus bill (a bill on a common subject that addresses numerous varied issues with that subject). In this case, the bill looks like it covers many different issues pertaining to judicial administration. Of interest will be provisions amending the Government Code to authorize an “Option for Remote Proceeding.” It is worth noting that sometimes provisions that affect municipal courts can get lost in lengthy bills like this, so read them closely. The current version of H.B. 3774 also includes, among other things, important changes to the “uncollectible fees” statute that clarifies the scope of that law.

**MG:** Yes, S.B. 690 and H.B. 3611 are ones to watch closely. S.B. 690 appears to have been left pending in committee, but H.B. 3611 appears to still be alive and moving along. Notably those two bills were identical as filed and neither proposed changes to Chapter 45—they both attempt to create remote proceedings in the Government Code. The same language from those bills appears to have been added to H.B. 3774. Most bills are not successful, but remote or virtual proceedings appear to have more than one shot. It is also possible that something could have been added (or will be) to another bill. Article 45.0201 (Appearance by Telephone or Videoconference) would seem to be the perfect place to broaden virtual opportunities. Currently it only applies for a *capias pro fine* show cause or a reconsideration hearing when the judge fines that in person would impose an undue hardship. It is very possible that none of these efforts are successful.

**What happens if none of the bills pass and the emergency orders end?**

**RC:** I guess that’s the million-dollar question. Some of our judges have pointed to Article 27.18 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. I’ll admit that this appears to be an overlooked section of the CCP, at least from a municipal court perspective. Mark, what are your thoughts on this going forward?

**MG:** I think you are right—that is overlooked. Article 27.18 does appear to offer plea and waiver by videoconference. One difference between that statute and our current Emergency Orders is that Article 27.18 requires written consent from the defendant as well as the state’s attorney, but it could allow parties to “opt in” so to speak to a virtual hearing of some sort. Additionally, if no bills pass specifically allowing virtual or remote proceedings, I think there is an outside chance that we could see a change in the Texas Administrative Code. Those changes can occur outside of a legislative session, and you may remember that less than a year ago, the Texas Judicial Council adopted new Chapter 176 under Title 1, Part 8, regarding Methods for the Improvement of the Administration of Justice. That sounds like it could be a possible home for new guidance if the Texas Judicial Council thinks it is necessary.





# Certifications November through May

Level I		
First Name	Last Name	City
Valerie	Garay	Pasadena
Leanne	Kirby	Cleveland
Tessa	Lawrence	Round Rock
Ashley	Williams	Athens
Beverly	Currie	Granger
Yolanda	Alatorre	Conroe
Anderson	Wolf	Austin
Lety	Vega	Bay City
Rosalia	Sosa	Pleasanton
Ashley	Lillard	Midland
Shayla	Hopes	Pleasanton
Ana	Olvera	Houston
Juanez	Hanes	Longview
Terrie	Hall	La Marque
Elexis	Palacios	La Porte
Elizabeth	Adams	Coppell
Yvette	Yanez	Midland
Cecilia	Harris	Austin
Sylvia	Cobia	Missouri City
Mary Mar-	Healy	Rowlett
Samuel	Falkenberg	San Antonio
Stacy	Morales	Sugar Land
Raudel	Gonzalez	San Antonio
Reba	Manning	Odessa
Kasheva	Smith	Odessa
Chelsea	Kemp	Riesel
Brandi	Pollock	Bridgeport
Christopher	Preneta	Decatur
Skyler	Reid	Mansfield
Michael	Davis	Sugar Land
Jamie	Lindsay	Denton
Amy	Tillotson	Woodway
Heather	Sutton	Schertz
Monica	Smith	Conroe
Melissa	Verde	Leonard
Sukhmeet	Kaur	The Colony
Savannah	Smith	Freer
Candace	Collins	San Antonio
Elizabeth	Kuentz	Horseshoe Bay
Kassey	Williams	San Antonio

Tracy	Huerta	New Braunfels
Lidia	Cantu	Round Rock
Edinia	Espinoza	San Antonio
Michael	Garbacik	San Antonio
Yolanda	Milam	Round Rock
Juana	Contreras	Corsicana
Antonio	Olivos	Fort Worth
Renee	Grayson	Corinth
Ashley	Stapleton	Madisonville
Sarah	Martinez	Longview
Magenta	Landers	Watauga



# Certifications November through May

Level II		
First Name	Last Name	City
Yolanda	Gutierrez	Helotes
Kathy	Pyle	Midland
Maria	Cardona	Conroe
Connie	Alarcon	Odessa
Courtney	Folsom	La Porte
Kirby	Hewett	Longview
Desiree	Vitale	San Antonio
Emily	Martinez	Friendswood
Jennifer	Ruiz	San Antonio
Victoria	Eakman	Sanger
Yelena	Kimble	Mesquite
Mary Lou	Quesada	Leander
Paula	Dugas	Huntsville
Celaida	Dejoie	Conroe
Brenda	Reyes	Lakeway
Beverly	Brown	Saginaw
Lesly	Vega Martinez	Longview
Elizabeth	Montes	Victoria
Jennifer	Melendez	Sugar Land
Robin	Shellard	New Braunfels
Chelby	Handy	Sugar Land
Matthew	Schwartz	Universal City
Janett	Duran	Elgin
Savannah	Smith	Freer
Sonia	Holmes	Wylie
Chava	Berry	Garland
Sara	Villalobos	Southlake
Tamara	Arguello-	Lakeway
Charisse	Rhodes	Fort Worth
Rebecca	Gray	Denison
Jamie	Lindsay	Denton



Level III		
First Name	Last Name	City
Faviola	Rodriguez	Katy