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Access to Court Information Ever Expanding

Customers of the federal court's Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system now have access, without charge, to district court written opinions. Written opinions have been defined by the Judicial Conference as "any document issued by a judge or judges of the court sitting in that capacity, that sets forth a reasoned explanation for a court's decision." The authoring judge determines which documents meet this definition. Only district courts using version 2.4 or higher of the Case Management/Electronic Case Files system will offer this access, but PACER customers also can access opinions via existing reports and queries, such as the docket report. Users will not be billed for accessing the written opinion document itself, but will be billed for the report or query used to identify the document.

In 2006 alone, over 200 million requests for information were processed by PACER. Users can retrieve, among other items, a listing of parties and participants in a case, a compilation of case-related information, such as cause of action, nature of suit and dollar demand, judgments or case status, and appellate court opinions. Many courts also offer imaged copies of documents.

The E-Government Act of 2002 set requirements for providing public access to government information over the Internet, but even prior to the Act federal courts were building websites and the federal Judiciary was implementing the web PACER to provide access to case information. All federal circuit, district and bankruptcy courts have websites and the vast majority of those sites satisfy or exceed the requirements of the E-Government Act with information on court locations, contact and docket information, local rules, and any document filed electronically or filed on paper and later converted to electronic format. The Judiciary remains committed to providing electronic public access to court information.

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