



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

Statewide Access - The Arizona Office of Administrative Hearings

The Arizona Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) is an independent agency that conducts hearings for other State agencies, boards and commissions by fairly and impartially hearing contested matters of citizens arising out of state regulation. With 18 judges on staff, the agency holds an average of 25 hearings per day. The OAH offers expedient hearings for all types of claims, saving those involved from lengthy wait times often associated with state and county courts.

Since 1996, the OAH has traveled to seven remote locations outside the Phoenix/Tucson Metropolitan areas to conduct hearings, saving those involved a sometimes lengthy trip in order to have their hearing. The service required the OAH's judges to live a Bedouin-like existence, traveling long hours in the desert, away from their families, to preside over hearings all over the state. In addition to the personal strain on the judges, the extensive travel was extremely inefficient and costly. In some instances, judges would arrive only to discover that the disputes would be settled just prior to hearing, or that the parties involved failed to show up. Some hearings might last under half of an hour, making the long drive (five hours each way in some instances) inefficient.

An influx of population into Arizona created higher demand for hearings outside of the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas. The number of hearings requested in those remote locations escalated from 356 to 535 cases, a staggering 50 percent increase, from 2003-2005. The number of travel weeks increased from 57 to 79 weeks. As a result, the time lost due to travel, consisting of preparation time, transit time to and from locations, and the down time of the OAH judges increased from 733 hours in 2003 to 881 hours in 2005. Those hours are equivalent to 18.3 weeks of lost time to a total of 22 weeks of lost time in that same time period. In 2005 the average wait time for a hearing in the outlying areas was 111 days, compared to the average 68 days wait for hearings within the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas. Something had to be done to decrease the wait for those in the outlying areas.

As already high travel costs escalated with an increase in hearing requests and the sharp rise in oil prices, the OAH searched for relief. In an effort to maximize time and efficiency, the OAH attempted to schedule as many hearings as possible in one remote location in a given week. However, the same problems arose: cancellations, pre-hearing settlements, short hearings. Judges sometimes ended up spending a full week in remote Arizona towns, having only two or three hours of total hearing time.

The OAH, which has long been considered by peers as a pioneer in its implementation of technology, searched for a solution. The OAH Director Cliff Vanell, after careful deliberation, chose Aethra, Inc. for videoconferencing solutions.

Currently, the OAH employs nine Aethra Vega Pro S videoconferencing units in two base locations (Tucson and Phoenix) and three remote sites throughout the state. Plans to add four more remote sites will be complete in a matter of months. Conducting conferences over the Internet, judges and participants hear each other over crisp audio, and see each other over crystal clear video on a 32" monitor. Aethra systems' compatibility with document cameras allows the judge and participants to review physical evidence pertinent to the case. The ability of a judge to actually look into the eyes of participants in the hearing is crucial. Only videoconferencing could have been used in place of actual presence.

As a result of installing Aethra videoconferencing systems, the OAH's production level and efficiency increased immediately. Simultaneously, costs dropped. "Videoconferencing allows us to use our time and money more wisely. It allows us to use the time that we would be using to travel more efficiently," said Jeffery Sanchez, Office Manager for the OAH. "Videoconferencing permits us to be more flexible, more efficient with time and cost, and also permits the judges to return to their families that same night."

The OAH is rapidly expanding their use of videoconferencing, and in turn, their number of hearings per day, immensely benefiting the public it serves by reducing hearing wait-time. Wait time in the outlying areas of the state has been reduced to the metropolitan area average.

The OAH saw immediate benefits of Aethra's systems. The OAH's first video hearing was between Phoenix and a town called Kingman (a town five hours away). The judge wrapped up the hearing in about 20 minutes and the second hearing that day vacated. So, to conduct 20 minutes of hearings that day the judge would have to have traveled five hours each way, thus saving 10 hours that normally we would not have had at our disposal. Because those particular hearings ran shorter than expected the judge was able to conduct a few hearings in Phoenix that same day, which speeds up the process so that parties do not have to wait as long to appear before a judge. This is just one day. Multiply that by all the video hearings we will be performing and you have huge time and cost savings.

In 2006, the time recovered from travel and vacated hearings for the OAH will be allocated to 110 additional hearings thanks to videoconferencing.

The OAH is a shining example of the practical, and in many instances, necessary use of videoconferencing. As videoconferencing continues to break down the last barrier of global communication and business, Aethra remains at the forefront of innovation.

About Aethra®

Aethra (www.aethra.com) is a leader in the global telecommunications market, with distribution of its leading-edge products through businesses and more than 40 telephone companies in over 60 countries worldwide. The company develops, manufactures and markets a wide range of high-performance video communications and audio conferencing products, including rollabouts, set-tops, videophones and special solutions dedicated to telemedicine, videosurveillance and distance learning. In addition, Aethra offers multi-audio, video and data services thanks to Aethra.net, the company specifically focused on multi-conferencing services. Aethra also develops and markets internationally a variety of telecommunications products, including ISDN and xDSL systems and networking test equipment. These exceptional products have distinguished Aethra as a leader in the telecommunications industry worldwide for over 30 years, reflecting its expertise in bringing cutting-edge communications technologies to the market.

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