

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR
BETH A. WOOD, CPA



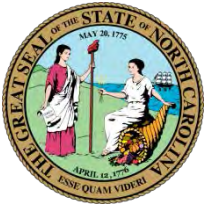
BLADEN COUNTY CLERK OF SUPERIOR COURT

ELIZABETHTOWN, NORTH CAROLINA
FINANCIAL RELATED AUDIT
SEPTEMBER 2015



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STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
Office of the State Auditor



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AUDITOR'S TRANSMITTAL

September 15, 2015

The Honorable Pat McCrory, Governor
The General Assembly of North Carolina
The Honorable Nicola S. Dennis, Bladen County Clerk of Superior Court

This report presents the results of our financial related audit at Bladen County Clerk of Superior Court. Our work was performed by authority of Article 5A of Chapter 147 of the *North Carolina General Statutes* and was conducted in accordance with the performance audit standards contained in *Government Auditing Standards*, issued by the Comptroller General of the United States.

The results of our audit identified deficiencies in internal control and/or instances of noncompliance that are considered reportable under *Government Auditing Standards*. These items are described in the *Audit Findings, Recommendations, and Responses* section of this report.

North Carolina General Statutes require the State Auditor to make audit reports available to the public. Copies of audit reports issued by the Office of the State Auditor may be obtained through one of the options listed in the back of this report.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Beth A. Wood".

Beth A. Wood, CPA
State Auditor



**Beth A. Wood, CPA
State Auditor**

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As authorized by Article 5A of Chapter 147 of the *North Carolina General Statutes*, we have conducted a financial related audit at the Bladen County Clerk of Superior Court. There were no special circumstances that caused us to conduct the audit, but rather it was performed as part of our effort to periodically examine and report on the financial practices of state agencies and institutions.

The voters of each county elect a Clerk of Superior Court for a four-year term. Clerks are responsible for all clerical and record-keeping functions of the superior court and district court. The Clerks' Offices collect, invest, and distribute assets in a fiduciary capacity. For example, the Clerks' Offices collect fines and court costs, hold cash and property bonds, administer estates on behalf of minors, and distribute resources to governmental and private parties as required.

The North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC) provides statewide support services for the courts, including court programs and management services; information technology; human resources services; financial, legal, and legislative support; and purchasing services. In addition, the NCAOC prepares and administers the court system's budget.

The general objective of this financial related audit was to identify improvements needed in internal control over selected fiscal matters. Management is responsible for establishing and maintaining effective internal control. Internal control is a process designed to provide reasonable assurance that relevant objectives are achieved. Errors or fraud may nevertheless occur and not be detected because of the inherent limitations of internal control. Also, projections of any evaluation of internal control to future periods are subject to the risk that conditions may change or that compliance with policies and procedures may deteriorate. Our audit does not provide a basis for rendering an opinion on internal control, and consequently, we have not issued such an opinion.

Our audit scope covered the period July 1, 2014 through February 28, 2015. During our audit, we considered internal control related to the following objectives:

Cash – The Clerk’s Office collects various fines, fees, and court costs daily, as well as collections for bonds, judgments, and other matters. We examined internal controls designed to ensure that the Clerk properly safeguards and accounts for cash receipts. We also examined internal control designed to ensure compliance with laws and regulations related to depositing cash receipts. During the audit period, the Clerk collected \$2,754,291.16 in cash.

Estates – The Clerk’s Office ensures all estates are charged an application fee plus an assessment based on the value of the estate’s inventory. An estate inventory is to be filed by the representative of the estate. We examined internal controls designed to ensure that the Clerk properly obtains an inventory for each estate in compliance with laws and regulations. We also examined internal control designed to ensure compliance with laws and regulations related to the appropriate assessment and collection of estate fees. During the audit period, the Clerk collected \$35,344.53 in estate fees.

Bond Forfeitures – The Clerk’s Office ensures that all motions or orders to set aside bond forfeitures meet specified criteria and are supported by required documentation. We examined internal controls designed to ensure compliance with laws and regulations related to the processing of these bond forfeitures. During the audit period, \$212,650.00 in bond forfeitures were set aside.

To accomplish the audit objectives, auditors gained an understanding of the Clerk's internal control over matters described in the *Audit Objectives and Scope* section of this report and evaluated the design of the internal control. Auditors then performed further audit procedures consisting of tests of control effectiveness and/or substantive procedures that provide evidence about our audit objectives. Specifically, auditors interviewed personnel, observed operations, reviewed policies, analyzed accounting records, and examined documentation supporting recorded transactions and balances, as considered necessary in the circumstances. Whenever sampling was used, we applied a nonstatistical approach, but chose sample sizes comparable to those that would have been determined statistically. As a result, we were able to project our results to the population but not quantify the sampling risk.

As a basis for evaluating internal control, we applied the internal control guidance contained in professional auditing standards. As discussed in the standards, internal control consists of five interrelated components: (1) control environment, (2) risk assessment, (3) control activities, (4) information and communication, and (5) monitoring.

We conducted this audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards applicable to performance audits. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Based on the results of audit procedures described in the *Methodology* section of this report, auditors identified deficiencies in internal control and/or instances of noncompliance that are considered reportable under *Government Auditing Standards*. These items are described in the *Audit Findings, Recommendations, and Responses* section of this report. Management's responses are presented after each audit finding. We did not audit the responses, and accordingly, we express no opinion on them.

1. IMPROPER SYSTEM ACCESS INCREASED RISK OF UNDETECTED ERRORS AND FRAUD

System access rights that are inconsistent with proper segregation of duties were assigned to employees. Two employees had cashier rights in the Financial Management System (FMS) and update access in the Criminal Court Information System (CCIS).

While no instances of fraud were identified during the audit period, the access rights assigned to the employees could have allowed an individual to misappropriate funds by collecting cash from a criminal payment, bypassing receipt entry into FMS, and updating CCIS to indicate all costs have been paid.

During the audit period, the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC) executed the update functionality within CCIS and in doing so, access rights were automatically assigned within the system based on outdated roles and responsibilities. Appropriate communication between the two parties prior to this system update did not take place to ensure employee access rights were consistent with proper segregation of duties. As a result, the Clerk was unaware she could assign inquiry access only within the criminal system until it was brought to her attention by the auditors.

Adequate segregation of duties is required by the *North Carolina Clerk of Superior Court Financial Policies and Procedures Manual*. Proper segregation of duties involves assigning duties and access to assets and information systems so that one employee's duties automatically provide a cross-check of the work of other employees.

As a result of our audit, the Clerk corrected the access deficiencies by taking measures to update the CCIS access rights to inquiry for those employees in question. All access deficiencies were corrected as of March 31, 2015.

Recommendation: Prior to the implementation of, or changes to, computer systems used in the Clerk's Office, the Clerk should be proactive in working with NCAOC to ensure access rights are properly assigned and are consistent with proper segregation of duties in accordance with guidance contained in the *Clerk of Superior Court Financial Policies and Procedures Manual*.

Clerk's Response: The Office of the State Auditor (OSA) revealed improper system access in CCIS to the Clerk on March of 2015. Upon being notified by the OSA, the Clerk immediately corrected the access deficiencies by taking measures to update the CCIS access rights to inquiry for those employees in question. All access deficiencies were corrected as of March 31, 2015. The Clerk was proactive in expressing the need for increased communication between the Clerk and the NC AOC when there are system updates and changes. As of June 30, 2015 the N.C.AOC provided the Clerk with additional tools to review any improper system access and make changes to access.

2. FAILURE TO COMPEL ESTATE INVENTORY FILINGS OR FEE COLLECTION

The Clerk's Office did not compel the timely filing of estate inventories or collect estate fees in accordance with state law, resulting in a loss or delay in the collection of court costs and fees.

Auditors examined all 32 estates in the audit period that required an inventory to be filed and identified 28 (88%) estates whose personal representatives were not compelled or

were not compelled timely to file inventories. No inventory had been filed for 14 of these estates at the time of our audit. For the 18 estates where an inventory had been filed, auditors identified 11 (61%) estates in which fees of \$2,653.45 were not collected when the inventory was filed. The Clerk's orders requiring the inventory filings were issued 51 to 166 days late.

In addition to the delay and potential loss in fee collections, the untimely filing of inventories could delay the family of the deceased from finalizing the estate and could allow unauthorized transactions from the estate not being detected.

The Clerk's Office did not have procedures in place to ensure the timely compelling of an estate inventory. The review of the 'Estate Cases with Filing Due' report from the Civil Case Processing System (VCAP) for an estate needing to be compelled to file, was not performed timely. Also, personal representatives were not made to pay the required fees at the time the inventory was filed. Instead, the fees were allowed to be paid at the final inventory.

North Carolina General Statute 28A-20 and the *North Carolina Clerk of Superior Court Procedures Manual*, Chapter 74, require the filing of an estate inventory within three months after the Clerk's appointment of the estate's personal representative. If an inventory is not filed, the Clerk must issue an order requiring the personal representative to file the inventory or give reason why the personal representative should not be replaced. Additionally, *North Carolina General Statute 7A-307(a)(2)* requires the Clerk to assess and collect the estate fees at the time the inventory is filed.

Recommendation: The Clerk's Office should follow state law and the *North Carolina Clerk of Superior Court Procedures Manual* to ensure appropriate action is taken to compel the timely filing of estate inventories and collect estate fees at the time inventory is filed.

Clerk's Response: We concur with the finding regarding the timely filing of Estate inventories. Our office strives to handle estates in an efficient manner and to comply with the statutory requirements, while being mindful that the person handling the estate has just lost a loved one. We will in the future take the necessary steps to ensure that appropriate actions are taken to compel timely filing of inventories. We will implement tracking measures to ensure more timely compelling actions. We also agree that the Clerk's office should ensure that the appropriate action is taken to enforce the timely filing of estate inventories. G.S.28A-20-2 requires the Clerk to issue an order requiring the personal representative or collector to file an inventory within the time specified in said order. Estate matters are sensitive, and circumstances beyond the personal representative's control may cause a personal representative to delay actions in order to obtain information needed to accurately reflect the asset of the estate. Once again, we have taken appropriate action in getting all documentation in order and placed in the file to show extensions granted or actions taken.

ORDERING INFORMATION

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This audit was conducted in 180 hours at an approximate cost of \$16,920.