Audit Report

# Office of the Clerk of Circuit Court
# Harford County, Maryland

September 2026

**OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE AUDITS**
DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES
MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

## Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee



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Victoria L. Gruber
Executive Director

Brian S. Tanen, CPA, CFE
Legislative Auditor

**DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES**
OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE AUDITS
MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

September 24, 2026

Senator Shelly L. Hettleman, Senate Chair, Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee
Delegate Jared Solomon, House Chair, Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee
Members of Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee
Annapolis, Maryland

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We have conducted a fiscal compliance audit of the Office of the Clerk of Circuit Court for Harford County, Maryland for the period beginning July 1, 2022 and ending July 20, 2026. The Office performs various functions for the public, including maintaining various legal records, recording certain real estate documents, collecting related fees and taxes, and issuing certain licenses.

Our audit disclosed that the Office did not ensure that certain criminal case dispositions were accurately recorded on the automated court system. According to the Judiciary's records, 2,271 criminal cases were closed during fiscal year 2025, of which 553 cases were not routinely subject to independent review.

The Judiciary's response to this audit, on behalf of the Office, is included as an appendix to this report. We have reviewed the response to our finding and related recommendation, and have concluded that the corrective actions identified are sufficient to address all issues.

We wish to acknowledge the cooperation extended to us during the audit by the Office.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian S. Tanen

Brian S. Tanen, CPA, CFE
Legislative Auditor

# Background Information

## Agency Responsibilities

The Office performs a variety of functions for the public such as filing, docketing, and maintaining various legal records; recording documents involving title to real estate; collecting the related fees, commissions, and taxes; and issuing certain licenses. In performing these functions, the Office collects funds on behalf of the State, Harford County and its incorporated municipalities, and others, and subsequently distributes the funds collected to the applicable entities.

## Financial Information

According to the State's accounting records, the Office's fiscal year 2025 revenues totaled $13,998,161. These revenues were distributed in the following manner:

- $450,547 was distributed to Harford County and its incorporated municipalities,
- $128,251 was distributed to others, and
- $13,419,363 (the remaining amount) represented revenues available to the State for purposes specified in various provisions of State law.

The majority of the Office's fiscal year 2025 expenditures, which totaled $6,409,692 (see Figure 1), were salaries and wages that were paid primarily from a general fund appropriation.

The Office also maintained custody of certain trust funds and special purpose funds that, according to its records, had balances totaling $1,718,803 as of June 30, 2026.

**Figure 1**
**Office of the Clerk of Circuit Court for Harford County**
**Positions, Expenditures, and Funding Sources**

| Full-Time Equivalent Positions as of June 30, 2025 | |
|---|---|
| | **Positions** |
| Filled | 53 |
| Vacant | 0 |
| **Total** | **53** |

| Fiscal Year 2025 Expenditures | |
|---|---|
| | **Expenditures** |
| Salaries, Wages, and Fringe Benefits | $6,016,739 |
| Operating Expenses | 392,953 |
| **Total** | **$6,409,692** |

| Fiscal Year 2025 Funding Sources | |
|---|---|
| | **Funding** |
| General Fund | $4,807,131 |
| Special Fund | 1,537,526 |
| Reimbursable Fund | 65,035 |
| **Total** | **$6,409,692** |

Source: State financial and personnel records

# Findings and Recommendations

## Criminal Court Case Dispositions

**Finding 1**
**The Office did not ensure certain criminal case dispositions were accurately recorded on the automated court system.**

**Analysis**
The Office did not ensure certain criminal case dispositions were accurately recorded on the automated court system. The courtroom clerk manually recorded the case disposition on various documents that are used by other Office personnel to update the Maryland Electronic Courts (MDEC) system. According to the Judiciary's records, there were 2,271 criminal cases closed during fiscal year 2025.

Our review disclosed that the Office did not routinely use independent source documentation, such as courtroom recordings, to ensure case dispositions were accurately recorded in MDEC except for cases that included a judgment for probation.[1] Rather, supervisory personnel generally relied on the initial record manually prepared by the courtroom clerk to ensure that information was accurately recorded in MDEC. This process would not identify potential discrepancies between the actual court disposition to those recorded by the courtroom clerk since independent source documentation was not used.

During fiscal year 2025, 553 of the aforementioned cases did not include a judgment for probation and would not have been subject to an independent review. Our test of 10 criminal court cases,[2] including 3 that were not supervised probation, disclosed that the disposition of each case was accurately recorded in MDEC. Since the aforementioned information is critical for public safety, it is incumbent on the Office to ensure the information is accurate and properly communicated.

In February 2026, the Judiciary alerted all Clerk's Offices of our recent audit findings recommending that supervisory reviews of criminal court dispositions include a documented review of courtroom recordings.

**Recommendation 1**
**We recommend that the Office ensure criminal court dispositions are verified by supervisory personnel, at least on a test basis, to independent source documents (such as courtroom recordings).**

# Audit Scope, Objectives, and Methodology

We have conducted a fiscal compliance audit of the Office of the Clerk of Circuit Court for Harford County, Maryland for the period beginning July 1, 2022 and ending July 20, 2026. The audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. 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.

[1] For criminal court cases involving supervised probation, the supporting documentation is signed by the judge attesting to the accuracy before the disposition is recorded in MDEC.
[2] Case records were selected between October 2024 and July 2026 based on the case disposition, complexity of the case record, case type, and date of the disposition.

As prescribed by the State Government Article, Section 2-1221 of the Annotated Code of Maryland, the objectives of this audit were to examine the Office's financial transactions, records, and internal control, and to evaluate its compliance with applicable State laws, rules, and regulations.

In planning and conducting our audit, we focused on the major financial-related areas of operations based on assessments of significance and risk. The areas addressed by the audit included cash receipts (including taxes and fees collected for real estate transactions), certain payroll activities, bank accounts, and certain court activities.

Our audit did not include a review of certain support services provided to the Office by the Administrative Office of the Courts. These support services (such as human resources and payroll activities, invoice processing, and maintenance of budgetary accounting records) are included within the scope of our audits of the Judiciary.

Our assessment of internal controls was based on agency procedures and controls in place at the time of our fieldwork. Our tests of transactions and other auditing procedures were generally focused on the transactions occurring during our audit period of July 1, 2022 to July 20, 2026, but may include transactions before or after this period as we considered necessary to achieve our audit objectives.

To accomplish our audit objectives, our audit procedures included inquiries of appropriate personnel, inspections of documents and records, tests of transactions, and to the extent practicable, observations of the Office's operations. Generally, transactions were selected for testing based on auditor judgment, which primarily considers risk, the timing or dollar amount of the transaction, or the significance of the transaction to the area of operation reviewed. As a matter of course, we do not normally use sampling in our tests, so unless otherwise specifically indicated, neither statistical nor non-statistical audit sampling was used to select the transactions tested. Therefore, unless sampling is specifically indicated in a finding, the results from any tests conducted or disclosed by us cannot be used to project those results to the entire population from which the test items were selected.

We also performed various data extracts of pertinent information from the State's Central Payroll Bureau (payroll data). The extracts are performed as part of ongoing internal processes established by the Office of Legislative Audits and were subject to various tests to determine data reliability. We determined that the data extracted from this source were sufficiently reliable for the purposes the data were used during this audit.

We also extracted data from the Office's court record systems for the purposes of testing certain areas, such as court activities. We performed various tests of the relevant data and determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes the data were used during the audit. Finally, we performed other auditing procedures that we considered necessary to achieve our audit objectives. The reliability of data used in this report for background or informational purposes was not assessed.

The Office's management is responsible for establishing and maintaining effective internal control. Internal control is a process designed to provide reasonable assurance that objectives pertaining to the reliability of financial records; effectiveness and efficiency of operations, including safeguarding of assets; and compliance with applicable laws, rules, and regulations are achieved. As provided in *Government Auditing Standards*, there are five components of internal control: control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information and communication, and monitoring. Each of the five components, when significant to the audit objectives, and as applicable to the Office, were considered by us during the course of this audit.

Because of inherent limitations in internal control, errors or fraud may nevertheless occur and not be detected. Also, projections of any evaluation of internal control to future periods are subject to the risk that conditions may change or compliance with policies and procedures may deteriorate.

Our reports are designed to assist the Maryland General Assembly in exercising its legislative oversight function and to provide constructive recommendations for improving State operations. As a result, our reports generally do not address activities we reviewed that are functioning properly.

This report includes a finding relating to a condition that we consider to be a significant deficiency in the design or operation of internal control that could adversely affect the Office's ability to maintain reliable financial records, operate effectively and efficiently, and/or comply with applicable laws, rules, and regulations. Our audit did not disclose any instances of noncompliance with applicable laws, rules, or regulations.

The response from the Judiciary, on behalf of the Office, to our finding and recommendation is included as an appendix to this report. As prescribed in the State Government Article, Section 2-1224 of the Annotated Code of Maryland, we will advise the Judiciary regarding the results of our review of its response.

**APPENDIX**

THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR HARFORD COUNTY
*Third Judicial Circuit of Maryland*

20 W. Courtland Street, Bel Air, MD 21014
Toll Free: 1-800-989-8296

HONORABLE MICHELLE L. KARCZESKI
*Clerk of the Circuit Court*

KIMBERLY L. WAGNER
*Chief Deputy*

Mr. Brian S. Tanen, CPA, CFE
Legislative Auditor
Office of Legislative Audits
The Warehouse at Camden Yards
351 West Camden Street, Suite 400
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

September 23, 2026

Dear Mr. Tanen:

We have received the draft audit report pertaining to the Harford County Circuit Court Clerk's Office for the period July 1, 2022 through July 20, 2026 . The attached document contains our response to the finding and recommendation in the audit report.

We believe we have responded in full to the findings and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Judy K. Rupp
State Court Administrator

Michelle L. Karczeski
Clerk of the Circuit Court for
Harford County

Cc: Hon. Matthew J. Fader, Chief Justice
Hon. Yolanda L. Curtin, Administrative Judge, Harford County Circuit Court
Nancy Faulkner, Deputy State Court Administrator
Stephane J. Latour, Managing Legal Counsel, Internal Affairs
Solomon Ayele, Director, Internal Audit

# Office of the Clerk of Circuit Court
# Harford County, Maryland

## Agency Response Form

### Criminal Court Case Dispositions

**Finding 1**
**The Office did not ensure certain criminal case dispositions were accurately recorded on the automated court system.**

**We recommend that the Office ensure criminal court dispositions are verified by supervisory personnel, at least on a test basis, to independent source documents (such as courtroom recordings).**

| Agency Response | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Analysis** | | | |
| **Please provide additional comments as deemed necessary.** | The Harford County Circuit Clerk's Office has had a number of supervisory review processes in place that resulted in a 100% review of all criminal cases that have had a hearing. While this review includes hearing sheets and probation and release orders, it has not included the verification of criminal dispositions by reviewing court audio recordings, at least on a test basis. For FY25 there were 2,271 criminal cases closed of which all were reviewed for accuracy by the Courtroom Supervisor. Of those cases, 1,718 or 75%, had an order for verification. Probation and Release orders are the independent source documents that have been reviewed and signed by a judge. The Clerk of the Circuit Court for Harford County recognizes that although the recommendation to utilize "…on a test basis…independent source documents, such as courtroom recordings" is a valid suggestion, it was, however, never a published recommendation of any past audit of the Office of Legislative Audits, nor a requirement of our 2025 Internal Audit. | | |
| **Recommendation 1** | Agree | **Estimated Completion Date:** | 10/1/2026 |
| **Please provide details of corrective action or explain disagreement.** | The Harford County Clerk's Office, with the recent knowledge of this new audit requirement, has obtained audio recordings from Court Administration as we do not have direct access to the CourtSmart court recording system. We have also been working with our Administrative Judge to develop a new independent source document that will be reviewed and signed by a judge to meet this requirement. Effective October 1, 2026, the Clerk's Office Courtroom Clerks will be using a new order requiring a judge's signature for criminal commitments. The courtroom clerks will also begin using audio files as part of an updated docketing process to enhance quality assurance. The Supervisor of the | | |

# Office of the Clerk of Circuit Court
# Harford County, Maryland

## Agency Response Form

| | |
|---|---|
| | Courtroom Clerk Department will, on a "test" basis, verify the accuracy of criminal dispositions that were recorded in the case management system (MDEC). This review is in addition to the continued use of other independent source documents to review criminal cases that have had a hearing. |

## AUDIT TEAM

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**Johanna K. Bachman, CIA, CFE**
Senior Auditor