ts annual report time and during the presentation, your Register of Deeds (ROD) reminds you how awesome their department is and how important they are to your county — blah, blah, blah. But wait, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven their report to be accurate and their duties to be more important than ever for your county’s economic recovery.

As Governor Ever’s Office was determining which workers were deemed essential, the Wisconsin Land Title, Realtors and Bankers Associations, as well as the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) and Fannie Mae, all reached out to ensure the ROD’s offices remained open for business. The vital role registrar’s play is critical to the economy by the timely recording of real estate transactions each day.

Wisconsin is a Race Notice state and all documents must be processed daily and in the order they are received. The Dodd-Frank Act was designed to ensure that a financial crisis like that of 2008 will not happen again and the registrar’s play a vital role in ensuring its success. Documents not processed in a timely manner may be the difference in the sale of property, qualifying for a loan, and the best interest rate. In spite of this pandemic, many ROD’s offices throughout the state are experiencing a record number of recordings due to low interest rates and a hot real estate market.

The Register of Deeds Association (WRDA) has a history of being proactive in creating efficiencies by utilizing technology within their office; from quill pen to eRecording and Remote Notarization, WRDA has consistently taken the legislative lead to allow for procedures to keep their office functional, even during a pandemic. WRDA’s persistence has assured that all 72 counties are capable of eRecording, which have become the new normal for many title and lending institutes during the pandemic.

Register of Deeds are leaders in all things electronic, including access to their recorded documents. Records are available online for purchase through a subscription service or a one-time credit card transaction. This technology has allowed business partners to confidently insure real estate transactions. Property sales and loans in process prior to and during the pandemic were able to continue as the title industry could address their gap insurance concerns.

The Land Records Systems used in each county provides staff access to the county’s network to ensure a secure connection using encryption through either remote desktop or VPN technologies. A few counties have a hosted production environment replacing the need for an on-site server.
Most counties were able to supply their employees with laptops, additional monitors and printers, while others allowed their employees to take their desktops home with them. For employees without a strong Wi-Fi connection, “hot spots” were provided and business continued as usual. The need to allow staff to work remotely from home also reinforced the need for more reliable broadband and internet access throughout the state and not just in rural areas.

Register of Deeds offices were quick to adapt to Safer at Home recommendations by allowing staff flexibility. Some worked from home while others staffed the office to fulfill statutory duties; ROD's quickly found an equitable balance for everyone. Many offices began weekly Zoom meetings or conference calls to boost morale and help employees through the anxious and conflicted uncertainty of the pandemic. Several offices rotated staff to give each employee equal opportunities while trying to juggle the complexities of their lives.

As we tested our Continuity of Operations plans each registrar determined how they could best serve the public while protecting the mental and physical health of their staff and the public. We were able to identify shortfalls in our plans and enjoy several successes. Additionally, ROD's offices implemented policies and procedures to assure the safety of the county’s network and staff accountability.

The pandemic has proven that Continuity of Operations plans work. Register of Deeds have dedicated staff that truly care about their county's economic success. It has also demonstrated the ROD's office is more resilient than COVID-19. •

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Mental Health & Drug Addiction
IN WISCONSIN JAILS

SCOPE, COSTS & SOLUTIONS*

-Gant County Sheriff Nate DeRouen, BSSA 1st Vice President

At any given time, Wisconsin jails house between 12,500-13,000 inmates in 71 counties. Over the past five years, this number has fluctuated, with a low in 2015 of 12,300. In 2020, COVID-19 changed the jail inmate population, as the court systems shut down for some time. Even as inmate populations fluctuate over time, the one thing that does not change is the enormous volume of inmates who enter county jails with substance abuse and mental health issues.

In Grant County, they surveyed inmates, after they had been in the facility for about a week, to see what their mental health needs might be and found out that 60% of them had some form of mental health issue. Pepin County Sheriff Joel Wener stated, “We found that 80% of the inmates entering the jail with substance abuse charges are also facing