



Office of the Onondaga County Clerk 2024 Annual Report



Emily E. Bersani
Onondaga County Clerk



On behalf of the County Clerk's Office, I am pleased to present our 2024 Annual Report, highlighting the key accomplishments, initiatives, and services delivered to the public over the past year. As stewards of vital public records and numerous administrative functions, our mission remains rooted in accessibility, efficiency, transparency, and providing quality customer service to the residents of our county. This report reflects not only the day-to-day operations of our office but also the collaborative efforts of a committed team working to uphold the integrity of our civic processes.

As this was my first year serving as County Clerk, it has been an incredible honor to step into this role and work alongside such a dedicated and knowledgeable team. One of my first priorities was building on the solid foundation already in place. Over the past year, we successfully recruited and onboarded several new employees who bring with them a diverse range of skills and fresh perspectives. At the same time, we maintained the strong institutional knowledge of our tenured staff, whose experience and dedication continue to be one of our greatest strengths.

We also had the privilege of celebrating the careers and retirements of two long-serving employees, whose 60 combined years of service leave a lasting legacy and set a high standard for public service.

This past year, our office continued to deliver essential services to the community, and to improve the way we serve the public by streamlining internal processes, embracing digitization, and strengthening our connection with the community. We remain focused on preserving public records, supporting the judicial system, embracing innovation, and being a trusted resource for our community members.

I am truly thankful to the county legislature and all county departments for their dedication and collaboration over the past year, working together to serve our community with commitment and care. Thank you for the opportunity to serve the people of Onondaga County. I look forward to continuing this important work together in the years to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emily E. Benson". The script is elegant and cursive, with a large initial 'E'.

Getting to Know the County Clerk's Office

The Clerk's Office plays a vital role in the daily life of our county, we manage public records, issue essential documents, and support the judicial system with accurate and timely filings. Behind every service we provide is a team of dedicated professionals committed to upholding integrity, efficiency, and trust in local government.

The duties of the County Clerk are mandated by federal, state, and local law. As custodian of public records, the office maintains property records (deed, mortgages, etc.), NYS Supreme Court records, Onondaga County Criminal Court records, judgments, business certificates and incorporation records, pistol permits, naturalization records, oaths of office, and other miscellaneous documents. In addition to accessing records, you can visit the County Clerk's office for a variety of other services.

Visit us to do the following:

- File a business certificate (DBA)
- Apply for a passport
- Purchase an EZPass
- Obtain DEC licenses (fishing, hunting, duck stamps)
- Have documents notarized
- Have documents authenticated for use in other jurisdictions including overseas (Apostille services)
- Sign up for the Veteran discount card program (FAVOR)
- Search archival records including naturalization records and archived marriage certificates dating back to the 1930s and earlier.

At the Onondaga County Clerk's office, our staff of 29 employees provide exceptional customer care to carry out these services. The team is comprised of First Deputy Clerk Jill Haskell; Principal Deputy Clerks Malcolm Merrill and Evan Karalunas; Deputy Clerks Brittnei Harper, Eric Wright, Jonathan Stanistreet, Zainab Jagun, and Doreen Casimiro; and 20 Civil Service employees.

“Great things in business are never done by one person; they’re done by a team of people.”

-Steve Jobs



Deputies from left to right: Jill Haskell, Eric Wright, Jonathan Stanistreet, Brittnei Harper, Zainab Jagun, Evan Karalunas, Malcolm Merrill, Doreen Casimiro

The Year in Numbers

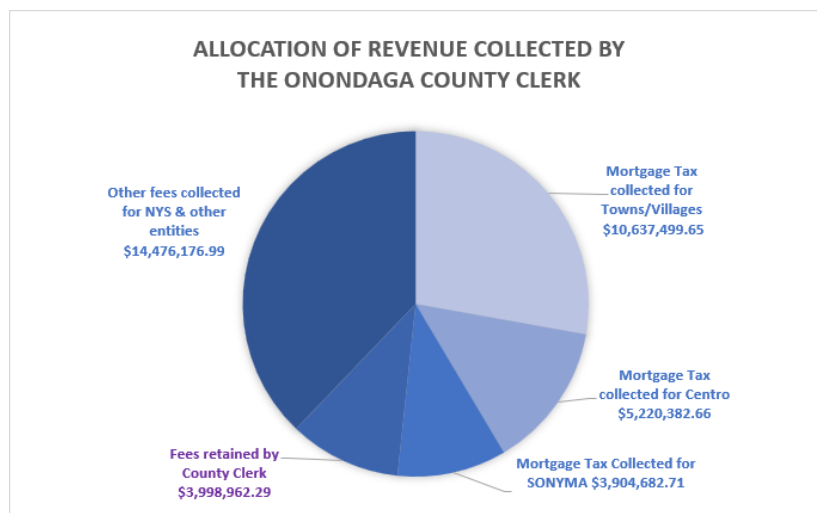
The County Clerk's Office is responsible not only for handling county-level revenue, but also for collecting fees on behalf of other government entities. This includes fees that are due to the State of New York (NYS), local municipalities (Towns and Villages), and the Central NY transit provider (Centro). Additionally, our staff accept payment for passport applications, which is forwarded to the U.S. Department of State. So, while you may make a payment to the County Clerk's Office, a portion of that money is often passed on to these other entities according to state law or intergovernmental agreements. This helps streamline the process for residents by allowing them to pay multiple required fees in one place.

In 2024, the dedicated staff of the **Onondaga County Clerk's office processed 125,316 transactions, collecting a grand total of \$38,237,704.30.** Our staff work diligently to provide high quality customer service to all residents of Onondaga County. The numbers below show just how busy the County Clerk's office was in 2024:

- Handled 260 passport applications
- Processed 1,218 business certificate filings (DBAs)
- Recorded 11,241 deeds and 10,791 mortgages
- Filed over 11,000 mortgage satisfactions (these include refinancing as well)
- Issued 10,284 index numbers to commence a case (Criminal & Supreme Courts)
- Filed 7,254 judgments
- Issued 1,649 exemplified judgements
- Entered 275,003 pages of land records into our digital records database

Of the \$38.2 million collected in the County Clerk's office, \$19.8 million was collected as mortgage tax and distributed to the Towns and Villages, Centro, and to the State of New York Mortgage Agency (SONYMA). Mortgage tax recording revenue can be a measure of the real estate market as an indicator of transaction volume, property values, and the lending environment. A higher number could indicate more home purchases, higher property values, and more borrowers qualifying for a mortgage. According to the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance, the median residential sale price in Onondaga County increased from \$190,000 in 2022 to \$232,000 in 2024, a rise of approximately 22% over two years. This increase can mean a variety of things and typically indicates that the housing market is seeing a rise in demand. It could also indicate that there is limited inventory on the market, which, in combination with rising demand, causes a seller's market.

Mortgage tax is a NYS imposed tax, calculated as a percent of the total mortgage amount. In Onondaga County, mortgage tax consists of the Basic tax (distributed to the corresponding town or village), additional tax (distributed to Centro), and special additional tax (distributed to SONYMA). As evidenced by the following pie chart, mortgage recording tax accounted for roughly 52% of the monies collected by our office in 2024.



Delivering Impact: 2024 Highlights

Over the past year, our office has focused on delivering meaningful progress through innovation, collaboration, and community engagement. From revitalizing programs that honor our veterans to building stronger relationships with local partners, we've pursued initiatives that not only improve how we serve the public, but also strengthen the infrastructure and values that support our work. Whether implementing new state legislation, engaging with students about civic duty, or welcoming new Americans through naturalization ceremonies, each effort reflects our commitment to service and accessibility. The following highlights showcase a year defined by growth, responsiveness, and impact across every level of our operations.

Revitalized the FAVOR Program

Breathed new life into the "Return the FAVOR" (Find & Assist Vets of Record) veteran discount card initiative, providing enhanced visibility and benefits for our local veterans. We also invested in a new photo ID printer to streamline production and improve the quality of veteran ID cards. In an effort to increase exposure, we participated in the annual Veteran's Day Expo at the NYS Fairgrounds, where we were able to speak with local veterans and promote the program.



Built Stronger Municipal Partnerships

Initiated and nurtured productive relationships with town and village clerks across the county, fostering better communication and collaboration on shared services and public-facing operations. We appreciated the opportunity to join the Town Clerk's Association at their monthly luncheon, where we could introduce ourselves and discuss pressing topics. In addition, we partnered with the City of Syracuse Central Permit Office to share data regarding new businesses; and collaborated with the NYS Supreme Court to discuss new legislation, best practices, and gaps in customer service, and joined a panel for Continuing Legal Education (CLE) on Supreme Court Practices.

Launched an Advisory Committee

Invited local title companies, attorneys, and other community members to join an advisory committee focused on Real Property. The goal of the committee is to gather community-based guidance and feedback that supports the County Clerk's office in delivering efficient and appropriate services. Meeting with local stakeholders on a regular basis brings together various perspectives from multiple sectors within the community and ensures transparency and accountability on our end. With the complex issues faced by this office, the committee fosters informed decision-making and is a great resource for knowledge sharing.

Improved the Office Infrastructure

Made critical updates to the County Clerk website, improving the digital infrastructure to enhance the customer experience and increase accessibility. Additionally, we successfully applied for and secured funding for a Capital Improvement Plan aimed at modernizing the physical office space. The plan focuses on enhancing workplace conditions and improving accessibility in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Capital Improvement Project, in collaboration with the county facilitates department, is set to begin in the summer of 2025.

Promoted Civic Engagement in Schools

Visited local educational institutions including H.W. Smith pre-K-8 School, Elmcrest Children's Center, and LeMoyne College to engage students in conversations about civic responsibility, the structure of local government, civil service employment, and the importance of participation in the democratic process. It is such a pleasure to engage with our local youth, and we always encourage students to consider a career in public service!

Implemented New State Laws

Navigated and operationalized two major pieces of New York State legislation: the Judicial Security Act, aimed at protecting judges and court personnel, and the newly enacted Transfer on Death Deeds law, which provides residents with a simplified process to transfer real estate outside of probate.

Strengthened Professional Networks

Officially joined the New York State Association of County Clerks, attending multiple regional and statewide meetings and conferences. These engagements provided valuable opportunities to share insights, explore best practices, and advocate for county-level needs. The network of clerks across New York State has proven to be an invaluable resource—not only for me as a County Clerk, but also for my deputies who rely on the shared knowledge, experience, and best practices of their peers to effectively carry out the day-to-day operations of our office.

Supported Economic Development

Represented our office at various high-profile events across the county, including Governor Hochul's visit to East Syracuse to announce the expansion of PPC Broadband, Attorney General James' visit to Fowler high school to announce funding for the Syracuse City School District and BOCES as a result of the lawsuit against vaping, Governor Hochul's visit to Onondaga Community College to announce funding for higher education, President Biden's visit to Syracuse to celebrate the historic Micron deal, the annual Comptroller breakfast with Comptroller DiNapoli, and County Executive McMahon's State of the County address. I'm thrilled to see the exciting economic development taking place in our county. It is a sign of growth, opportunity, and a brighter future for everyone in our community.



Welcomed New Americans

In partnership with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Supreme Court, our office organized and hosted six naturalization ceremonies, five at the County Courthouse and one at the New York State Fair. These inspiring events welcomed 300 new Americans from more than 45 different countries into our community and celebrated the diversity and strength they bring to our nation.

Gave Back to the Community

The County Clerk staff closed out 2024 with an office-wide food and toiletry drive. The team collected hundreds of food items for the Food

Bank of Central New York, as well as much needed toiletry items for our Syracuse City School District. It was so inspiring to see our team come together for a good cause, bringing their public service to another level. In addition, First Deputy Jill Haskell and I volunteered for an evening at the Food Bank of CNY, packaging over 200 boxes of fresh produce to be distributed across the county. Giving back to the community is critical as it strengthens our connections, supports those in need, and helps build a more compassionate society.

The Year Ahead

Expand Access Through Mobile Office Hours

In an effort to better serve residents throughout the county, we plan to launch mobile office hours in various communities. These mobile units will allow us to bring essential County Clerk services directly to the public, reducing travel and wait times. Services offered will include notarizing and authenticating documents, processing applications for passports and DEC licenses, issuing business certificates (DBAs), printing Veteran ID cards (FAVOR program), and conducting document searches. This initiative is aimed at increasing accessibility, especially for residents in rural or underserved areas, and ensuring that our office is as reachable and responsive as possible.

Increase Community Engagement and Education

To foster greater transparency and public understanding of our work, we will increase our participation in community learning events. These sessions, held at venues such as local libraries and community centers, will provide residents with a clearer picture of the County Clerk's role, a tutorial on how to navigate and utilize our website, and information on various county resources available to them. These events will also serve as a platform to answer questions and gather feedback from the community.

Advance Digitization

We will continue to invest in the digitization of our records to both preserve historical documents and improve operational efficiency. This includes back-scanning archived materials so they can be accessed online by the public, as well as implementing digital workflows wherever possible. These efforts are part of our broader goal to modernize the office and provide faster, more convenient access to records and services. In 2024, 61.67% of recorded documents were submitted electronically and 80.97% of court records were filed electronically. Our staff continue to encourage the public to utilize these digital services in an effort to increase efficiency, improve the workflow, and expand access.



