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Photo by Randy Wilcox

Donn Fresard of Grosse Pointe Woods — chief of staff in Wayne County Prosecuting Attorney Kym Worthy's office — meets with Wayne County Register of Deeds Bernard Youngblood, right, in Youngblood's downtown Detroit office. The Register of Deeds office was recently honored for its innovative work recording documents and preventing fraud.

## **Coordinated efforts**

### **Register of Deeds office recognized for record-keeping, fraud fighting**

By K. Michelle Moran  
C & G Staff Writer

Wayne County Register of Deeds Bernard Youngblood of Grosse Pointe Farms doesn't think homeowners should have to fear visiting his office or losing their home to a scam artist.

And thanks to new programs he's put in place, they don't have to.

The office received the coveted Eagle Award recently from the International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Election Officials and Treasurers for Youngblood's institution of unique new instant document recording methods and property fraud prevention.

"Mr. Youngblood's innovative programs and achievements in document processing and fraud prevention to ensure homeowners' rights are a shining

example of pioneering changes that help better serve the communities we reside in,” said IACREOT Publications Chair Robert Venuti in a prepared statement.

Youngblood’s office contracted with Hart InterCivic two years ago to provide a \$5 million records management system that not only speeds the process, but also protects those records in case of emergency. Youngblood said the county — the 10th largest in the country, according to the National Association of Counties — has nearly 900,000 parcels of land and is the largest county in the state.

The office takes in and records all land-related documents in the county, including mortgages and liens. It has a staff of roughly 130 who process as many as 3,000 documents per day. The Register of Deeds office records go back to 1701, Youngblood said. Documents are now recorded on CD, making them more easily accessible.

“It’s our challenge to safeguard those documents for perpetuity,” he said.

He said an estimated 200-300 people come to the office daily to search for records.

Each document is scanned by employees who double-check the information to make sure all of the paperwork is legible and complete. After the document is indexed, Youngblood said, the original paperwork is returned to the sender — usually a lawyer or title company.

When Youngblood started, he said the Register of Deeds office was 90 days behind in recording documents. Now, thanks to the new program, they can record a document in four minutes, making it available almost immediately.

“People are just so pleased with the changes,” said Deputy Register of Deeds Christine F. McLenon. “They love the fact that they can have a document handed back to them fully recorded and (that they are then) able to search for it (electronically). It’s changed the perception of the office. It’s made it more user-friendly.”

The award also acknowledges a program launched earlier this year to combat fraud. Youngblood said he believes his department is the first in the country to use such a program — which merges prosecuting attorneys, Wayne County Sheriff’s Department detectives and personnel from Youngblood’s office to investigate and prosecute cases of property fraud. The novel program addresses what Youngblood said is a growing — and extremely lucrative — crime. Using modern technology and old-fashioned criminal cunning, scammers steal people’s property by altering paperwork, which enables the thieves to sell or rent it.

Youngblood said since they coordinated their efforts, they've opened more than 350 cases and reverted an estimated 80 properties back to their rightful owners. They've also sent a number of scammers to jail.

The anti-fraud task force now has four sheriff's deputies and two prosecutors exclusively dedicated to it, Youngblood said.

Abed Hammoud, one of those prosecutors, said the creation of the task force has led to a much more successful and coordinated effort.

"We get involved from the first minute of the case," Hammoud said. "We target our efforts a lot better. The idea is to have a case that's try-able and winnable."

Youngblood draws on his background in the battle against property fraud. Before becoming the register of deeds circa 2000, Youngblood spent 30 years working in real estate. A licensed broker and real estate appraiser for residential and business property, he frequently had to file paperwork with the Register of Deeds office. Besides his family's long affiliation with real estate, they also have a history of service in elected office: Youngblood's great-great grandfather, Bernard Youngblood, was elected Wayne County treasurer in November 1882.

In the future, Youngblood hopes to see more cooperation between his office and mortgage bankers with regard to suspicious closings.

"It's a conspiracy — it's not just one individual," he said.

Pava Leyrer, president of the Michigan Mortgage Brokers Association, agrees with that assessment. She said her organization works to educate its members about fraud and ethics. Besides leading workshops for their own members, she said MMBA professionals are willing to give presentations to law enforcement officials and members of the general public. Since technology has made fraud easier and more common, she said property owners need to be especially vigilant about whom they conduct business with. Leyrer said the work being done in Wayne County is a positive step.

"We applaud their efforts for investigating any mortgage fraud," Leyrer said.

To view Wayne County land records online, visit [www.waynecountylandrecords.com](http://www.waynecountylandrecords.com).