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Chief Justice, Presiding Judge, and District Attorney Join Forces to Ease Case Backlog in Riverside County Superior Court

Rapid Population Growth, Shortage of Judges Contribute To Heavy Backlog of Criminal Cases

San Francisco – Chief Justice Ronald M. George, Riverside Superior Court Presiding Judge Richard Todd Fields, and Riverside District Attorney Rod Pacheco have jointly announced steps to assist the Superior Court of Riverside County in easing its heavy backlog of criminal cases.

A rapidly growing population in the area has resulted in substantial growth in cases brought to the court. The growth in new judgeships has not kept pace, but it is expected that recent legislative action will help ameliorate the problem over the next year.

The Chief Justice will use his authority granted by the California Constitution to assign judges to expedite the work of the Riverside courts to respond to significant delays in case processing that threaten to adversely affect the administration of justice. The additional judicial assistance will help promote public safety and maintain access to civil justice.

“The large backlog of criminal cases contributes to the recurrence of ‘last day’ cases that must go to trial or risk dismissal, and to the potential compromise of public safety if dismissals occur because there are insufficient resources to handle cases in timely fashion,” said Chief Justice George, who serves as chair of the Judicial Council, the administrative policymaking body of the state courts. The backlog also threatens the ability of the county’s families to resolve child custody disputes and juvenile dependency matters, he said.

In a letter to Presiding Judge Fields and District Attorney Pacheco, the Chief Justice stated that to help meet Riverside’s immediate needs, he has

assigned a team of both active and retired judges who are experienced in handling criminal cases to serve in the Riverside Superior Court for the next four months and to concentrate their efforts solely on disposing of the court's criminal backlog.

Presiding Judge Fields stated, "The Superior Court of Riverside County faces one of the most severe case backlogs in California, due to rapid population growth, an enormous increase in case filings, and the historic shortage of new judgeships over the past decade. Our court is committed to working with the Chief Justice, District Attorney, Public Defender, and private defense counsel to resolve these issues and to restore timely access to justice in our county. We are pleased to have these additional judicial resources in order to achieve our goal of meaningful access to justice for all the citizens of Riverside County and other users of the court's services."

"We greatly appreciate the addition of Chief Justice George and the Administrative Office of the Courts into this important issue," said Riverside District Attorney Pacheco. "We will offer all support and effort that is consistent with the law and justice. As District Attorney, my office is committed to strengthening our justice system and improving access to justice at a time when we face unique challenges. The leaders of Riverside County have pledged to work together on effective solutions for our case backlog and to gain more resources for our growing county. It is again an honor to partner with Chief Justice George on an important issue for our community. We also welcome the addition of Justice Huffman to this process."

The underlying cause of the backlog is the tremendous growth in population and caseload in Riverside County over the past 20 years. Since 1989, Riverside County's population grew by more than 76 percent while the number of new judgeships in the country rose by 3, or only a 6.5 percent increase.

Supervising Judge Helios Hernandez will continue to handle the court's master calendar, where he has worked diligently to maximize the use of the court's limited resources. The Chief Justice has assigned Judge David S. Wesley of the Superior Court of Los Angeles County to serve as supervising judge of the strike team. He will be responsible for assigning cases among the strike team judges.

The Chief Justice also asked the Judicial Council to authorize the temporary hiring by the Riverside court of two to three retired commissioners to hear matters that are appropriate for subordinate judicial officers. The Chief Justice directed the staff that assists him in carrying out his assignment duties to identify retired commissioners willing to accept temporary appointments to serve in the Riverside Superior Court.

To facilitate an ongoing dialogue among all justice partners in Riverside County, which will improve the case flow and resolution of criminal cases, Associate Justice Richard D.

Huffman of the Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division One (San Diego), who chairs the Judicial Council's Executive and Planning Committee, will convene an initial meeting of justice system partners, including court officials, the District Attorney, Public Defender, Sheriff, Probation Office, and officials of the Riverside County Bar Association.

The Chief Justice also called on the court and local government officials to work with the Legislature to secure funding for 50 new judgeships being sought by the council for fiscal year 2007-2008 and 50 new judgeships in fiscal year 2008-2009. During the last legislative session, the Governor and the Legislature approved 50 new judgeships during fiscal year 2006-2007, of which 7 were allotted to the Superior Court of Riverside County.

“[T]he 150 approved judgeships fall far short of the 350 identified as needed in a study conducted by the National Center for State Courts several years ago,” the Chief Justice observed. “As the population continues to grow in the Inland Empire, the need for judicial officers also continues to grow. We must remain vigilant in our efforts to identify judicial needs on a continuing basis in California and to secure the funding to address those needs.”

“I have confidence in the leadership abilities of both of you to achieve these goals and produce a more responsive court system that allows all of Riverside's litigants the ability to participate in court proceedings in a timely manner,” said the Chief Justice in his letter.

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The Judicial Council is the policymaking body of the California courts, the largest court system in the nation. Under the leadership of the Chief Justice and in accordance with the California Constitution, the council is responsible for ensuring the consistent, independent, impartial, and accessible administration of justice. The Administrative Office of the Courts carries out the official actions of the council and promotes leadership and excellence in court administration.