



# NEWS RELEASE

Release Number: 50

Date: September 12, 2009

JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF  
CALIFORNIA  
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE  
OF THE COURTS  
Public Information Office  
455 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94102-3688  
www.courtinfo.ca.gov

415-865-7740

Lynn Holton  
Public Information Officer

## **Court Closures Reflect Dire Economic Situation Facing Judicial Branch, State's Top Jurist Declares**

### ***Chief Justice Delivers Annual State of the Judiciary Address***

San Diego—In his 14th annual State of the Judiciary Address to the State Bar of California, Chief Justice Ronald M. George today stated that the severe economic challenges facing the judicial branch will result in statewide court closures for the first time starting next Wednesday, September 16, 2009.

“On the third Wednesday of every month for the next 10 months, courts will be forced to take this drastic action because of severe reductions to the judicial branch budget,” Chief Justice George declared at the State Bar Annual Meeting.

“The unintended—yet inevitable—symbolism of ‘Closed’ signs on institutions that embody our democratic ideals is yet another tragic indicator of the severity of California’s economic crisis,” he said.

At an emergency public meeting last July, the Judicial Council of California made the difficult decision to close courts one day per month as a uniform and consistent measure designed to avoid even more damaging consequences of reductions in the judicial branch budget, Chief Justice George stated. The closures were authorized by a state law passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor.

“After months of examining other alternatives and discussions with court leaders, the Council determined that court closures were the only rational option available to us to adequately address budget realities while at the same time doing our best to protect our skilled court employees from massive layoffs, maintain a more consistent level of court services for

(more)

litigants and their lawyers, preserve equal access to justice for the public we serve, and obtain savings from all areas of court operations, including court security—the largest and fastest growing component of trial court operational costs,” Chief Justice George observed.

### **Voluntary Pay Cuts for Judges**

At the same public meeting, Chief Justice George asked his judicial colleagues to join him in pledging to reduce their salaries to “share in the sacrifice we are asking of the majority of the 21,000 men and women who work in the California judicial branch” by taking a day’s worth of reduction in pay each month.

The Chief Justice reported, “a very high percentage” of the more than 1600 trial court judges and 112 appellate justices in the state have pledged to either participate in the salary waiver or to make a personal donation of a portion of their salary to their respective court. For instance, to date 97 percent of the judges of the Superior Court of San Diego County and more than 98 percent of the judges of the Superior Court of Los Angeles County have made such a pledge. In Ventura, 100% have done so.

### **Historic Court Reforms**

Even with court closures, the Chief Justice reported that the state court system itself is “stronger and better able to deliver on the promise of equal justice under law” due to “unprecedented changes in the structure of the judicial branch.”

The first major court reform was the 1997 passage of the Trial Court Funding Act, breakthrough legislation that provided statewide funding for trial courts, enabling the courts to better navigate California’s periodic economic cycles and to end the inequities of county-funded courts.

In 1998, California voters approved a constitutional amendment permitting the unification of the 220 superior and municipal courts into 58 trial courts, one in each county. This reform has allowed greater flexibility in the use of judicial and staff resources, eliminated duplicative services, and led to the creation of new court programs for the public, the Chief Justice noted.

Finally, the Trial Court Facilities Act of 2002 called for the transfer of responsibility for court facilities from the counties to the state. “To date, 503—more than 90 percent—of California’s court structures have been transferred to state ownership under judicial branch management,” the Chief Justice said.

## **New Responsibilities for Judicial Council and AOC**

“These historic changes have imposed new responsibilities upon the council, and upon local courts, while causing California to be recognized nationally and worldwide as one of the foremost leaders in court administration,” Chief Justice George declared. “As a result of these reforms, innovative programs to improve public access abound: collaborative justice courts, services for self-represented litigants, and courtrooms focused on complex litigation are found in courthouses across the state.”

The Chief Justice noted that the current fiscal crisis has led some to question the growth of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the staff agency for the council. “These debates within the branch are entirely appropriate and welcome,” the Chief Justice said, noting that the AOC has grown from a staff of 268 in 1998 to 887 today.

“From my perspective, what is noteworthy is not that the AOC has grown to this size, but that it accomplishes all the Legislature, the Governor, and we on the Judicial Council have directed it to do with *less than 900 employees*.” He observed that the AOC’s budget, excluding courthouse facilities management, just over 3.5 percent of the total judicial branch budget.

“The AOC has assumed nearly all of the court management functions once performed by the counties,” Chief Justice George said. “These include financial and accounting services, computer systems and technological support, human resources, and a great number of legal services ranging from representation in lawsuits to contracts.”

## **Case Management System for Courts**

California courts now operate more than 70 different case management systems with some 130 variations, the Chief Justice reported. “These systems often do not interface with one another and cannot provide uniform and accurate information across court and county jurisdictions, much less to other agencies such as the California Department of Justice,” he said.

The California Case Management System (CCMS) is designed to resolve these issues, the Chief Justice stated, by providing “a uniform, integrated case management system that will greatly improve court efficiency and service to the bar and the public.”

Development of the system is nearly complete, the Chief Justice said, but \$105 million of the funding was redirected this year to support trial court operations, “a necessary move but one that will delay full implementation of the system,” he said.

“As the state’s budget permits, we shall continue our legislative efforts to fund newly authorized judicial positions, expand interpreter services, improve foster care, and provide legal representation in limited situations for some family law and landlord tenant litigants. We also want to correct existing deficiencies in the judges’ retirement system to better enable us to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse judiciary,” he continued.

### **Judicial Election Reform**

The Chief Justice also reminded lawyers that in December the Judicial Council will consider the final report of the Commission for Impartial Courts, a “monumental effort” examining judicial candidate campaign conduct, campaign finance, public information and education, and judicial selection and retention. The commission is chaired by Supreme Court Justice Ming Chin.

*To view the full text of the Chief Justice’s State of the Judiciary Address, please see the California Courts Web site at this link: [http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/1\\_2speeches.htm](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/1_2speeches.htm).*

#