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A Month In, New Chief Fields Questions

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SAN FRANCISCO — A feisty Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye today defended recent pay raises for Administrative Office of the Courts workers while chiding early critics for "not giving me a chance."

Just one month into her tenure as head of California's judicial branch, Cantil-Sakauye held her first sit-down interview with reporters at the Supreme Court building in San Francisco. In a wide-ranging discussion, the new chief defended the 3.5 percent step increases awarded to most AOC employees, a pay bump she endorsed last year as chair of a Judicial Council oversight committee. Cantil-Sakauye's predecessor, Chief Justice Ronald George, ultimately approved the salary increases, which are expected to cost \$1.1 million this year.

Cantil-Sakauye said that despite two years of budget troubles for the judiciary, trial courts didn't eliminate step increases for their employees and some didn't eliminate cost-of-living boosts.

"I really see no reason to treat [AOC workers] differently," said Cantil-Sakauye.

Asked what her first disappointments on the job have been, the chief pointed to letters sent to her by the Alliance of California Judges, a group of jurists who have criticized the AOC's growth and spending as well as Judicial Council decisions to continue funding a branchwide computer network.

Cantil-Sakauye said she invited Alliance judges to join council advisory committees and take a more active role within the judiciary's governing structure. They declined, she said.

"I am surprised by what I consider to be not giving me a chance," she said.



For more on the chief justice's approach to the budget crisis, click the image above for a video.

Alliance Director Daniel Goldstein, a San Diego County Superior Court judge, said the group's letters were only meant to inform the chief justice about spending and issues its members find troubling.

"We're not looking to be obstinate and obstructive," Goldstein said. "But we are clear and we are sure that the best thing for any organization is democracy and transparency."

The alliance is sponsoring legislation — not yet in print — that would create a governing body comprising members elected by local courts. Alliance members have been critical of the Judicial Council, most of whose members are selected by the chief justice.

"We think [Cantil-Sakauye] is going to be a good chief of the Supreme Court," Goldstein said. "But we also want to make sure the Judicial Council becomes democratic and transparent and isn't limited to a single group of voices."

Branch leaders opposed a similar legislative effort by the alliance last year. The alliance was not able to secure an author then, but group directors say they're confident the bill will materialize this year.

In her first weeks on the job, Cantil-Sakauye was hit by a proposed state budget that would slice \$200 million from her branch as well as the announcement that Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno will resign at the end of February. Cantil-Sakauye, who met with a handful of legislators at the Capitol on Tuesday, said she has a meeting with Gov. Jerry Brown scheduled for Friday afternoon in San Francisco.

She said she planned to urge him to move quickly on Moreno's replacement, and when asked about the qualities she thought would be important, pointed out that Moreno is the only justice on the court who lives in Los Angeles.

Cantil-Sakauye also told reporters that once Moreno leaves the high court, he will not participate *pro tem*, leaving just the six remaining justices to decide cases where he heard oral arguments.

Cantil-Sakauye said she will oppose the \$200 million proposed cut and is looking for ways to avoid courthouse closures.

"At some point this becomes a civil rights issue," she said.