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California Needs More Judges, Better Courthouses, Chief Justice Ronald George Tells Lawmakers

By a MetNews Staff Writer

California's courts have improved in the 10 years he has held office, but are in serious need of more judges and better facilities, Chief Justice Ronald M. George told state lawmakers yesterday.

"The right to a fair hearing is an empty promise if there is no one to preside over the courtroom," while "the unsafe and insecure condition of the majority of California's courthouse facilities" further impedes access to justice, George warned in his 11th annual State of the Judiciary address to the Legislature.

Addressing those difficulties, he said, will complete the process that has produced three lasting reforms—unification, state funding, and transfer of courthouse properties from the counties to the state.

"Our state's vast growth in population and the problems that accompany it are outstripping the ability of the courts to dispense justice," George said, noting that the number of judges has grown by only three percent since 1988, compared to a 30 percent growth in population.

The need is particularly acute in the Inland Empire, he said, noting that with populations having doubled in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, the ratio of judges to population there is one-fourth what it is in the Southern California coastal counties.

In Riverside County, civil trials have been halted twice recently due to the insufficient number of judges and the heavy influx of new criminal cases, which take priority under state law, the chief justice said, declaring:

"Courts cannot simply hang a sign announcing: 'Full. No more filings accepted.'"

George called on the legislators to pass SB 56, by Sen. Joe Dunn, D-Garden Grove, which would create 150 new judgeships and permit the conversion of 161 commissioner positions to new judgeships as they become vacant.

While a recent study by the National Center for State Courts showed that the caseload of California courts warrants the addition of 355 new judicial positions, George explained, the Dunn bill would create 50 new judgeships per year for three years, beginning June 1, 2007, where the needs are most pressing.

George gave numerous examples of how California's more than 450 court facilities fall short of what the millions of jurors, parties, and witnesses with cases expect.

Sixty-eight percent of courthouses do not meet basic fire- and life-safety standards, and in 75 percent of court facilities, adequate access for persons with disabilities cannot be provided, the chief justice said. Most courts do not offer safe children's waiting areas, he added.

"I am hopeful that when the public's need for additional judicial positions and safe and secure courthouses is assessed, political and institutional differences will be put aside and the three branches of government will agree on the importance of removing these existing obstacles to adequate, accessible, and secure justice," George said.

The text of the chief justice's speech appears at Page 3 of today's MetNews.