



Superior Court of California  
**County of Sonoma**  
 BUDGET SNAPSHOT

March 2017



JUDICIAL COUNCIL  
 OF CALIFORNIA  
 GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Raima H. Ballinger, Presiding Judge

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**Court Service Highlights in the Current Year**

- **Completed phase 1 case management system conversion to Odyssey for civil, family, probate**
- **Still maintaining all self-help services, specialty courts and first year of homeless court**
- **Reduce civil law and motion backlog**

**Court Service Highlights in Detail**

In August 2016, the court implemented Odyssey case management system in three case types, going paperless first in family law, followed with civil, then probate. The new CMS allows access via internet portal connections, and improves access to information and documents to external customers, justice partners, and court employees and judicial officers. The CMS has also eliminated the need for paper files, pulling files for daily calendars, and interfiling tasks. While we have gained some efficiencies, at this time we are building capacity by adding front-end scanning tasks. We also implemented automated juvenile abstracts to the DOJ, a significant change from a manual system county legacy system.

**Maintaining specialty court**

While staffing remains low, Sonoma Superior continues our specialty court services. We completed the first full year of homeless court, which is held quarterly. Last year, four such courts were held serving 54 defendants and 190 cases. A veteran’s court is being started, but is not yet fully functioning. We hope to expand and build its infrastructure if successful with an Innovation Grant. Self-help services continue even with reduced staffing. We utilize volunteers to provide services to over 13,000 people in family law, domestic violence, landlord/tenant, debt collection, etc.

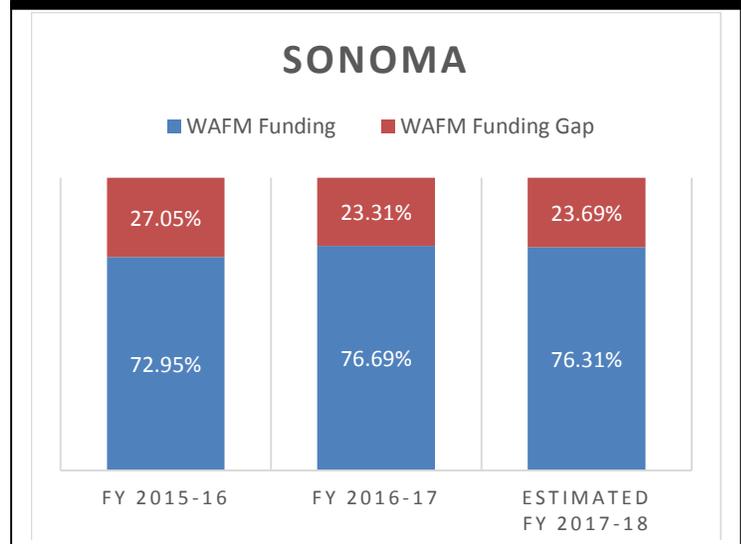
**Other court services**

The court focused on the backlog of civil law and motion, and added an additional calendar each week to help reduce the time from filing to motions reviewed by a judge. We are now at the minimum time frame, improving access to justice for the civil litigants.

**Budget Challenges and Priorities**

Sonoma continues to contribute to the WAFM reallocation of funding to under-resourced courts, impacting our ability to restore staffing levels and take on new projects. Increased costs of business including IT, janitorial, screening, and supplies as well as increased salary and benefits costs require us to reduce services in other areas. The court continues to have divisions closed at 3:30 p.m., and currently our civil division closes on Friday afternoons at noon to allow the staff to catch up on paperwork. Due to ongoing deficits, it is likely there will be no retiree health contribution to OPEB this year.

**Workload Allocation & Funding Gap (see reverse)**



**Court Demographics**

Population Served	502,146
Square Miles Covered	1,768
Total Number of Court Facilities	5

## Why do courts need more money if filings are down?

*Most of California's courts have not been funded at 100% of their need for at least the past five years. Some courts, specifically those that are considered historically under-resourced, have always been chronically underfunded.*

### **How courts are funded**

Trial court revenues can be divided into three categories: state financing sources, grants, and other financing sources. The majority of the courts' revenue comes from the state, and the vast majority of state funding is provided by the Trial Court Trust Fund (TCTF). State financing sources also include reimbursements for court interpreters and other costs. Grant funding for child support commissioners and facilitators is a significant portion of grant revenue. Local fees, local reimbursements, and the recovery of costs for comprehensive collection programs make up a significant portion of other financing sources revenue. Reimbursements are paid to the courts in the amounts they are authorized to spend. Grant funding is allocated to the courts based on amounts they are awarded based on grant applications and program criteria. Local fees and collections are distributed to the courts according to schedules and statutes that govern how much courts are entitled to retain from what is collected. However, these other financing sources account for only a modest amount of all trial court revenues. The majority of funds distributed from the TCTF to the trial courts is determined by way of a statewide filings-based formula called the Workload-based Allocation and Funding Methodology (WAFM) which allocates funds based on each court's share of the estimated statewide funding need calculated from a three-year average of filings and case type at each court.

### **WAFM**

The WAFM calculation begins with resources assessment study which assigns a relative time value to each type of case (felony, unlimited civil, family law, etc.). That value is determined through time studies performed at the courts and research in clerk's offices, self-help centers, and courtrooms. As a result, this method assesses the average amount of processing time each case type requires of court staff. We then multiply this amount of time, called a caseweight, by the court's three-year average of the number of cases filed for that case type. We use the sum of the calculated times for all case types to estimate a staffing need. WAFM then determines an overall 'workload based' funding need for each trial court using that staffing need in combination with information on court employees compensation, operating expenses, and equipment expenditures. WAFM was created by the Judicial Council to establish an equitable way to allocate money to the courts. Prior to WAFM, courts received a share of TCTF funds based on how much funding they received historically from their counties (when trial courts were funded by the counties rather than by the State). The change from local to state funding occurred in 1997 with the passage of the Lockyer-Isenberg Trial Court Funding Act of 1997 (AB 233; Ch. 850, Statutes of 1997). Unfortunately, even with the introduction and use of WAFM as a model, California's courts suffer a shortfall in funding. In fact, courts currently share funding that is less than 100% of their estimated need, which means that just about every court in California receives less money than it needs to serve the public. It is important to stress that WAFM provides a mechanism to distribute money to the courts, but it does not mean there is sufficient money to fund court operations and services.

### **Impact of legislation and ballot initiatives**

Some bills that become law require the courts to perform new functions without providing funding to support those new functions. For example, SB 1134 (Leno; Ch. 785, Statutes of 2016) requires all California courts (trial courts, Courts of Appeal, and the Supreme Court) to rehear specified habeas corpus petitions because that bill changed the standard of review for such cases. As a result of these "do-over" filings and hearings without an appropriation of funding, court revenues must be spent hearing cases a second time, delaying for weeks and months any new cases because no funding was appropriated with this bill. The same is true for ballot initiatives. Prop. 64 allows people who previously had convictions for specified marijuana crimes to petition the courts to have their convictions vacated. Tens of thousands of people in California have been convicted of marijuana violations; they may now be eligible to ask the courts to undo their convictions, but the initiative didn't include funding to help the courts process these requests. That means that courts will spend their revenues to address these marijuana issues, rather than hearing new cases that are filed.

### **Other factors**

Even though fewer cases were filed in 2015 than in 2014, courts are still underfunded no less than \$430 million because: (1) Courts have been historically underfunded. Even though filings are down, they are not down enough to close the gap between what courts need and what they have. (2) More people are representing themselves in court. Since individuals are largely unfamiliar with court procedures, these cases take longer than cases that are tried by lawyers. (3) There are more criminal cases going to trial. Statistics show that since the passage of AB 109 (realignment) and Prop. 47 (felonies converted to misdemeanors in certain cases), the number of trials has increased *and* the length and complexity of trials have also increased. (4) Language services are becoming more critical. The courts face new and increasing responsibilities to manage and provide interpreter services for litigants who are not English speakers. While the services of interpreters are often reimbursed, management and logistics associated with language access are not. (5) Since realignment there have been significant changes to how people are sentenced and the duration courts retain jurisdiction over them, resulting in new hearings, increased paperwork, and other logistics that must be managed by the courts.