

Justice stopgap

10:00 PM PDT on Tuesday, June 19, 2007

Twelve temporary judges will help relieve Riverside County's overwhelmed courts, as will a state-led effort to find better ways to manage the grueling caseload. But the state's aid, though welcome, offers only a stopgap: Riverside County needs more judges permanently.

California Chief Justice Ronald George on Friday assigned a strike force of a dozen judges to help Riverside County's overburdened courts. The additional judges could start by mid-July and work for about four months. The chief justice also named appellate court Associate Justice Richard D. Huffman to meet with Riverside County officials to find ways to ease the logjam.

But the Legislature could do far more by creating new judicial positions. The number of judges in California has not kept up with population growth or caseload, resulting in the shortage so apparent in Riverside County. The county has 76 judges now authorized but needs an additional 57 to properly staff the courts.

George acted last week because a backlog of 1,200 criminal cases threatens to paralyze Riverside County's courts. The Constitution guarantees the right to a speedy trial. But frequently criminal cases in the county just barely escape dismissal for violating that provision because of a lack of judges to hear them. And the crush of criminal trials pushes civil cases to the sidelines.

Letting criminals escape punishment because of an overburdened court system is unacceptable. And the flood of criminal trials delays justice in business disputes, child-custody cases and other matters.

Resolving the differences between judges and prosecutors would also improve local court dynamics. Judges blame the district attorney's opposition to plea bargains for crowding the court with criminal trials, while the DA says the judges could do a better job of managing the workload. But both sides have a big stake in a functional court system and should work together to find solutions.

Still, the long-term answer is more judges for the county and the state. The California Judicial Council, which oversees state courts, wants to create 150 new judgeships. Legislators added 50 new judges statewide in the current fiscal year, and the Legislature should approve 100 more over the next two years. And that total is less than half the number the state needs, the Judicial Council says.

Without new judges, the court system will grow increasingly overburdened, and not just in Riverside County. The strike team can ease the immediate crisis, but only the Legislature can truly remedy the judicial shortage.