

# Retired judges to aid Riverside County with criminal case overload

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By RICHARD K. DE ATLEY  
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Two retired judges are coming to Riverside County on short assignments to handle criminal cases facing dismissal because no courtroom is available.

The county regularly files requests with the state Administrative Office of the Courts for temporary judges to help with its caseload. But the judges assigned for the latter part of February have specific duties to handle the most-threatened cases.

Riverside County Presiding Judge Richard Fields said Friday that caseload projections for the end of February showed a higher-than-usual number of criminal matters ready for trial.

Under the state Constitution, criminal matters must begin 60 days after the arraignment, or be dismissed. Last month, two misdemeanor cases were thrown out because no court was available.

Fields said there are more than 1,000 criminal cases ready for trial in the downtown Riverside Hall of Justice alone.

"Every day we are at the brink of dismissing cases," he said.

Riverside County has the second-largest caseload per judge for large counties in the state with 5,818 cases per judge annually. Only San Bernardino County's is higher in that category at 6,161.

Riverside County has 49 judges and 20 commissioners, but state studies say it should have 135 judicial officers. Civil trials are at a standstill in the county because criminal cases have priority.

The county's population has grown 26 percent since 2000, but only one judge was added to its roster during that time. Funding was approved in the current state budget for seven new judgeships later this year.

Duties for the temporary judges are usually nonspecific, listing the department and courthouse to which they will report.

But the two recent assignments spell out "last-day criminal trial overload" as the mission for former Santa Barbara County Superior Court Judge Barbara J. Beck and retired San Bernardino County Superior Court Judge Kenneth G. Ziebarth Jr.

The "last-day" means the final day a case can go to trial before being dismissed.

Beck is assigned to Department 2 in the Riverside County Historic Courthouse for Feb. 20-23; Ziebarth will report to Department 64 or 65 in the downtown Hall of Justice for Feb. 20-27.

*Reach Richard K. De Atley at 951-368-9573 or [rdeatley@PE.com](mailto:rdeatley@PE.com)*