

Riverside County court woes underscore justice's speech to Legislature

10:00 PM PDT on Tuesday, March 25, 2008

By RICHARD K. DE ATLEY
The Press-Enterprise

Saying "a functioning court system is not a luxury," California Chief Justice Ronald George on Tuesday cited the backlog of cases in Riverside County as he addressed a joint session of the California Legislature.

George recounted for lawmakers his decision in June to send a strike force of judges to the county to relieve pressure on its court system, and that talks about possible changes in court practices "are producing important results."

Earlier this month, several changes were made in calendar management and early review of criminal cases after months of negotiations between judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, the sheriff's office and others involved in court operation.

"Nevertheless, a substantial backlog of cases remains," George said. Court records showed 1,316 criminal cases awaited trial in July of last year. The most recently available number was 1,153.

In a speech that acknowledged tough budget bargaining in the face of an \$8 billion deficit for the next fiscal year, George noted that California "is at the bottom of the lists" of comparable states when it comes to judges in proportion to population.

George told legislators that the lack of judges in Riverside County, combined with a backup of criminal court cases, was affecting people waiting for justice.

"Court delays have real, human consequences," George said.

"In one Riverside criminal case, an individual who had spent five years in jail was found not guilty when his case, which had resulted in a hung jury at an earlier trial, was finally retried," George said in his prepared remarks.

The chief justice did not mention the defendant by name but appeared to be referring to the case of Robbie Catchings, who had been charged in a 2002 shooting in Perris, had a hung jury in 2005 and was acquitted on retrial in October of last year.

George outlined how the criminal case backlog had shut down civil trials for the past two years in Riverside County because criminal cases have speedy trial guarantees while civil trials do not.

George told the legislators the lack of judges sets off a cycle: A set trial date is a key to resolving cases, but if a judge is not available, no trial date can be set.

"The absence of an operational civil justice system will affect every aspect of California life: business and financial institutions, dissolutions of marriage, probate distributions ... all will have no place to go," he said.

"Really, it's enough to make you want to move out of the county," said Vicki Brook, a Homeland resident who has had a divorce case in Riverside County courts since January 2006 and a medical malpractice case in the system since October 2003.

Brook estimated she has already spent \$25,000 on her divorce case. "There has never been a judge available. And every time I go to court, when my attorneys and I have a pre-meeting, that costs \$2,000." Brook said she wants a judge to hear her case and has turned down pro-tem attorneys and a commissioner.

"The medical malpractice case is so far beyond that, I don't even know," she said. "Really, we are the ones taking the burden."

The budget crisis has already caused legislators to delay for one year the funding of 14 approved judgeships to be divided evenly among Riverside and San Bernardino counties, each carrying among the state's worst case-to-judge ratios.

George urged legislators to approve a bill this session that would complete a three-year campaign to add 150 judgeships to the state; 50 a year, with a large share going to the Inland counties.

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