

## Stimulus Package Won't Help Courts

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SACRAMENTO — California won't receive enough federal stimulus money to save its courts from a \$100 million budget hit, state finance officials announced Friday.

The federal package will channel only about \$8.2 billion in general fund aid to the state, far short of the \$10 billion needed to prevent deep cuts in court services as well as an income tax hike and reductions in social safety-net programs, state Treasurer Bill Lockyer and finance Director Mike Genest said.

The decision means the judiciary will also lose \$71 million slated for 100 new judgeships.

"Not getting those judges just puts us in a deeper hole," said William Vickrey, director of the Administrative Office of the Courts. "It's an extremely serious situation."

Many of the new bench positions would have gone to Central Valley and Inland Empire courts, where the number of judges has not kept pace with growth in population and caseload. In his State of the Judiciary speech earlier this month, Chief Justice Ronald George urged the Legislature to fund the new judgeships even if the federal stimulus money failed to reach \$10 billion. But with social programs facing significant cuts, lawmakers appear to have little appetite for significant new spending.

The \$100 million budget cut is amplified by unexpectedly higher costs for security — sheriffs oversee local court security and their labor costs are determined by county leaders, not the state — employee retirement, appointed counsel and interpreters, Vickrey said. In total, the courts could be facing a \$400 million deficit, he said.

"If the budget process stopped now, this would be a very, very serious problem with huge impacts on the public," Vickrey said.

The courts administrator said that he and other AOC executives are trying to secure additional money, at least for the security and appointed counsel costs, from the Schwarzenegger administration and legislative leaders.

"I know they've got huge problems statewide, but I'm hopeful they'll work with us on this," Vickrey said.

Exactly which court services would be affected by the cuts will be hammered out in the coming months as legislators examine individual agency spending plans and the governor's revised budget, expected in June.

The cuts were part of a contingency plan that lawmakers negotiated in February to close a \$40 billion deficit. Lockyer and Genest were charged with sifting through the stimulus package's complex fund-granting formulas and deciding whether they would generate at least \$10 billion in unrestricted funding for state programs, including court operations.

Despite heavy lobbying by social service groups and labor unions, the state officials said they could not find enough federal money to pull the "trigger" on program-cutting protections.

"In making the trigger determination, our responsibility is to evaluate whether conditions meet the criteria established by [law], not whether the legislated fiscal policy is appropriate," Lockyer wrote in a letter to legislative leaders and the governor.

Assembly Speaker Karen Bass said she was disappointed by the state officials' "narrow" interpretation of what funding is available to the state.

"We agree with the treasurer that a portion of the cuts should be restored, and we will work through the budget process to find alternative solutions to a portion of these cuts," Bass said in a prepared statement.

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