



THE CAPITOL CONNECTION

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LEGISLATIVE
CALENDAR:

Last Day of Session
September 14

*Last Day for Governor to
Sign or Veto Bills*
October 14

EXCLUSIVE: INTERVIEW WITH DION ARONER



Assembly Member Dion Aroner (D-Berkeley) was elected to the Assembly in 1996 after serving for 25 years as the chief of staff to her predecessor, former Assembly Member Tom Bates.

She currently chairs the Assembly Human Services Committee and has dedicated much of her legislative agenda to foster care and juvenile dependency issues. She recently met with *The Capitol Connection* to discuss her experiences, achievements, and goals.

CC: You are one of several legislators who have transitioned from legislative staff to Member. Please discuss how you've made that transition. How has your experience as staff affected you?

Aroner: As far as I know, I'm the first female legislative staffer to get elected directly out of the Capitol. The issue was not so much going from being a staffer to a legislator. There is an intermediate

step which I think was even more difficult: going from being a staffer to a candidate. I worked for my predecessor for 25 years and had to claim a record that I participated in making, but that had never been attached to my name before – it had been attached solely to [former Assembly Member] Tom Bates's name. I had to learn to take credit for work I had done that had always been behind the scenes.

I didn't find the leap to legislator so difficult. There are some things that you personally go through when you have to give up responsibility for certain things. For example, I made the transition from being a chief of staff, to becoming a legislator and had to let someone else be my chief of staff. I've had to learn to not be involved in every single thing that goes on in my office, but rather permit my very competent staff to handle issues with my full support and confidence.

CC: Was there anything about becoming a Member that was surprising to you?

Aroner: Yes. I tell people about this a lot:

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INES DRAWN IN THE LEGISLATURE

Along with the hundreds of other bills on which the Legislature will act prior to the September 14th end of the current session, the state's lawmakers must also approve redistricting plans that redraw the boundaries of state Senate, Assembly, and congressional districts.

With data generated by the 2000 U.S. census, district boundaries must now be adjusted to account for population increases and shifts since the last redistricting plan was adopted in 1991. Also, California has gained an additional congressional seat. By law, districts of each type must be reasonably equal in population and must be con-

tiguous. In addition, the geographic integrity of any city, county, or region must be respected to the extent possible.

From a political perspective, an "optimal" redistricting plan protects incumbents, secures party representation, addresses concerns of distinct communities, and avoids legal challenges.

Democrats will seek to ensure that their majorities in both houses of the Legislature and California's congressional delegation are maintained. Doing this, how-

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LINES DRAWN IN THE LEGISLATURE

(Continued from page 1)

ever may mean spreading out Democratic voters over several adjacent districts, especially in heavily populated urban areas, which could lead to a dilution of the voting power of ethnic communities.

Term limits further confound the traditional partisan goal of protecting incumbents. Individual legislators facing term limits in one house may be more concerned with the shape of a district in the other house or in Congress.

Redistricting plans are considered concurrently by the Assembly Elections, Reapportionment, and Constitutional Amendment Committee and the Senate Elections and Reapportionment Committee. To help ensure public participation, hearings are held throughout the state. Members of the public may submit their own maps of proposed districts. The final plan that goes to the floor of each house will likely be a product negotiated in a conference committee. The plan must be

signed by the governor to take effect. If the redistricting legislation passes as urgency legislation (which requires a 2/3 vote of each house), it will not be subject to the possibility of a challenge through the referendum process. However, it is subject to legal challenges alleging violations of state or federal elections laws as well as the California or U.S. Constitutions.

In 1992, the California Supreme Court was called on to resolve the impasse created by the failure of the Legislature and Governor to adopt reapportionment plans in time for the

1992 elections. Governor Pete Wilson vetoed the plans submitted by the Legislature and the attempted override failed. Unlike in 1992, the legislative majorities in each house and Governor Gray Davis are all of the same party, so a gubernatorial veto is highly unlikely.

From the archives...



This building, originally the Odd Fellows Hall, was used as the Alpine County courthouse until 1928, when the courts moved to a more modern facility.

LEGISLATIVE REVIEW

The current legislative adjourns on September 14th. All bills must be moved out of committee and referred to the floor by September 4th and passed by September 14th, in order to reach the governor's desk this year. The governor has until October 14th to sign or veto bills. Here is a summary of bills of interest to the courts that are either currently awaiting a floor vote or have made it to the governor.

CIVIL AND SMALL CLAIMS

AB 36 (Steinberg) & SB 11 (Escutia) – Confidentiality of settlement agreements

Bills seek to limit the use of secrecy agreements and protective orders in cases involving allegedly defective products or environmental hazards.

Status: AB 36 – Senate Rules Committee; SB 11 – Assembly floor

COURTS

SB 1112 (Polanco) – Cesar Chavez holiday

Makes Cesar Chavez Day a court holiday.

JC Position: Sponsor

Status: Assembly Appropriations Committee

CRIMINAL LAW

AB 1304 (Rod Pacheco) – Criminal procedure: motions to suppress: appeal

Specifies that if a defendant in a misdemeanor case appeals denial

of his or her suppression motion, the trial court has discretion to grant a stay of the trial pending disposition of the appeal.

Status: Governor's desk

SB 83 (Burton) – Forensic testing: post-conviction

Requires the court to appoint counsel to prepare a person's post-conviction motion for DNA testing and to represent the person in related proceedings if the person is indigent and requests the assistance of counsel.

Status: Assembly Appropriations Committee

SB 223 (Burton) – Proposition 36: drug testing

Provides funds for drug testing in Proposition 36 cases. Provides that, where drug treatment has been ordered as a condition of probation, drug testing shall primarily be used as a treatment tool.

Status: Assembly floor

SB 485 (Senate Public Safety Committee) – Criminal procedure

Among other things, requires the court on its own motion or on the motion of the people to make a finding that photographs of minors are harmful matter as defined in Penal Code section 313, and to direct the preservation, handling and disposition of the material accordingly.

Status: Senate

(Continued on page 3)

LEGISLATIVE REVIEW

SB 791 (McPherson) – Marijuana: penalties

Reclassifies as an infraction the possession of 28.5 grams or less of marijuana.

JC Position: Support

Status: Assembly floor

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

AB 160 (Bates) – Domestic violence: protective orders

Specifies that a criminal restraining order or protective order has precedence over any civil court order. Requires the Judicial Council to establish a protocol for the timely coordination of multiple orders involving the same person. Takes effect January 1, 2003.

JC Position: Support

Status: Governor's desk

SB 66 (Kuehl) – Domestic violence: protective orders

Requires the court, when considering issuance of a protective order, to cause a search of specified records and data bases to determine if the proposed subject of the order has any specified prior criminal convictions or outstanding warrants, is on parole or probation, or is or was the subject of other protective or restraining orders.

JC Position: Oppose unless amended and funded.

Status: Assembly Appropriations Committee

SB 1221 (Romero) – Spousal support: domestic violence

Creates a rebuttable presumption that any award of spousal support to a spouse who has been convicted of a domestic violence-related crime should not be made. Authorizes the court to consider a convicted spouse's history as a victim of domestic violence as a condition for rebutting the presumption.

JC Position: Oppose unless amended.

Status: Governor's desk

FAMILY LAW

SB 78 (Kuehl) – Premarital agreements

Sets forth specified findings that the court is required to make in order to find that a premarital agreement was executed voluntarily.

Status: Governor's desk

AB 583 (Jackson) – Martial dissolution: financial disclosure

AB 583 revises the requirements for financial disclosure in marital dissolution. Requires the court to impose mandatory sanctions for violating disclosure requirements, and requires the court to set aside a judgment where the disclosure laws have been violated. Permits a mutual waiver of a final declaration of disclosure of assets.

Status: Senate Appropriations Committee

JUDGES

AB 1099 (Havice) – JRS II prior service credit

Provides reciprocity for JRS II judges who have prior service in a state or county retirement system. Permits a judge to elect to make contributions and receive service credit for the time in which the judge served as a subordinate judicial officer. Permits judges to

participate in the state's supplemental contribution program. Permits a judge to change a modified retirement allowance if the judge's spouse predeceases the judge.

Status: Senate Appropriations Committee

JURIES

SB 303 (Torlakson) – Jury service exemption: peace officer

Adds the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District police to the list of peace officers exempt from both civil and criminal jury duty.

JC Position: Oppose

Status: Signed by governor

JUVENILE LAW

SB 940 (Senate Judiciary Committee) – Juvenile law

Makes numerous changes to juvenile law concerning the purpose of the juvenile law with respect to judicial community leadership; hearings in infraction cases based on a notice to appear; the termination of parental rights for wards who are in foster care; and access to juvenile police records.

Status: Assembly Judiciary Committee

TRAFFIC

SB 255 (Speier) – Vehicles: children unattended: fine

Among other things makes it an infraction, punishable by a fine of \$100, for the parent, legal guardian, or other person responsible for a child who is 6 years or younger to leave that child inside a vehicle, without being subject to the supervision of a person who is 12 years or older, and where there are conditions that present a significant risk to the child's health and safety or when the vehicles' engine is running or the vehicle's keys are in the ignition, or both. Specifically authorizes the court to reduce or waive the fine if the defen-

dant is economically disadvantaged.

Status: Assembly Appropriations Committee

TRIAL COURT FUNDING

AB 145 (Pacheco) – Credit cards

Authorizes credit card payments for the deposit of bail for any offense not declared to be a felony or for any court-ordered fee or fine.

JC Position: Sponsor

Status: Signed by governor

AB 223 (Frommer) – Evidence: discovery

Makes numerous "clean-up" changes to statutes relating to trial court funding. Authorizes the clerk of the court to issue a commission authorizing the deposition in another state or place. The commission would be issued to any party in any action pending in its venue without a noticed motion or court order. Requires the Judicial Council to develop and approve official form interrogatories and requests for admission for use in any other civil action in a state court as the Judicial Council deems appropriate. Enables parties to use existing and future technology to conduct discovery.

(Continued on page 4)

Courts Today...



The Napa County Superior Court has established an on-going effort to improve its community outreach. The program includes surveys, focus groups and community input into the court's strategic plan.

LEGISLATIVE REVIEW

(Continued from page 3)

JC Position: Sponsor

Status: Senate Floor

AB 1700 (Assembly Judiciary Committee) – Courts

Amends portions of the Civil Code, Code of Civil Procedure, Government Code, Penal Code, and Welfare and Institutions

Code to make changes to the organizational and financial arrangements between the Judicial Council, trial courts, counties and other state agencies.

JC Position: Sponsor

Status: Senate Appropriations Committee

Status Chart of Pending Legislation

Looking for Judicial Council positions on legislation? The Office of Governmental Affairs prepares a chart after each Policy Coordination and Liaison Committee (PCLC) meeting showing the status of legislation on which the PCLC has adopted a position. The chart provides details such as the source of the bill, and the bill's current status in the Legislature. The bills are listed in numerical order and indexed by subject. To get your own copy of the status chart visit us on the web at <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/courtadmin/aoc/oga.htm>.

RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES...

“Ripped from the Headlines” highlights news stories of interest including headlines and a lead paragraph, without editorial content from *The Capitol Connection*.

“Foster Kids: Vital Checkup” *Los Angeles Times* (August 5, 2001)

For 550 local foster children, last month marked the end of a long, painful struggle to regain childhood's lost to abuse or neglect. In another “Adoption Saturday,” Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Michael Nash presided over a room full of giddy parents and youngsters at the Children’s Court in Monterey Court, finalizing the legalities that create new families.

For every child adopted at the July 28 ceremony, there may be as many as 10 more in the county’s care who are legally eligible for adoption but have been stuck in an administrative limbo for as long as four years: The legal rights of their biological parents were terminated long ago, willing adoptive parents have stepped forward and federal and state funds are set aside to help move the process along, but county social workers can’t seem to finish the paperwork freeing these children for adoption. Meanwhile the kids often bounce from foster home to foster home.

Adoption planning is just one of the big bottlenecks in the county’s foster care system and just one of the reasons that state Controller Kathleen Connell late last month announced an audit of child welfare agencies in L.A. and Sacramento counties.

“Tort Reform” *Daily Journal* (August 7, 2001)

For nearly a quarter of a century, the business and other interests unhappy with how the tort system works in the United States have focused their reform efforts on trying to cap damages or restrict the suits injured plaintiffs can bring.

But now, they may be shifting to new targets. Instead of focusing their efforts on changing the rules by which the tort system operates, reformers are taking aim at the courts, judges and lawyers who enforce the rules, according to speakers on an American Bar Association panel.

“I think you’re going to see more emphasis on who is being elected or re-elected to serve on the judiciary,” Ed Murnane, the president of the Illinois Civil Justice League, said Saturday.

“Judges Divided on Applying Prop. 36 to Drug Defendants” *Los Angeles Times* (August 9, 2001)

Judges dealing with proposition 36 are divided about which drug defendants with prior felony convictions are eligible for treatment rather than prison.

But judges have different views about whether they have the authority to dismiss prior convictions in order to help defendants receive treatment. “There is a split of opinion,” said Judge Michael Tynan, who supervises the drug courts for Los Angeles County. “Good arguments could be made both ways. I think we are going to have to wait to see what the [appellate] courts decide.”

“County to Pay Inmates Millions.

Jails: Supervisors approve a \$27-million settlement of lawsuits by prisoners held past their release dates. Sheriff Baca admits errors, says reforms are underway.” *Los Angeles Times* (August 15, 2001)

Los Angeles County admitted Tuesday to illegally detaining some 400,000 people in county jails over five years as county

A day in the life...



Lieutenant Robert Jarrett, Sergeant Michael Gonzalez, and Deputy Sheriff P. A. Confer discuss special security required for transporting an inmate to a courtroom.

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RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES...

(Continued from page 4)

supervisors agreed to pay \$27 million to settle five class-action lawsuits.

The settlement, among the largest sums ever paid by the county to resolve litigation, shows that the Sheriff's Department's long standing problem of keeping inmates in jail after courts have ordered them released is far greater than previously known.

"Perata wants gunmakers liable in lawsuits" *Contra Costa Times* (August 15, 2001)

Sen. Don Perata announced Tuesday he will introduce legislation stripping away a special protection for gunmakers against liability lawsuits.

The bill, SB 682, is prompted by a state Supreme Court ruling issued last week that said the victims of a 1993 San Francisco shooting rampage could not sue the manufacturer of the weapon involved for negligently producing assault weapons. The court cited an 18-year-old statute prohibiting the legal challenge.

"I'm just going to remove the exemption," Perata said. "It shouldn't be there. It's the only product that has that exemption."

"Thousands of dollars spent to alter California term limits" *Daily News* (August 17, 2001)

Lawmakers, corporations and special interest groups have poured more than \$800,000 into a drive to change California's term limit law to let some lawmakers stay longer in office.

Legislatures in 11 out of 19 states with term limits tried this year to change or eliminate them. But California will be the first to ask voters to peel back the bounds they set for elected officials 11 years ago.

"Democrats Have Luck of Draw in Redistricting" *Los Angeles Times* (August 19, 2001)

The Legislature will start work in earnest Monday on what many members admit is their most self-serving, interest-conflicted and partisan ritual: carving new political boundaries for themselves and Californians in Congress.

The outcome, virtually a foregone conclusion because Democrats control the Legislature and governor's office, is certain to further cement Democrats as the dominant party in the Senate, Assembly and the state's House delegation for the next decade.

Republican ranks are so thin in the Legislature that they play almost a spectator role. Democratic dominance is so heavy that there may not be many more Democratic seats to create without endangering other Democrats, said Senate President Pro Tem John L. Burton (D-San Francisco). "We cannot get a lot more than we've got," he said.

"DEA Chief Looks at Calif. Policy as Blueprint for U.S." *Los Angeles Time* (August 21, 2001)

The newly installed head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administra-

tion said Monday that California's landmark approach to rehabilitating drug offenders can serve as a model for the rest of the country—if shortcomings in the program are fixed.

"We need to watch the California experiment. I think it's a strong statement by the population there that [residents want to] take a look at treatment for nonviolent drug users rather than incarceration," DEA administrator Asa Huthinson told reporters on his first official day leading the 9,200-employee federal agency.

"Court Will Be More Strict on Late Filing in Death Cases" *Daily Journal* (August 23, 2001)

The California Supreme Court will be keeping a closer eye on attorneys who miss filing deadlines in death penalty cases. The court announced Wednesday that, starting in October, both defense attorneys and prosecutors handling capital appeals must provide detailed explanations whenever they ask for extensions of time to file briefs.

Chief Justice Ronald M. George said the new procedures should help reduce "unwarranted delays" in capital litigation, a problem that has dogged the high court for years even as death row has grown to 600 inmates. All death judgments are automatically reviewed by the Supreme Court.

George said the new procedures complement other steps the court has taken in recent years to reduce delays in capital appeals, including the expansion of the state Public Defender's office, the creation of the Habeas Corpus Resource Center and the imposition of tighter deadlines for record correction.

"New Limits on Prenuptial Agreements Go to Governor. SB78, opposed by some in family law bar, could protect the

rights of economically disadvantaged women." *Daily Journal* (August 28, 2001)

A bill that would effectively overrule two recent family law decisions by the California Supreme Court and place new restrictions on prenuptial agreements passed the state Assembly on a 54-5 vote Monday and now goes to the governor's desk.

Supporters argue the bill is needed to protect economically disadvantaged spouses, primarily women who marry wealthier men, from signing away their legal and economic rights without counsel and without being fully informed.

But opponents contend the measure would cast doubt on all premarital agreements by giving judges wide discretion to invalidate the contracts for arbitrary reasons. This uncer-

"Eye of the Beholder" Headlines...

"Hate Crimes Reported in State Last Year Show Slight Decline"

The Los Angeles Times (August 11, 2001)

"Hate crimes increasing"

Daily News (August 11, 2001)

"Court rebuffs challenge to use of red-light cameras" *SF Gate* (August 16, 2001)

"Judge: City broke law with red-light cameras"

Union Tribune (August 16, 2001)

"Redistricting plan may hurt Condit's odds"

Union Tribune (August 31, 2001)

"Remap plan gives Condit a boost" *Sacramento Bee* (August 31, 2001)

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RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES...

(Continued from page 5)

tainty, they say, would harm couples on their second or subsequent marriages who are seeking to protect the inheritances of children from prior marriages.

“Assembly OKs Funds for Drug Tests Under Prop. 36” *Daily Journal* (August 29, 2001)

Millions of dollars for urine testing under Proposition 36, the treatment initiative for drug offenders, would be provided under a bill that has cleared the state Assembly and will soon go the governor.

No money for drug testing was allocated as part of the \$120 million-per-year authorized by the ballot measure, which took effect July 1 and is expected to send thousands of nonviolent users to probation and treatment. But drug court judges and law enforcement officials have insisted that testing is crucial to making sure offenders stick with their treatment programs.

WORDS WITH ASSEMBLY MEMBER ARONER

(Continued from page 1)

The biggest surprise I had was that I ended up liking my colleagues much more than I ever imagined. As a staffer, I was not always enamored of my boss’s colleagues. Members got in the way, they did things we didn’t like, and they presented me with problems when they had bills that I didn’t like. I was pleasantly surprised, right away, by how much I liked my colleagues, and how much I do to this day – even with our vast differences of opinion. I’ve learned that it doesn’t have to get in the way of the personal relationships. As a staffer, I never understood that. In the past I would see Tom get a little defensive when the staff would be critical of his colleagues and he would come to their defense. Even when they were “wrong” on a particular policy issue. Now I understand where members come from given their districts and the problems they have within their districts. I understand that much better as a colleague.



-Assembly Member Dion Aroner (D-Berkeley)

“Foster Care is not a partisan issue in the Legislature at this point. It’s just a question of how much we can handle and more importantly how much the administration can handle.”

CC: You have carried a number of bills in the foster care and juvenile dependency area. What are some of your key accomplishments in this area?

Aroner: I have an experience here that nobody else currently has and that is that I staffed the very committee that I currently chair. When you look at almost 20 years of doing that, there are lots of pieces of legislation that come to mind. The ones I get most excited about, while some of them are very small, are the pieces that we’ve done with the young people themselves. I’ve been fortunate that as a staffer I developed a relationship with the California Youth Connection and have seen it grow and blossom. It’s something I’m very proud of. I kind of discovered them and they discovered me as a staffer and we decided that we could do some good things together. Over the years we’ve had the young people come and testify on issues that affect them. We’ve even allowed them to join us in

organizing committee hearings. To hear young people talk about the fact that they don’t see their social workers very often and that the judge plays more of a role in their life than the social worker does is very disconcerting. To hear them talk about being moved from foster home to foster home and having bad experiences in foster care is also very troublesome. I really think it’s because of these foster youth that we saw a comprehensive foster care package introduced this year. There wasn’t a member of leadership in

our house that didn’t support that package and I really think that had to do with the young people.

The legislation that I’m doing this year on child welfare caseloads is also extraordinarily important, as is the one on improving the quality of services for foster parents.

CC: Please tell us a little bit more about how you brought the voices of the young people in the foster care system to the legislative process.

Aroner: They first came to me around seven years ago, a small group of young people with a couple of volunteers. Many of them participated in independent living programs through their community colleges. Teachers had been providing them with some guidance about how to set up a statewide organization. They thought, “why don’t we go and have discussions with some policy makers about what’s concerning us.” And the young people came. There were maybe ten of us at the first meeting. The very first thing that the kids talked about was drivers’ licenses. They couldn’t get drivers’ licenses. Some foster parents would sign for it, but others were concerned with the liability. So they went to [former As-

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WORDS WITH ASSEMBLY MEMBER ARONER

(Continued from page 6)

sembly Member] Rusty Areias and asked him to put a bill in. That was the very first bill that the kids ever did. We were interested in empowering them and teaching them that if you want to move legislation, you've got to learn the process and you have to take responsibility for the legislation. The next year we had a meeting where we invited members of the administration and others in the Capitol to come and hear the kids talk about their needs. That's the year that we did the first independent living bill regarding transitional housing. The young people had to write the bill, testify on it, they had to lobby it and [then-Governor] Pete Wilson signed it. The third year we had them organize a legislative hearing and that was the first year they put in the Foster Care Bill of Rights. Foster care is not a partisan issue in the Legislature at this point. It's just a question of how much we can handle and more importantly how much the administration can handle.

CC: In August, you co-sponsored a Guardianship Roundtable with the Judicial Council. What were the key issues discussed, and what do you anticipate the next steps will be?

Aroner: I'm not a lawyer. I'm a policy person and have been involved with kids' legislation for years now. From my perspective it didn't make sense that young people were in probate. Probate to me was where people dealt with their wills and estates. Today the youngsters who are in probate often look very similar to the youngsters that we have in dependency and family courts. I wanted to at least start a discussion. So we held a guardianship roundtable in August at the UC Berkeley campus, with experts from around the state, including an appellate justice, probate judges, dependency judges, court workers, grandparents and relatives. We talked about providing services to these families. In probate there is little funding for services, even though some judges have figured out ways to get services for those families. We had lengthy discussions about that and about how to move families from one court to the other. We also had major discussions around the adoption issue. Grandparents want to adopt their grandkids but they don't want to interfere with the biological parent's relationships with these youngsters.

CC: You are the chair of the Assembly Human Services

Committee. What are some of the most important issues that committee has addressed?

Aroner: The highlight in my first year as chair was welfare reform. I was one of the co-chairs of the joint committee on welfare reform. I think we successfully negotiated one of the better programs in the nation.

We've also been working on developmental disabilities issues, especially as we move more and more toward community-based services. I'm carrying legislation right now in regards to unifying the budget of the Department of Developmental Services. It's a very controversial bill, but I think the Legislature should take leadership regarding how to really provide services in the developmental disabilities arena.

We are also working on bills that would remove the disincentives that prevent people with physical disabilities from joining the work force in some capacity. This is a major issue nationally. Improving foster care is another huge issue. We've got to do something.

CC: What are your major policy-related goals for next

year?

Aroner: One huge issue that we've just started working on this year is human resources. We don't have enough professionals in the human services arena to take care of the people that we've been talking about. We need child welfare workers, adult protective services workers, school psychologists and school social workers. This is a huge issue that we've begun working on from both sides.

And certainly, the foster care package. [Assembly Member] Darrell Steinberg and I are determined that we are not letting go. We've got to continue to push, especially with the dramatic increase in interest here and with leadership behind us. We've got to do some more work. We need to push more to get the Governor to move forward. The time has come.

A day in the life...



A court client waits with her daughter-in-law and grandson for news on a case involving her son. California now has the largest court-based child custody mediation program in the nation.



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Sacramento Speaks on Self-Help

People choose to go to court alone for many reasons including cost, the presumed simplicity of a matter, and the simple preference for independence. To assist the ever-increasing numbers of litigants who go to court without legal counsel, the Judicial Council and the Administrative Office of the Courts launched one of the nation's most comprehensive court sponsored online self-help centers.

Members of the Legislature have taken note. "I applaud the Judicial Council of California for offering this step-by-step on-line assistance to citizens representing themselves in court", says Senator Bruce McPherson. "It is an impressive and comprehensive collection of advice and assistance that will help many people better understand court and legal procedures and navigate the legal system."

According to the AOC, more than half of the litigants who use courts in California, an estimated 4.3 million individuals, are self-represented. Many of these are in family court settings. "The Self Help Center on the Judicial Council's website is a treasure trove of information, both for litigants who are not represented by counsel and for people who are not litigants, but are looking for general

information about California's legal procedures," says Lee Morhar, Chief Counsel for the Department of Child Support Services. "The Self Help Center is the latest in a number of initiatives the Judicial Council has undertaken to assist the increasing number of people who are finding themselves in court without representation."

The new web site is designed to help court users navigate the court process more successfully and be more realistic in their expectations

of the legal system. "The new Online Self-Help Center will assist Californians by making them more familiar with the state's complex legal process," said Senator Martha Escutia. Plans to further develop the site have been well received. Senator Escutia noted that "...for many Spanish-speaking Californians, the site will be particularly useful when it is available in Spanish next year."

The new site is accessible through the California court's official web site at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp.



The Capitol Connection is on the Web!

Looking for a past issue of the Capitol Connection? Find it online! The Capitol Connection is available on the Internet at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/courtadmin/aoc/capconn.htm.