

California's judicial branch is in a fiscal crisis with severe consequences for the courts and the communities they serve – especially the most vulnerable. \$653 million in cuts in the last 4 years, this year legislators and the governor chopped the court's operational funds by \$350 million; ongoing cuts. Then took another \$310 million from the court construction fund.

And Governor Brown warned of more cuts, if tax revenues are insufficient. The result is nothing short of devastating for the branch and the people it serves.

There've been staff layoffs all over the state. Los Angeles court pink slipped 329. The San Joaquin Court let go 45 people.

Sacramento had 885 employees two years ago. They expect to be down to only 600 this year, "hanging on by their fingernails," according to the CEO. The San Francisco court lost 67 employees.

"Which means that reports can't always be done timely in terms of recommendations regarding conservatorships, guardianship matters, and these are the parts of the community that are the most vulnerable, the elderly, and the young. It's a very serious problem."

"I worry that it's just a matter of time that someone who needs a restraining order doesn't get it, doesn't get it served, and something bad happens."

"And I worry for the children of these clients."

"Oh, it's a huge concern. I work for a nonprofit that represents tenants who're being evicted, and there've been so many delays."

"The potential for things going really wrong is there. It is very definitely, a definite hardship on people, especially very low income people who are trying to represent themselves."

23 courts have shut down courtrooms.

"It happens very frequently, more times than not, that there is not a courtroom available and sometimes you will have to just have your schedule on standby, witnesses, clients, for as much as a week. And then you'll be told that your case is continued to some later date."

"To get to hearings often times is taking twice as long."

"It's just complicating the administration of even a simple case. A simple auto accident case went from getting it to trial in 12 months to, you know, who knows when?"

Placer also closed courtrooms, two of them. They cut staff by 30%, and shut down the youth peer court and family law case management.

San Luis Obispo has closed the Grover Beach court. And they withdrew funding for a program helping abused and neglected children. Most courts have significantly cut back customer service hours.

"We've reduced our hours so people can start working on the backlog. In our traffic department we have an 11,000 trial backlog. Those people are entitled to a trial, we want to give them a trial, but we need the judges and support staff."

"A close friend of mine had a dissolution that she was handling herself. She had to go and stand in line for days! In order to get her papers filed. And there were some days the courts were simply not open and the papers could not get filed."

"In Contra Costa County and Alameda County that's a real problem. If you don't get to the clerk's office by 1 o'clock, you've got a hundred people in line ahead of you to file and that's really difficult."

"It's a cost for my clients for me to wait in line."

"It loses me clients also, because I have to charge them to wait in line."

"It's also bad for business when they can't get their books cleared, when they need to carry pending litigation on their books as a possible liability."

In fact, business people spoke up loud and clear at 4 budget impact hearings around the state. Justice Zelon remembers well what they said:

"The lack of certainty is really going to hurt us. It's going to hurt us and make it impossible for us to move forward. And if we don't know if we're going to get trials and if we don't know we're going to get the court services we depend on, we don't have the certainty we need."

At Santa Clara's Self Help Center, the staff is down 20%. They see about 44,000 people each year and turn away many.

"When they need more help we have less help to give them."

"When we open at 8:30, by 9 or 9:30 we are sold out for the day./ Just imagine you have been in line since 7 o'clock, 6 o'clock and you're told 'Oop, sorry, you're going to have to come back another day.'"

And people just give up."

This scene is typical – virtually every self help center in the state is overwhelmed – with the indigent and the newly poor.

"The tendency to think of this as some abstract problem happening to abstract people and this is about pushing papers, is absolutely wrong. This is impacting families every single day."

"Most recently we've seen a lot of people that are needing a lot more help that aren't that familiar with the court system."

San Francisco helps more than 35-hundred people a month, with a staff that's been cut in half. They turn away huge numbers.

"Because of the budget we don't have the staff, we're not doing guardianships, conservatorships and step parent adoption."

And there's simply not enough staff to meet the demand.

"It's a tremendous service. It's a shame that budget cuts have cut into the most valued services in the city."

"The value means a lot as far as the health and welfare of my kids."

"The list for the morning is closed, we have 30 people to get to and we're going to do our best."

"Many people that we serve, if they don't work that day, they don't have a sick day or a vacation day; they're just losing out on their pay. We see the frustration with how it's impacting the public."

"For our clients, who make so little, one day off a work can mean the difference between paying your rent and not. And that can completely destabilize a family."

"There's someone out there whose license was suspended from the department of child support services and that's how he makes a living, he's begging us saying 'Please let me work, please let me work,' and I'm having to say 'We're going to do our best.'"

And family courts everywhere are also getting slammed. Families in San Diego now have to wait many months for a mediation appointment, before the judge can get all the information to rule on custody visitation.

"I have people, children in shelters for that period of time. We've had families with their children in cars."

"In our court we just got the timeline for emergency screenings. So someone files papers and says there's an emergency situation; two weeks before they can get in front of a mediator. So really just look at the kids."

Delays are common in the Orange County Court, too. They used to schedule 30 hearings per day, now it's 40. It used to take 6-8 weeks to get a hearing date; now it's many months.

Supervising attorney William Tanner tells about a client whose ex-wife wouldn't let him see the kids, despite a visitation order.

"He filed at the end of September, his OSC date is the beginning of March. So it's almost 6 months that he's going to be without seeing his children. He's really frustrated and doesn't understand why he can't go into court."

"It's really unfortunate for the people of California. I think the courts are such a critical part of our democracy and we need to fund them."

"What I'm worried about is the impact on the judicial system overall."

"I think as a democracy that's one thing we can't sacrifice." "If we remove that or start chipping away at that, how can we define ourselves as a democracy? I think that the judicial system is the cornerstone of our democracy."

"We're talking about people. We're talking about public safety. We're talking about something that's beneath the dignity of the great state of California. And if we don't as a society, if we don't as citizens do something about this, and if the legislature doesn't listen, then shame on them and shame on us."

The Chief Justice is focused on safeguarding the future of the branch with adequate funding.

"Our passion and commitment lies with the public;" "When we're closed, when our hours are reduced, when those with causes popular and unpopular can't get into court." "What we see, I think is the diminution of the rule of law which is our legacy, our foundation, and I submit, our birthright."
"Thank you for keeping this message alive, may we carry it into 2012 and remember that the reason we're speaking, the reason we're using our voice is because those who cannot get representation or who rely on legal services or pro bono, need us to do it for them. That is our duty and our obligation. Thank you." Applause