

Chief Will Send Dozen Judges to Bolster Bench in Riverside

By Jason W. Armstrong
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RIVERSIDE - To help reduce Riverside County's backlog of criminal cases, state Chief Justice Ronald George said Friday that he's sending in a dozen retired and out-of-county active judges to bolster the bench.

The additional help is expected to allow resumption of civil trials in a few months, according to Riverside's supervising criminal court judge, Helios Hernandez. The trials were halted when the civil judges began hearing burgeoning criminal cases last year.

Hernandez said George's 12 new judges would help but not eradicate the county's population-driven backlog of pending criminal cases. The state Judicial Council has said that Riverside County needs 64 more judges to operate backlog-free.

The backlog stands at 1,200 and has grown by 20 percent since January.

"It's too early to tell how much this team will help [reduce] the backlog," Hernandez said Friday. "We have high hopes for it, and we're very pleased that the [Administrative Office of the Courts] has listened to our presiding judge and is recognizing the unique situation facing Riverside County."

Lynn Holton, spokeswoman for George and the Judicial Council, said Friday that the chief expects to put the team into action by mid-July. She said the rotating team would consist of 20 retired and sitting judges, 12 of whom would hear cases at a given time.

The team will hear cases for four months, Holton said.

She said the additional jurists would supplement a group of retired judges who are helping the court through the Judicial Council's assigned judges program. Countywide, eight retired judges and a handful of "visiting judges" are hearing cases, Hernandez said.

George is working to identify judges statewide who will participate on the team, Holton said.

She said Los Angeles Superior Court Judge David S. Wesley would supervise the group and would make case assignments.

"The chief has given these judges direction to only work on the backlog," Riverside Presiding Judge Richard Fields said.

William Vickrey, director of the Administrative Office of the Courts, said the judicial team is intended to give Riverside "breathing space" until Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appoints seven new judges that are among 50 judicial positions authorized by the Legislature this year.

Vickrey said George decided to approve the team upon requests by Fields and District Attorney Rod Pacheco.

Some Riverside judges and defense attorneys have shifted some of the blame for the caseload crunch to Pacheco, saying his unwillingness to plea-bargain cases has pushed more to trial. Pacheco has denied that he's a part

of the problem, saying the root of the backlog lies with the county's population growth and dearth of judges.

Since 1989, Riverside County's population has jumped 76 percent to 2 million. In that time, the county has gotten just three additional judgeships, according to the Judicial Council.

Vickrey said council in the past has enlisted smaller special teams of judges to help out with workload pressures in other counties. But he said the Riverside strike team is the largest backlog-busting group ever assembled.

"Certainly the issues in Riverside are unique as they relate to the area's extraordinary growth," Vickrey said.