

EDITORIAL

The face of justice

Tuesday, March 6, 2007

WALK INTO any California courthouse, and one thing is plain. The judges on the bench don't reflect the state's diverse make-up.

In a state that is a majority non-white, nearly three-quarters of some 1,600 judges are white males.

Changing this fact won't be easy. It will take time, political commitment and steady work. Last year, the state took a constructive step forward: Some 50 new judges were approved to speed up legal work in a jammed judicial system. In exchange, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who appoints all judges, promised Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez to push harder in diversifying appointments.

Now comes a report from the state Judicial Council, which oversees the courts, giving a racial and gender profile of the bench. There's a long way to go in diversifying the system.

The size of the gap depends on the numbers used. The governor once measured his success by comparing his picks with minority numbers in the overwhelmingly white and male State Bar. By this standard, he has done a credible job: the percentage of Latino judges is ahead of the percentage of Latino lawyers. It's also ahead for black judges.

But the overall results are exceedingly low. In a state that's 32 percent Latino, only 6.3 percent of the judges are from this group. Blacks, who are 8 percent of the state, make up only 4.4 percent of the judges.

The solution, according to Chris Arriola of California La Raza Lawyers and other critics, is better recruiting among the still-sizable pool of minority members of the bar. He's encouraged that Schwarzenegger has named Sharon Majors-Lewis, who is black, as his judicial appointments secretary.

The governor has made a credible start, but he needs to push harder to fill the bench with a truer reflection of California's population.

This article appeared on page D - 8 of the San Francisco Chronicle