

State Supreme Courts

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Calif. chief justice laments court closures

BY CHRIS RIZO

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (Legal Newsline)-California's court system has borne more than its fair share of the state's budget woes, Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald George told lawmakers Tuesday.

Delivering his annual State of the Judiciary address to legislators, George said state courts shuttered one workday a month amid rising caseloads and dwindling resources is creating a definite strain on California's judicial branch.

He said the state's fiscal crisis leaves the courts "increasingly hard-pressed to meet their obligation to provide accessible justice." He added: "These statewide closures must not continue into the next fiscal year."

George, a Republican, urged state budget writers to keep in mind, as they grapple with a staggering \$20 billion shortfall, that a well-funded court system is essential.

"Courts are not a luxury to be funded in good times and ignored in bad times. Justice cannot only be available only when it is convenient to pay for it," he told lawmakers during a joint session of the state Assembly and Senate.

California courts have been closed the third Wednesday of each month since September to help reduce costs amid a \$380 million cut to the judicial branch's budget. Court closures, in addition to the furloughs of more than 20,000 staff, are scheduled to last until July. The moves are projected to save about \$63 million.

But rather than allowing courts to close one day a month, George said lawmakers should instead consider extending a user fee paid by defendants. The levy is projected to raise \$40 million for court-related security through June 30 of next year.

For his part, Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in January budget proposal called for restoring about \$100 million to the courts' budget. It is unclear whether lawmakers will adopt the governor's suggestion as they try to make the state's ends meet.

"We shall attempt to address and absorb the reductions in our budget during these difficult times," George said. "But all of us -- in each of the three branches of government -- must remain committed to continuing the progress."

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Ronald George (R)

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