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George Defends Court System State's Chief Justice Seeks to Protect Court Funding in Combative Speech

By Amy Yarbrough

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In an uncharacteristically pointed speech to the Legislature Tuesday afternoon, California's Chief Justice Ronald M. George appeared to attack a newly formed judicial advocacy group, calling it "uninformed" and accusing it of trying to dismantle the justice system.

George's annual State of the Judiciary is part of a two-pronged approach by judicial leaders to protect funding, including spending for trial court construction projects and a statewide case management system. Last week, judicial leaders who traveled to meet with legislators were provided talking points by the Administrative Office of the Courts that included similar criticisms of the Alliance of California Judges.

In a text version of his remarks to the a joint session of the Legislature Tuesday, George said the Judicial Council, the policy-making body for the state's courts, and the voluntary California Judges Association were the true voices of the state's judiciary.

"The judiciary is not represented by the few strident and uninformed voices that occasionally emerge as e-mail strings on the fringe of the judiciary," George said. "Their efforts reflect nothing less than a thinly disguised agenda to dismantle the statewide administration of justice that all three branches of government have developed over the past several years."

Unlike the AOC's talking points, George did not name the Alliance by name, but there are no other groups representing the state's judges.

The Alliance was formed in September as a response to the Judicial Council's vote to close courts one extra day a month to save money and has been a vocal critic of the agency's spending and what it sees as a lack of transparency.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Charles Horan, one of the directors of the Alliance, said if George was referring to his group he considers the remarks "an insult to our over 200 judges across the state who simply disagree with some of the decisions our judicial leaders made over the years."

Another Alliance leader, Justice Tom Hollenhorst, of the 4th District Court of Appeal, said his group was, "strident, yes, disillusioned yes, mean spirited, no." He called the Administrative Office of the Courts "an organization that disdains dissent" and believes that "anyone who is sings a different song is clearly out of tune."

This year's State of the Judiciary, the 15th the Chief Justice has given, took a much different tone than in 2009, when a more staid George focused much of his comments on proposed budget cuts to the judicial branch and warned of the dire consequences that could result from them.

In Tuesday's speech, George said the branch is reeling from tough times, but "remains robust and

resilient."

"Because of the structural changes we have undergone, our courts are better able to deliver on the promise of equal justice under law than at any other time in my service as Chief Justice of California, and perhaps than at any other time in our state's history," he said.

To that end, George told legislators, the judicial branch must move forward with the California Court Case Management System and rebuilding the state's aging courthouses, funding for which was authorized under SB 1407 signed into law in 2008.

In reports to the Legislature and Department of Finance, the agency has reported past and expected spending on the new computer program to reach \$1.75 billion, but the agency recently has insisted that costs will not surpass \$1.3 billion.

Either way, the case management system has been the subject of criticism by the Alliance and court workers unions.

George said SB 1407 money must be used for courthouses, rather than for court operation as Los Angeles County Superior Court's Presiding Judge Charles McCoy is seeking.

"One simple truth prevails," George said. "Courts are not a luxury to be funded in good times and ignored in bad times. Justice cannot be available only when it is convenient to pay for it."

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