

Court Workers May Face Furloughs to Cut Costs

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Judges are planning to shut down Los Angeles County courts for as many as eight days over the next three months and send workers home without pay to reduce an \$8.2-million budget deficit, officials said Thursday.

"This is not something that we want to do," said Presiding Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Robert A. Dukes, who, along with the court's executive officer and its 565 judges and commissioners, is exempt from the furloughs.

Union officials quickly rejected a suggestion by judges that would keep open the county's 59 court facilities if employees were allowed to work without pay in exchange for accrued vacation time.

"Our people refuse to come to work for free," said Damian Tryon of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO. The union will explore all options to avoid a furlough, he said.

Union officials, who represent 82% of the court's 5,200 employees, urged the court to consider other options, including voluntary work furloughs. The union suggested the court could save money by ending its practice of paying professional dues for judges and by reducing the number of administrators.

Lawyer Raymond Boucher said he is most concerned about the domestic violence victim who won't be able to get a restraining order or the family being evicted who cannot go to court that day to stop the proceedings. "Where do they go?" he asked after a meeting Thursday of court leaders and lawyers.

Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley said Thursday that the shutdown would cause "serious disruption to the others who need to operate within the already overburdened criminal justice system."

The Los Angeles court operates 583 courtrooms throughout the county and received 2.6 million civil, criminal and traffic filings last year. All California trial courts have been forced by the state's fiscal crisis to reduce their budget by an additional 1.3% for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30. This latest round of cuts coincides with Gov. Gray Davis' midyear budget reductions.

Last fall, Los Angeles court officials laid off 77 full-time, permanent employees to close what was then a \$57-million deficit for the current budget year. Officials said they had few other options except to close the courts, which would save \$644,000 a day in personnel costs. The only other California court to shut as a cost-cutting measure was in Yolo County, which closed for two weeks during the Christmas holidays to reduce costs. Other counties, including Orange, are considering voluntary furloughs, and Solano County court officials announced such a program Thursday.

Court officials in Los Angeles issued notifications late Wednesday of their plan to close all court buildings April 17 and 23, and six more days in May and June, depending on how much money they still need to cut.

Supervising Judge Dan Oki, whose budget committee recommended the furloughs, said a few centrally located criminal courts may be opened on furlough days to handle emergency matters.

The court also may allow attorneys to file documents with the court, using designated drop boxes. Opening a few criminal courts to handle "last-day" cases -- those in which suspects have a constitutional right to court hearings or else to be set free -- would create "more confusion and disorganization," said Curt Livesay, one of Cooley's top advisors.

cited in Miles v. Wesley, No. 13-5562, an archived on September 30, 2015

The court's Executive Committee is expected today to authorize Dukes, the presiding judge, and Executive Officer Jack Clarke to order the furloughs as needed, and to close the civil courts for as many as nine additional days in April, May and June.

Although the courts would be closed, prosecutors and public defenders, who are county employees, would have to report to work. So would all of the judges.

"This is not a vacation day for judges," Dukes said, adding that, as independently elected officials, judges cannot be furloughed. If they could, he said, the withholding of their wages would not help the court's budget because they are paid by the state from another source.

Clarke and the court's 130 court commissioners also would escape the furloughs. "I'm exempt because I'm a department head," Clarke said.

Court officials see no end to the belt-tightening. They anticipate being ordered to cut another 9% from spending plans for the next fiscal year, beginning July 1, which Los Angeles court leaders say could result in the closing of as many as 90 courtrooms.

*Archived on September 30, 2015
No. 13-55625-1
Miles v. Weste
cited in*