

## Courts Face Closures, Job Cuts

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To cope with an anticipated \$57-million shortfall, Los Angeles County Superior Court plans to cut hundreds of jobs and may close 29 courtrooms across the county, according to documents and interviews with court officials.

Layoff notices to 168 employees, mostly clerical staff, could go out as early as this week, with plans ultimately to eliminate 368 positions. The remaining 200 slots are already vacant because of attrition.

Scrambling to reduce expenditures by almost 10%, the Superior Court imposed a hiring freeze earlier this summer and is now considering reducing funding for courthouse security and ending the use of retired judges. Funding for popular programs such as Drug Court also could be in jeopardy.

The largest court system in California, Los Angeles County has about 600 courtrooms, 613 judicial officers and 5,800 employees. Other counties throughout the state will have to adjust to similar cuts, officials said.

"The security for the public and for the individuals that work in all the courthouses is of paramount concern and will not be compromised," said Judge Dan Oki, who supervises criminal courts in Los Angeles County.

Oki said he could not comment on details. Others in the justice system expressed concern.

"When cuts of that magnitude are executed, the concern would be that the justice process would be delayed or compromised," said

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No. 13-5561  
Miles v. Westin  
cited in

County Public Defender Mike Judge.

According to a confidential document obtained by The Times, if the court closed 29 courtrooms, it would no longer need the bailiffs or retired judges, traditionally used to ease case overloads and fill vacancies.

"These are real numbers that require serious deliberation. Our objective is that, regardless of the size of the cuts, the judges will come up with a plan that leaves us with a fully functioning court system, Assistant Presiding Judge Robert A. Dukes said Monday.

Court officials said the shortfall stems from increased expenditures and a reduction in state funding. Los Angeles County Superior Court is expected to receive about \$20 million less than expected from the state for the 2002-03 fiscal year, said Executive Officer John A. Clarke.

Other trial-level courts throughout the state are expected to face similar deficits because of the downturn in the economy and the governor's budget recommendations.

"We're the 900-pound gorilla in the court system," said Los Angeles County court spokesman Allan Parachini. "It's showing up here because we have the largest and most complex organization. We're certain that this is a problem that is going to sweep through the court system of California."

The Judicial Council of California warned courts last week that they face a 3.7% reduction in their current spending. In a memo, the council noted that some trial courts may be able to absorb the reduction, while others would have to restrict hiring, renegotiate contracts and maintain vacancies. The budget for California trial courts could be reduced by as much as \$148 million out of a total budget of \$2.5 billion, according to the Judicial Council.

"The courts are definitely taking a hit," said Lynn Holton, a Judicial Council spokeswoman. "We've heard from several courts who are concerned about their budgets for next year. We've already taken

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millions of dollars off the table and we have already made sacrifices in the courts."

Los Angeles County Superior Court has an annual budget of about \$600 million--98% from the state and 2% from fees and grants. The county maintains the court facilities, but does not fund operations.

Other than the expected reduction in state funds, Deputy Executive Officer Bill Mitchell said the deficit is due to increased expenditures, such as staff for the new Chatsworth courthouse. The court also hired 81 contract court reporters as permanent employees and promoted juvenile traffic hearing officers to referees.

The judges proposed cutting 5.7% of the workforce by taking several steps, including eliminating vacant positions, firing probationary office assistants and clerical workers, discontinuing the use of retirees and laying off trainee clerks hired after Feb. 4. The court administration stressed in its documents that it plans to honor negotiated salary increases and promotions.

The budget committee expects to make final decisions within 30 days, after receiving feedback on the recommendations. If no decisions are made until November, an additional 70 total positions could be slashed, according to the confidential documents. And if no action is taken until January, the deficit could cause the elimination of 157 more positions.

Judges and administrators are beginning to assess the effect on courthouse safety, judges' caseload and public access to the courts. The court is looking to cut about \$10 million of its total \$100 million spending on security, Clarke said. That could be accomplished by closing some lockups and transferring those criminal cases to other courthouses.

Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley said he believes the Superior Court could save some money by allowing county and court employees to bypass metal detectors at courthouse entrances. "It's been security overkill, and they ought to look hard at cutting back," he said.

Executive Officer Clark said the forecast for the future is just as dim.

"We're anticipating next year to be as bad or worse than this year," he said.

*cited in Miles v. Wesley, No. 13-55620 archived on September 30, 2015*