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Strength for many in Tacoma comes from woman's 'weakness'

Superior Court would like new resources to help curb backlog

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By SEAN ROBINSON — Staff writer

A new employee in family court would be nice, maybe even a new judge in Pierce County Superior Court and perhaps the first steps toward a mental-health court.

Those are the top three items on a budget wish list offered by the county's court leaders, but they're just wishes for now. Tuesday, presiding Judge Ronald Culpepper discussed the list with County Council members while providing a general overview of the state of the Superior Court.

The occasion was the council's weekly study session: a loose affair where members sit around a conference table, talking policy, money and the future.

Culpepper, taking stock of court doings, led with a highlight: a long-standing backlog of criminal court cases is down and staying down. The backlog, measured as cases more than nine months old, peaked at almost 350 cases in 2007. Six years later, it's dropped to fewer than 200, and judges are trying to keep the numbers low.

"We're making a conscious effort to focus on older cases and get them done," Culpepper said.

Part of the problem stems from automatic continuances, Culpepper said. Attorneys will agree between themselves via email or phone calls to kick a hearing back for another two weeks as a matter of habit. Judges are trying to counter that with a policy that requires direct argument in court if a case has been on the docket for more than six months.

"We're hoping to try to change the culture a little bit," Culpepper said.

Separate topics included the court's supplemental budget request, a routine exercise for all county departments this time of year, subject to review by the county executive and final approval by the council.

REQUESTS

Court leaders requested a total of \$1.28 million in supplemental money (the court's 2013 budget is \$13.99 million). Within that request, the highest priority is an additional family-court technician: a dry title for a catch-all job that involves helping people navigate proceedings where emotions run high.

The number of pending cases has risen from 690 in December 2011 to 850 as of last month, according to court statistics. Many family court plaintiffs don't hire attorneys and try to handle the process on their own.

Culpepper called court technicians "the saints of Superior Court. If you want to know about misery, go down to family court." The added position would cost \$90,000, according to the budget request.

A spot for a new full-time judge is another item on the wish list. The court employs 22 full-time judges and eight court commissioners. Funding for judges and their salaries is split between the state and the county.

24 FOR PIERCE

State law sets the number of judges for each county's Superior Court. In theory, the formula allows 24 judges for Pierce County — two additional seats. King County, with a larger population, has 53 Superior Court judges.

Measured by cases per judge, Pierce County is overloaded. State statistics show that King County prosecutors filed 6,123 criminal cases in 2012 — a ratio of 115 cases per judge.

Pierce County prosecutors filed 4,922 criminal cases in 2012 — a ratio of 223 cases per judge.

"We have almost the same number of people we send to prison as King County without about 40 percent of the population and about 40 percent of the judges," Culpepper said Tuesday. "Maybe this is good news. Maybe it says something else. I don't know. We're a pretty busy court."

Culpepper, along with Judge Ed Murphy, also discussed the prospect of a new mental-health court.

The idea has bubbled for some time; court and county leaders see it as a possible relief system for mentally ill people charged with lower-level offenses. Such individuals are clogging the county jail and local emergency rooms. Theoretically, a mental-health court, structured along the lines of the county's drug court, would push such defendants toward needed treatment, reducing costs elsewhere in the county's legal system.

"This is all kind of in the conceptual phase," Culpepper said. "As you know we have a lot of people in the jail with some mental-health problems.

"Some of the folks in jail who are mentally ill deserve to be there. Some are hard to work with. They burn their bridges, their families have given up on them. They get arrested because they won't leave the 7-Eleven store.

"The underlying problem isn't their criminal behavior — it's that they're mentally ill. If we could get them out, hook them up to something that would keep them out of jail, we'd all benefit."

LONG TIMELINE

Decisions about the supplemental budget request and individual items are a long way off.

The county executive's office will review requests from all departments and submit an initial proposal by the middle of next month.

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