

Budget cuts threaten justice

Originally published April 28, 2015 at 5:28 pm Updated April 28, 2015 at 5:46 pm

Washington is dead last among the 50 states in the percentage of state funding for courts, and the state Senate proposes even deeper cuts.

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Special to The Times

WE are grateful that our Washington courts cannot and do not turn away anyone. But under the budget proposed by the state Senate, they may no longer be able to guarantee a fully functioning court system.

The justice system was established as the third, coequal branch of government and belongs to all of the people as the last line of defense of a person's right to be protected from abuse of government power and the harmful acts of another.

Functioning courts with timely hearings and the resolution of legal disputes are a core importance to all communities, affecting safety, overall fairness and a community's economic vitality. When core functions are cut from the courts' operating budget, core principles are also lost. Aging technology begins to fail, court users wait longer, critical information is no longer available to judges, and key components to fairness and efficiency are lost.

Though Washington ranks dead last among the 50 states in the percentage of state funding for the courts — our judicial branch receives just two-fifths of 1 percent of the state budget — the state Senate is now proposing even deeper cuts in the funding of our court system.

No other part of our state government will be cut back as much as our courts.

The proposal would cut another \$11 million from an already underfunded system, and would provide Washington's appellate courts and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) with less funding than did the 2009-2011 state budget at the height of the recession. This would devastate essential programs such as basic support services to courts and Court-Appointed Special Advocates for children, while placing an even heavier burden on counties and municipalities.

The Senate proposes huge cuts for the Supreme Court, Court of Appeals and if adopted, the AOC's total budget would have been reduced by 45 percent since 2009 for all daily operations to assist the court system, with the exception of the state's Judicial Information System and judges' salaries. Similarly, the Supreme Court's budget would be cut by 23 percent and the Court of Appeals by 17 percent since 2009.

Most households could not sustain such a reduction and neither can our courts. Justice delayed from underfunded courts will mean justice denied in countless ways. For example, domestic violence victims may be left unprotected from abusive partners during protracted protection-order proceedings, prosecutions and appeals, further endangering our citizens and generating additional work for police. And the continual influx of civil cases big and small, which historically have been resolved in our courts, will end up stymied at a higher cost to the litigants. I hope the state Senate will take another look at this proposal and consider its impact on communities across the state.

We understand the difficult job lawmakers have, and how important it is to use taxpayer dollars wisely. Our courts have pitched in to help economize. Alternative sentencings, youth intervention, mediation, and video hearings are just some of the things our courts have done to reduce transportation costs and increase access to justice in remote areas. There are many more examples of courts across the state using innovation to provide justice to the best of their ability at the lowest possible costs.

However, even innovation and efficiency cannot save court operations from the strain of severe underfunding and ongoing, multiyear cuts to core services.

Our courts should continue to work with lawmakers to help them manage a difficult budget, but state lawmakers must also work with the courts to ensure that our communities have the functioning system of justice guaranteed in our federal and state constitutions, which protects individuals and helps communities thrive, and which will be put at serious risk if these cuts are implemented.

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