

Legislative plan would impose devastating cuts on court system

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Several years ago, judges statewide began asking the Legislature for more adequate and stable funding for the trial courts so that we could provide equal and accessible justice across our state. At that time, our great state of Washington was dead last – 50th out of 50 states – for the money spent on our trial courts. Even worse, the money the state spent on the entire judicial branch of government was only three-tenths of one percent of the state operating budget. Since 2005, state lawmakers deserves much credit for responsibly starting down the path to provide adequate and stable funding for the trial courts of our state. They started partially funding services such as court interpreters, mandatory guardian ad litem for children in dependency cases, district and municipal court judges' salaries, parent dependency representation, and criminal indigent defense, among other costs.

The state's contribution to the trial courts rose from three-tenths to seven-tenths of the state operating budget. Since 2010, however, this critical funding has been cut. Now cuts proposed by the Legislature would be even more devastating. For example, the Senate's budget proposes a cut of \$7.9 million that can only come from the pass-through funds for trial court operations and direct services by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the state agency for the judicial branch which exists largely to support the trial courts.

This would result in a 31.2 percent overall cut to AOC since 2005, a cut to an entire branch of government that is greater than any agency of the executive branch has taken. It is reprehensible that a co-equal branch of government, the judiciary, is provided so little money to run our statewide court system and is now being threatened with even more cuts. Because 63.6 percent of the budget for the AOC is either constitutionally protected or protected by the Legislature through provisos, the cuts proposed in the Senate budget come entirely from the remaining 36.4 percent of the budget: the Justice in Jeopardy Initiative pass-throughs and direct court services.

The pass-throughs include funding for supervisors for court-appointed special advocates, the volunteers serving as statutorily required guardians ad litem to represent the best interests of children who have been removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse or neglect. Using volunteers leverages public funding. Sadly, this program, though mandated by the Legislature, is in danger of shutting down – even though it saves more money than it costs.

Other pass-throughs in danger include court interpreters for those who cannot understand English and would not otherwise know what is happening in court; a contribution to the salaries of district and qualifying municipal court judges who preside over trials involving state statutes; and collection of legal financial obligations by the clerks – which adds money to the general fund, among other funding that serves those using the trial courts.

This just does not make sense. We urge the Legislature to reconsider the deep cuts to the AOC budget that will result in loss of services that help the people access the court system. Don't close the doors to the courthouse for those persons who need these services.

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