

Washington State Judicial Branch

2025-27 Biennial Budget

Expand Court Research Capacity

Agency: Administrative Office of the Courts

Decision Package Code/Title: BG – Expand Court Research Capacity

Agency Recommendation Summary Text:

The Administrative Office of the Courts requests \$916,000 and 2.0 FTEs ongoing to manage the expanded responsibilities of the Washington Center for Court Research (WSSCR). WSSCR began in 2006 with six staff and a limited scope: estimating judicial workload for courts, assessing two local court programs, and studying juror pay in three trial courts. Now WSSCR has 18 staff supporting new court programs and operations dependent on data to learn, change, and improve to achieve higher levels of equal and effective justice. Without additional support, WSSCR cannot maintain its quality research programs. (General Fund-State)

Fiscal Summary:

	FY 2026	FY 2027	Biennial	FY 2028	FY 2029	Biennial
Staffing						
FTEs	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Operating Expenditures						
Fund 001-1	\$464,000	\$452,000	\$916,000	\$452,000	\$452,000	\$904,000
Total Expenditures						
	\$464,000	\$452,000	\$916,000	\$452,000	\$452,000	\$904,000

Package Description:

Implementation of the Washington State Center for Court Research (WSSCR) began in 2006 with a staff of three researchers, two database specialists, and a manager (6 staff in total). Topics in WSSCR's portfolio included estimating how much judge time was needed in each court, assessing local court programs in two counties, and studying juror pay pilot involving three trial courts.

In 2024 the staff consists of fourteen researchers, two database specialists, a senior court program analyst, and a manager (18 staff in total). At the Legislature's direction, WSSCR has launched a series of program initiatives intended to support courts as learning organizations that can be responsive to local conditions and lead their local operations to higher levels of equal and effective justice. The program areas WSSCR supports include:

- Therapeutic Courts
- Collaborative Family Courts
- Family and Juvenile Court Improvement
- Juvenile Detention
- Juvenile Probation
- Legal Financial Obligations
- Judicial Needs Estimates
- Court Workload Management
- Juror Demographics
- Court Program and Court Organization Assessment and Feedback
- Dependent Children Legal Representation
- Data Development
- Data visualization

WSSCR's business is organized by the Data for Justice model, which supports the courts to build their internal capacity to use information, including enhanced feedback from the court-involved population, to manage programs for improvement (responsiveness, effectiveness, and equity).

Administrative Office of the Courts
Policy Level – BG – Expand Court Research Capacity

The expanded scope of WSSCR operations creates an urgent need for additional capacity. Under this proposal, responsibility for research operations will be split into subject matter areas. This will benefit the subject matter areas by providing a greater level of focus and support related to the design, operation, and administration of research programs. It will benefit the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and the courts by giving the Court Research Manager additional capacity to focus on courts and their needs for developing and using information in service to improvement. The work of WSSCR is broad, detailed, impactful, visible, and needed to support effective and equitable court programs. Adding support, will ensure WSSCR maintains its quality research programs

Fully describe and quantify expected impacts on state residents.

Everyone who is affected by court operations stands a chance of being affected, in a positive way, by further state investment in WSSCR. WSSCR works with courts, helping them gain perspective on and make improvement to their programs, ranging from pretrial to jury management to therapeutic courts and community supervision.

Explain what alternatives were explored by the agency and why this was the best option chosen.

WSSCR's scope has expanded. Maintaining the current, more broad and flat structure was considered. But, it is not serving the needs of AOC or the courts. The decision to create subject matter teams and request this expanded capacity was taken only after it became clear through experience that the current structure is not up to the task.

What are the consequences of not funding this request?

With additional capacity, there will be a lack of focused subject matter area guidance for researchers, a risk of burnout within the work group, and insufficient communication and coordination both within the AOC and between the WSSCR and the courts.

Is this an expansion or alteration of a current program or service?

This will expand the staffing of the WSSCR by adding two positions.

Decision Package expenditure, FTE and revenue assumptions:

Staffing Assumptions

Principal Research Associate. The new staff allow WSSCR to split in two teams of subject matter experts. One FTE will work with dependency courts, juvenile courts, therapeutic courts, and other programs. The second FTE will assume responsibility for equity and access, juror demographics, pretrial, court workload, judicial needs, data visualization, court-involved persons' feedback, and other programs.

Expenditures by Object	<u>FY 2026</u>	<u>FY 2027</u>	<u>FY 2028</u>	<u>FY 2029</u>	<u>FY 2030</u>	<u>FY 2031</u>
A Salaries and Wages	264,000	264,000	264,000	264,000	264,000	264,000
B Employee Benefits	82,000	82,000	82,000	82,000	82,000	82,000
E Goods and Services	12,000	12,000	12,000	12,000	12,000	12,000
G Travel	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000
J Capital Outlays	16,000	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000
T Intra-Agency Reimbursements	86,000	86,000	86,000	86,000	86,000	86,000
Total Objects	464,000	452,000	452,000	452,000	452,000	452,000

Staffing

Job Class	Salary	<u>FY 2026</u>	<u>FY 2027</u>	<u>FY 2028</u>	<u>FY 2029</u>	<u>FY 2030</u>	<u>FY 2031</u>
PRINCIPAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE	132,000	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Total FTEs		2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0

Explanation of standard costs by object:

A - Salary estimates are current biennium actual rates at Step L.

B - Benefits are the agency average of 31.10% of salaries.

E - Goods and Services are the agency average of \$5,800 per direct program FTE.

G - Travel is the agency average of \$2,000 per direct program FTE.

J – Ongoing Equipment is the agency average of \$1,900 per direct program FTE.

J – One-time IT Equipment is \$5,900 for the first fiscal year per direct program FTE.

Agency Indirect is calculated at a rate of 24.98% of direct program salaries and benefits.

How does the package relate to the Judicial Branch principal policy objectives?

Fair and Effective Administration of Justice

The heart of WSCCR's mission is fair and effective court operations. By focusing WSCCR's work into subject matter areas, existing staff will be better supported and more effective at aligning WSCCR's work with court needs and with other components of the AOC.

Accessibility

WSCCR supports accessibility through assessing the need for accessibility (such as through estimating demand for interpreter services for each court), consulting on design of physical and virtual spaces, and gathering feedback from court-involved persons who could benefit from greater accessibility. Making WSCCR more focused will help it be more responsive in this area.

Access to Necessary Representation

WSCCR provides Washington-specific analysis of the match between demand for and supply of legal representation. Making WSCCR more focused will help it be more responsive in this area.

Commitment to Effective Court Management

WSCCR participates in AOC initiatives that help courts develop internal capacity to effectively manage their operations. Making WSCCR more focused will help it be more responsive in this area.

Sufficient Staffing and Support

Providing valid and timely estimates of the need for staffing and support is a core element of WSCCR's portfolio. Making WSCCR more focused will help it be more responsive in this area.

How does the package impact equity in the state?

Address any target populations or communities that will benefit from this proposal.

The population of court-involved individuals and the population of people who work in the judicial branch will benefit from materially greater and more sustainable research capacity.

Describe the how the agency conducted community outreach and engagement.

Not applicable.

Consider which target populations or communities would be disproportionately impacted by this proposal.

Explain why and how these equity impacts will be mitigated.

No adverse impacts are anticipated.

Are there impacts to other governmental entities?

No.

Stakeholder response:

Requests from courts, the Legislature, and other stakeholders for WSCCR's skills grows steadily, year by year. This change will give those groups materially greater levels of support.

Are there legal or administrative mandates that require this package to be funded?

Not directly, although the package will make it more feasible for WSCCR to respond to legal and other mandates.

Does current law need to be changed to successfully implement this package?

No.

Are there impacts to state facilities?

No.

Are there other supporting materials that strengthen the case for this request?

None are needed.

Are there information technology impacts?

No.

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