

Washington State Judicial Branch

2025-27 Biennial Budget

Fund Three New Superior Court Judges

Agency: Administrative Office of the Courts

Decision Package Code/Title: AC – Fund New Superior Court Judges

Agency Recommendation Summary Text:

The Administrative Office of the Courts requests \$1,274,000 ongoing to fund a 5th Superior Court Judge in Skagit County and the 55th and 56th Superior Court Judges in King County effective July 1, 2025. The Skagit request accompanies legislative proposals that would amend RCW 2.08.063 increasing the number of judges serving Skagit County. This request is supported by the 2020 Judicial Needs Estimate. The King County judges are already authorized in RCW 2.08.061. (General Fund – State)

Fiscal Summary:

	FY 2026	FY 2027	Biennial	FY 2028	FY 2029	Biennial
Staffing						
FTEs	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
Operating Expenditures						
Fund 001-1	\$637,000	\$637,000	\$1,274,000	\$637,000	\$637,000	\$1,274,000
Total Expenditures						
	\$637,000	\$637,000	\$1,274,000	\$637,000	\$637,000	\$1,274,000

Package Description:

The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) is required to pay for half of the salary and all the benefit costs for superior court judges.

For King County, the Legislature in 1992 authorized an increase in the number of Superior Court Judges from 46 to 58 authorized judgeships (Chapter 189, Laws of 1992, Section 1). At the time these judges were not all funded with an accompanying decision package. Over the last 32 years, budget requests have been made and funding has been appropriated for up to 54 of the authorized judges. This request would fund the 55th and 56th judgeships.

Fully describe and quantify expected impacts on state residents.

Criminal, civil, domestic, and juvenile dependency cases are heard in superior court. Each case involves alleged victims, parents of dependent children, and foster parents, whose lives are impacted by the outcome. The faith and confidence Washingtonians place in the judiciary will be impacted by the assurance that every county in Washington has fully-staffed, effective, and fair courts with judges able to perform to their highest ability.

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

No alternatives were explored. The AOC has a statutory obligation to pay for superior court judges when supported by the counties and authorized by the Legislature.

What are the consequences of not funding this request?

The consequence of not funding this request would be that AOC would not have the ability to pay the state's share of the superior court judges in these counties/judicial districts.

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

This is an expansion of a current program by adding a judge in Skagit County. It is not an expansion in King County where the additional judges have already been authorized by the Legislature.

Decision Package expenditure, FTE and revenue assumptions:

Staffing Assumptions

Superior Court Judges. Beginning July 1, 2025 and ongoing, AOC requires salary, benefits, and associated standard costs for three new superior court judges – one in Skagit County and two in King County.

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	342,000	342,000	342,000	342,000	342,000	342,000
B Employee Benefits	168,000	168,000	168,000	168,000	168,000	168,000
T Intra-Agency Reimbursements	127,000	127,000	127,000	127,000	127,000	127,000
Total Objects	637,000	637,000	637,000	637,000	637,000	637,000

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.

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

Judges need time to prepare and fully hear the litigants before them; when that time is limited, decisions may be made without necessary preparation or full opportunity for those litigants to be heard, understood, and their positions fully considered. Only so many cases may be heard in a day, and only so many pleadings may be reviewed in a day by even the most experienced and knowledgeable judges. Reducing caseloads increases the ability of judges to do necessary preparation, to give litigants the time needed to argue their cases, and to take their time in considering and making informed and fair decisions. High caseloads lead to limitations of time and the possibility of mistakes or misunderstandings which can lead to less-than-fair and just results.

Accessibility

Currently, all litigants—even those with special needs—are heard on the same calendars as all other litigants. This does not always allow for the specialized consideration that some disabled litigants require, and may lead to a rushed system that inadvertently discourages requests for accommodations or additional space or time needed. Additional judicial positions will allow for more time and a more accommodating atmosphere necessary to encourage participation by all in our justice system.

Access to Necessary Representation

All individuals appearing before the courts of Washington have a right to adequate representation, or the absolute right to appear on their own behalf. Rushed court days with too many hearings make it difficult for a judge to determine whether an individual is represented by choice, or representing themselves by choice, or whether the decision was made due to misunderstanding or other factors. Adequate time and space in a court calendar for the judge to explore these issues is critical to litigants making informed and considered choices, or to fully inform the litigants of the options available to them on an individualized basis. Additional judges will ease the filled calendars and allow full discussion, information, and exploration of the needs of litigants.

Sufficient Staffing and Support

Addition judicial positions are supported by AOC’s judicial needs estimate and authorized in the current statute.

How does the package impact equity in the state?

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

Litigants and criminal defendants before superior courts are largely those from underserved and underrepresented populations—those who are impoverished, come from racial or ethnic minority groups, those with mental health or addiction issues, and those with disabilities. These more vulnerable people need to be well-served by superior court judges with the time, bandwidth, and personal well-being to devote 100% attention to every person who appears before them. Especially in criminal matters, these communities need patience, a desire to understand and explore the issues facing them, and their limitations in participation in the justice system. An overburdened court is not able to devote 100% attention to any litigant.

Describe the how the agency conducted community outreach and engagement.

Concerns with the current workload of the superior courts is known by attorneys and court personnel. We expect support for the proposal.

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

Explain why and how these equity impacts will be mitigated.

No populations will be disproportionately impacted in a negative way by this proposal; equity, inclusion, and justice can only be improved by this proposal.

Are there impacts to other governmental entities?

The impact to other governmental entities is to the counties adding new superior court judges. They are supportive and have agreed to pay their portion of the new superior court judges’ salaries.

Stakeholder response:

Stakeholders are expected to support this proposal.

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

No.

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

Yes. RCW 2.08.063 will need to be amended to add a judicial position.

Are there impacts to state facilities?

No.

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

Legislation will be proposed to amend the statute authorizing an additional judge Skagit County.

Are there information technology impacts?

No information technology impacts beyond those required for any new hire are anticipated.

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