Washington State Judicial Branch
2026 Supplemental Budget
Add 9th Superior Court Judge to Yakima County

Agency: Administrative Office of the Courts

Decision Package Code/Title: Add 9th Judge to Yakima Superior Court

Agency Recommendation Summary Text:

The Administrative Office of the Courts and Yakima County jointly request $220,000 per year in ongoing funding to add a ninth judge to the Yakima County Superior Court. For 27 years, Yakima County Superior Court has operated with a bench of eight judges. In that time, the county's population has grown and with it, the volume and complexity of caseloads.

The court's caseload has increased sharply over the past three years. Over the years, the court has taken steps to adopt national best practices, leveraged technical assistance, and harnessed technology where appropriate, but these efforts, while helpful, are no longer sufficient on their own. (General Fund—State)

Fiscal Summary:

	FY 2026	FY 2027	Biennial	FY 2028	FY 2029	Biennial
Staffing						
FTEs	0	0.50	**0.25**	0.50	0.50	**0.50`**
Operating Expenditures						
Fund 001-1	$0	$220	**$220**	$220	$220	**$440**
Total Expenditures						
	$0	**$220**	**$220**	**$220**	**$220**	**$440**

Dollars in Thousands

Package Description:
Numerous factors influence the workload of judicial officers: Population growth, legislative changes, a decrease in the number of legal professionals, as well actions taken by law enforcement and prosecutors all contribute to a judge's workload. Societal factors, such as the Fentanyl crisis, and periodic increases in crime are just a couple of examples that further add to the judicial workload. Each of these factors affects the volume of case filings, the nature of the cases submitted to the court, and the duration required for a judicial officer to effectively manage and resolve cases timely.

Delivering prompt and efficient justice with an emphasis on procedural fairness is a fundamental principle. As Yakima's population continues to grow, it is critical for the Superior Court to maintain its ability to deliver justice in a timely and effective manner to uphold the rule of law and ensure effective case management. To accomplish this, there must be sufficient judicial officers to manage the increasing caseloads. Yakima County has grown by eight percent over 27 years and is 10th highest county in the state for population growth, as the table below shows, but the real impact is coming from legislative changes and the increasing complexity of cases, as shown by time-to-resolution and clearance rate statistics.

	Yakima County Population Trends 2014-2025						
			Yakima County Projections- Total Resident Population Growth				
Year	1998	2014	2020	2024	2025	*2026*	*2030*
	244,960	248,800	256,728	263,200	264,650	*265,214*	*271,120*

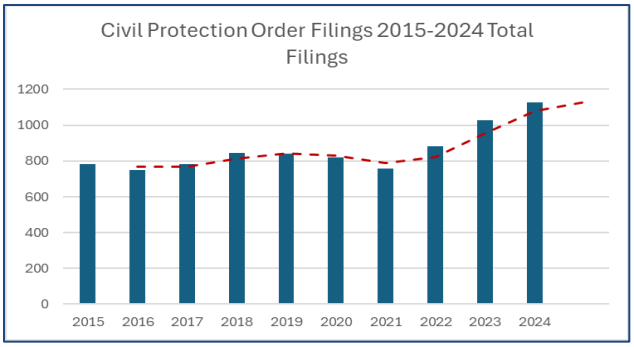
*All population information has been obtained from the Washington State Office of Financial Management

Significant legislative reforms have been implemented to improve access to justice for marginalized communities, leading to an uptick in case filings in Yakima County. There has been an increase in case filings, along with a rise in the number of hearings and a greater demand for judicial research and time spent on each individual case. Notable examples of these reforms include the Uniform Guardianship Act, modifications to civil protection orders, and legislative changes regarding eviction cases.

Example 1: The Uniform Guardianship Act (UGA) took effect in 2021 and established improved standards for courts, requiring them to appoint professionals such as Court Visitors and attorneys, while also expanding the circumstances under which a professional may be appointed. This has increased hearings and judicial time dedicated to reviewing reports and making informed decisions in each unique case. The number of appointments over a five-year period between 2015-2020 totaled 2 cases. However, since the law's implementation in 2021, the number of appointments has surged to 218 cases. (see table below)

Court Appointed Professional Costs Year to Year Comparison						
Year	Court Visitor	Total Hours	Court Appointed Attorney	Total Hours	Total Cost	Total Reimbursement from AOC
2020	0	0	0	0	0	$0
2024	$132,794	1,562	$157,968	903	$290,762	$144,997

Example 2: The changes to civil protection order statutes became effective in 2022. Before 2020, the Superior Court saw an annual average of 800 filings for protection orders. This trend remained consistent in 2022, but by 2023, the filings had increased to 1,028, and in 2024, they increased further to 1,128, representing a 41% rise in civil protection order filings.



Time-to-Disposition and Clearance Rate Metrics

In 2017, the court contracted with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to address growing caseloads and find effective management strategies. Numerous case management techniques suggested by NCSC led to improved judicial oversight of cases to ensure that litigants are following the necessary steps towards resolution. Additionally, judges consider factors such as procedural fairness and transparency. These elements are crucial for litigants but also require more of a judge's time dedicated to each case. The time-to-disposition rates in Yakima County Superior Court serve as a key indicator of the court's efficiency and effectiveness. See the table below for recent data and note the column "Percent Not Met". This metric indicates the percent of cases that were resolved beyond the established time standards for the State of Washington.

Many of these categories are above 25 percent.

YAKIMA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT
FILING TO RESOLUTION
Time Standard Report (Preliminary Version)
For Cases Resolved in 2025 through 6/27/2025 12:00:00 AM

	Case Type	90%		98 %		100%		% NOT MET	Total Cases
01	Criminal	41.24	(4 mos)	47.88	(6 mos)	56.58	(9 mos)	43.42	965
02	Civil	88.95	(12 mos)	90.77	(18 mos)	94.47	(24 mos)	5.53	1,972
03	Domestic	35.36	(10 mos)	39.35	(14 mos)	47.04	(18 mos)	52.96	676
04	Probate	73.02	(8 mos)	85.29	(18 mos)	92.37	(36 mos)	7.63	367
05	Guardianship	47.92	(8 mos)	55.21	(18 mos)	71.88	(36 mos)	28.13	96
06	Adoption/Parentage	57.03	(8 mos)	62.50	(10 mos)	64.84	(14 mos)	35.16	128
07	Mental Illness	100.00	(8 mos)	100.00	(10 mos)	100.00	(14 mos)	0.00	510
08	Dependency	68.52	(8 mos)	75.00	(10 mos)	81.48	(14 mos)	18.52	108
09	Juv. Offender	80.17	(4 mos)	91.38	(6 mos)	95.26	(9 mos)	4.74	232
11	Lower Court Appeal	14.29	(4 mos)	28.57	(5 mos)	28.57	(6 mos)	71.43	7

Clearance rates are another important metric in the court system. This metric measures the volume of incoming filings against the number of cases that are resolved. When the clearance falls below 1.0, it indicates that the incoming workload exceeds the resources available for closing cases.

For the last several years, most of the categories fell *far* below 1.0.

Yakima Superior Filings

Year	Criminal (1)	Civil (2)	Domestic	Probate/ Guardianship (5)	Adoption/ Parentage (3)	Mental Illness/ Alcohol	Juvenile Dependency (4)	Juvenile Offender (1)	Total Filings
2020	2211	2348	1022	804	291	1049	431	561	8717
2021	2104	2262	1034	957	271	1044	359	320	8351
2022	2166	2706	942	979	244	818	418	426	8699
2023	1959	3258	1033	972	252	816	429	421	9140
2024	1909	3838	922	940	249	1135	346	451	9790

Yakima Superior Resolutions

County/Court	Criminal (1)	Civil (2)	Domestic	Probate/ Guardianship (5)	Adoption/ Parentage (3)	Mental Illness/ Alcohol	Juvenile Dependency (4)	Juvenile Offender (1)	Total Resolutions
2020	1768	2533	1271	425	356	1049	514	595	8511
2021	2001	1859	925	201	294	822	268	302	6672
2022	1741	2220	922	285	242	39	365	341	6155
2023	2108	2611	824	640	212	318	355	418	7486
2024	2033	3422	655	542	234	1210	347	443	8886

Yakima Supeior Clearance Rate

County/Court	Criminal (1)	Civil (2)	Domestic	Probate/ Guardianship (5)	Adoption/ Parentage (3)	Mental Illness/ Alcohol	Juvenile Dependency (4)	Juvenile Offender (1)	Clearance Rate
2020	0.79963817	1.07879046	1.24363992	0.528606965	1.223367698	1	1.192575406	1.06060606	0.97636802
2021	0.95104563	0.82183908	0.89458414	0.210031348	1.084870849	0.787356322	0.746518106	0.94375	0.79894623
2022	0.80378578	0.82039911	0.97876858	0.291113381	0.991803279	0.047677262	0.873205742	0.80046948	0.70755259
2023	1.07605921	0.80141191	0.79767667	0.658436214	0.841269841	0.389705882	0.827505828	0.99287411	0.8190372
2024	1.06495547	0.89161021	0.71041215	0.576595745	0.939759036	1.066079295	1.002890173	0.98226164	0.90766088

Finally, a frequently used metric is the age of pending cases. This highlights the court "backlog," which refers to cases that are still open, active, and beyond the Washington State Time-to-Disposition Standards. Some cases in this category may surpass the time standards for legal reasons or other circumstances outside of the court's control, nevertheless, reviewing this metric is beneficial for visually illustrating the age of cases within the system.

Note that there are over 2800 cases that are over 2 years old.

YAKIMA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT

Age of Active Pending Resolution Caseload as of 6/27/25 (Preliminary Version)

(All calculations are based on 30.4 days per month)

Case Type		0-4 mos		5-8 mos		9-12 mos		13-24 mos		over 24 mos			
		# of Cases	%	# of Cases	%	# of Cases	%	# of Cases	%	# of Cases	%	Total	%
01	Criminal	396	23.3	253	14.9	215	12.6	324	19.0	514	30.2	1702	100.0
02	Civil	369	28.0	197	14.9	177	13.4	299	22.7	277	21.0	1319	100.0
03	Domestic	319	26.9	155	13.1	171	14.4	238	20.1	303	25.5	1186	100.0
04	Probate	73	3.8	113	5.9	79	4.1	202	10.5	1464	75.8	1931	100.0
05	Guardianship	58	22.1	32	12.2	39	14.8	54	20.5	80	30.4	263	100.0
06	Adoption/Parentage	68	41.0	27	16.3	16	9.6	29	17.5	26	15.7	166	100.0
07	Mental Illness	93	66.0	5	3.5	1	0.7	6	4.3	36	25.5	141	100.0
08	Dependency	60	47.6	19	15.1	14	11.1	15	11.9	18	14.3	126	100.0
09	Juv. Offender	75	40.1	15	8.0	5	2.7	15	8.0	77	41.2	187	100.0
11	Lower Court Appeal	1	7.7	1	7.7	2	15.4	3	23.1	6	46.2	13	100.0
	Total	1512	21.50	817	11.62	719	10.22	1185	16.85	2801	39.82	7,034	100.0

Fully describe and quantify expected impacts on state residents.

The existing backlogged caseload and its associated workload have a detrimental impact on the Yakima County bench and the local community. The lack of resources leads to compromised quality of justice and significant delays for litigants and the families of Yakima County. The current strain on the local judiciary hampers access to justice for marginalized communities, prolongs the resolution of legal disputes, and complicates the ability of individuals and businesses to navigate the legal system effectively. The addition of a judge would significantly reduce these pressures resulting in tangible benefits such as improved access to justice and better resource allocation within improvements such as enhanced access to justice and better resource allocation within the court system.

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

Over the last several years, Yakima County Superior Court has made numerous adjustments to its calendar to manage increasing caseloads. For instance, the civil protection order dockets have expanded from two court sessions per week to four. Furthermore, the court has collaborated with local volunteer attorney service providers to assist on high-volume unrepresented litigant court days, ensuring these individuals can receive personalized assistance in resolving their family cases. Additionally, specific court staff have been designated to monitor cases that have exceeded 365 days in our court system. Ongoing collaboration is fostered through the establishment of case-specific work groups that include representatives from each part of the legal system, such as prosecutors, defense attorneys, and members of the local civil bar. These workgroups are designed to focus on bottlenecks in the case navigation process and to enhance any internal workflows and procedures that may require improvement.

Yakima County Superior Court has diligently worked to improve clearance rates, reduce time to disposition and streamline court processes by implementing best practices and leveraging technical support from national experts. While these additional efforts have yielded some positive outcomes, they remain insufficient to keep up with the ongoing increase in caseloads that the court has experienced over the past three years.

What are the consequences of not funding this request?
In the absence of sufficient judicial resources, Yakima County Superior Court cases will continue to face delays or remain unresolved, thereby hindering the community's access to justice.

Administrative Office of the Courts
Policy Level – A4 – Add 9th Judge to Yakima Superior Court

Is this an expansion or alteration of a current program or service?
No

Decision Package expenditure, FTE and revenue assumptions:

Staffing

Job Class	**Salary**	**FY 2026**	**FY 2027**	**FY 2028**	**FY 2029**	**FY 2030**	**FY 2031**
SUPERIOR COURT JUDGE	122,000	0.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
	Total FTEs	**0.0**	**0.5**	**0.5**	**0.5**	**0.5**	**0.5**

	Expenditures by Object	**FY 2026**	**FY 2027**	**FY 2028**	**FY 2029**	**FY2030**	**FY2031**
A	Salaries and Wages		122,000	122,000	122,000	122,000	122,000
B	Employee Benefits		56,000	56,000	56,000	56,000	56,000
T	Intra-Agency Reimbursements		42,000	42,000	42,000	42,000	42,000
	Total Objects		220,000	220,000	220,000	220,000	220,000

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
This request increases the judicial capacity in Yakima County thereby facilitating the growth of fair and effective justice administration in both civil and criminal cases.

Accessibility
An additional judge provides another resource for the local community, which in turn ensures all court dockets remain manageable, open and accessible.

Access to Necessary Representation
Yakima County Superior Court will continue to follow the constitutional and statutory guarantees of the right to counsel.

Commitment to Effective Court Management
Yakima County Superior Court is dedicated to effective case management and performance oversight. Granting this request would enhance the judicial capacity in Yakima and help address the persistent challenges of managing an increasing workload due to population growth and rising case filings.

Sufficient Staffing and Support
Funding this request for an additional judge in Superior Court would partially fulfill the recommendation from AOC's Judicial Need Estimate.

Are there impacts to other governmental entities?
Yes, the Yakima County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) must approve the funding for one half of this judicial officer's salary, along with additional staff to support the judicial officer. These additional expenditures are included in Yakima County Superior Court's budget request for 2026. The BOCC has provided a letter of support to the court, indicating their commitment to the allocation of 50% of the salary for an additional judge.

Stakeholder response:
At present, the court prioritizes trials involving loss of liberty as top priority. This results in criminal trials taking priority over civil trials, and it is typical for a civil trial to be bumped to accommodate a criminal trial that is close to speedy trial limits. The court expects the local civil bar in Yakima County will fully support this request, as it will lead to the availability of an additional judicial officer to promptly hear and address their civil and domestic cases promptly.

Are there legal or administrative mandates that require this package to be funded?
Pursuant to RCW 2.56.030(11), the Administrator for the Courts shall, under supervision and direction of the chief justice, examine the need for new superior court and district court judge positions under an objective workload analysis. Yakima County Superior Court has demonstrated the need for a 9th judge.

Does current law need to be changed to successfully implement this package?
Yes- RCW 2.08.063 will need to be updated to nine judges for Yakima County Superior Court. A proposed bill accompanies this request.

Judges-Lincoln, Skagit, Walla Walla, Whitman, Yakima, Adams and Whatcom counties.

There shall be in the county of Lincoln one judge of the superior court; in the county of Skagit, four judges of the superior court; in the county of Walla Walla, two judges of the superior court; in the county of Whitman, one judge of the superior court; in the county of Yakima, ~~eight~~ nine judges of the superior court; in the county of Adams, one judge of the superior court; in the county of Whatcom, five judges of the superior court.

Are there impacts to state facilities?
No

Are there other supporting materials that strengthen the case for this request?
Letters of support from Yakima County senate and house representatives as well as letters of support from the civil bar in Yakima and local law and justice partners to indicate how an additional judge would positively impact the judicial system in Yakima County.

Are there information technology impacts?
No

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