

Interbranch Advisory Committee (IAC) Meeting

June 23, 2025 | 9:00am-11:30am

Tukwila Justice Center

Welcome from Chief Justice Stephens and Senator Pedersen.

Welcome from Tukwila Municipal Court Judge Walden & Tukwila Mayor McLeod, who commented on the impact of the Tukwila Justice Center to the Public. The building showcases how “when branches of government work together we can accomplish something amazing.”

Note from C.J. Stephens:

While the committee was reauthorized during the last legislative session, the funding for the committee was vetoed on a misunderstanding. AOC, the Chief’s office and Senator Pedersen’s office will be covering in the meantime until the supplemental legislative session, so the funding may be corrected, and the work may continue.

Judicial Branch Updates (Chief Justice Debra Stephens)

Events that have occurred since the last meeting:

- The Bench Bar Press Committee held their second Court-Media Training in May 2025, hosted by seven community colleges throughout Washington state, via video conference. This event provided an opportunity for the media to ask judges/court professionals questions in a panel style and allowed the panelists to explain how to help mediate disputes that arise over court coverage, especially those in high profile cases. With the new push to get court professionals talking to/about media coverage, the committee is hoping to make this an annual training.
- The first ever Tribal Judicial Summit occurred in June 2025 at the Little Creek Resort in Shelton, WA. C.J. Stephens co-convened this summit with Kris Peters, Council Chairman of the Squaxin Island Tribe. Several tribal chairs from other tribes attended as well. This included informational training in cultural tribal history, conversations surrounding the Tribal State Court Consortium, and training(s) that will be beneficial in the future surrounding tribal/state courts. The hope is that this event can occur on at least a biennial basis.
- The Minority and Justice Commission Symposium occurred in June 2025 at the Temple of Justice. Judicial representatives from across the state and access to justice groups were in attendance. There was a focus on the experience of indigenous communities and their barriers to justice, especially with issues re: child welfare and tribal/state courts. Great conversations surrounding these issues will continue to occur and will help develop better collaboration between tribal and state courts.
- The Judicial Leadership Summit occurred in June 2025 at the Temple of Justice. One focus of this summit was interpreter services. There is a big concern surrounding the

accessibility and cost of interpreter services throughout the state. There will continue to be a push for funding and research into AI tools for interpreter services/ access to court services.

Upcoming Events/ Updates:

- Disability Justice Task Force Symposium: 9/10 at the Temple of Justice.
The task force has been working diligently over the past years on a comprehensive report/ survey of disability justice barriers. The court has learned that we are not where we need to be in terms of access for people living with disabilities.
- The Supreme Court has issued an interim Order Adopting Caseload Standards.
An interim order has been released to allow for budget planning at the county/municipal level as they tend to work on a calendar year fiscal year. The court is working to have a full order issued.
- The Supreme Court has one more week of oral arguments for the Spring term.
No cases are heard in July or August.
- Bar Licensure Task Force Alternate Pathways to Licensure.
The report on alternate pathways to licensure is due in September 2025. At the time the report is received, conversations surrounding the five-year study of the effect of diploma privilege will occur as well.

Judicial Branch Priorities and Challenges

Christopher Stanley, Chief Financial and Management Officer at AOC:

- We are in a tough economic situation, and we are not anticipating improvement over the next 1.5-2 years.
- There are multiple components to the judicial branch budget:
 - o Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)
 - o Office of Public Defense
 - o Office of Civil Legal Aid
- AOC took a significant reduction of \$8 million/biennium
- Several items took reductions/cuts to their funds including:
 - o Reduction to JIS funds
 - o 70% reduction to BECCA Program.
 - o Thurston County impact fee was cut for one year
 - o Cut to *Blake* funding
 - o OCLA funding was lost
 - Comment from Sara Robbins (Director, OCLA): lost all funding while cases were still pending, difficult to continue this work past 06/30.
- While many funds were cut, some were received for other programs/initiatives
 - o Data for Justice initiative will be able to continue
 - o Funding for additional King County Superior Court Judges

- Court Reporting System replacement
- Judicial Branch is a small/affordable branch of the General Fund-State Operating Budget; While we received an increase in cash, the budget share reduced from .84% - .78%.
- “Snapshots in Time” are often used to try to determine what surplus of funds are available, but the “underspend” is never what it seems. Snapshots in time do not account for:
 - Delayed billing
 - Provisoed funds
 - Future adjustments not yet reflected in accounting system
- Revenue sharing is considered a future adjustment; if a court has excess funds they are not using, AOC can reallocate those funds to another court in need (with permission from the parties). These adjustments are not accounted for until often the end of June, which is the end of the fiscal year.
- There were lots of provisoed funds in 2023 from the new projects/programs that were started. The perception of the public is that once funds are received, the money is spent as soon as possible. This is not necessarily the case as programs take time to start up.
- Non-provisoed fund reversions top out at \$100k and are typically used for an agency’s base functions and established programs. We have not hit \$100k in the last ten years with these fund types.
- It may appear the judicial branch has excess funds, but those funds go away during the close because of the way they are distributed across the system.
- Judicial Information System (JIS) Account: Pre-covid, it was a balance beam on how we balanced to 0 on the revenue side (infraction revenue / agency under-expenditures) ~ 20m a year in infraction revenue
- When COVID hit, infractions crashed. A transfer was entered into the back of the budget to support the JIS account. The way we balance the JIS account now is a stool, we have Agency Under-expenditures (vacancy savings) / Infraction revenue / GF-S Transfer.
- JIS Account often runs cash negative for a solid chunk of the year, but it always comes back. Before the “stool” solution, it was not coming back to zero and we closed 2-3 years cash negative. The projection was that we would be \$25m in the hole as of this year.
- Health of the JIS Account: not robust, but it is alive, and it will not go cash negative. We can afford a \$4.2m/year cut (which was offered up to the legislature.) The balance of what we have for vacancy savings is all we must balance the JIS account. If there are cuts to that, or any resources where we must bail something else out, we can’t do it.
- Bottom line:

- AOC adjusts allocations among courts to maximize spending and ensure courts are supplied resources they need.
- AOC delivers several programs with no additional staffing, relying on existing staff and local partners to deliver critical programs (BECCA, CASA, Guardianship, Court Security, etc.)
- AOC ensures that all available funding is used to support all court levels and that all funds are properly accounted for.

Questions/ Comments re: Judicial Branch Priorities and Challenges:

- Chief Justice Debra Stephens:
 - In terms of *Blake* funds: we are in a position where we can get work done, the capacity/systems are built, courts are online, we are going to do it whether we go well above \$6 million or not. We will get the money because it is a legislative mandate that you are supposed to refund *Blake*. The Wheels of Justice will not slow down just because we only have \$6 million.
 - Same sentiment applies to the Water Rights Adjudication as exemplified last year with Whatcom County Judge.
- Trish Kinlow (DMCMA):

A number of courts have been able to process their *Blake* vacates. However, there are several courts that do not have the capacity to take care of *Blake* cases, so there are other courts that are doing the work on their behalf. The capacity issues may be due to staffing/fundings/increase in filings.
- Judge Ferrera (SCJA):
 - AOC is only allowed to support trial courts in a way that the statute allows. Sometimes that proviso funding is the only way that funding can make its way to trial courts because of the way the statute allows.
- Scott Ahlf (AOC):
 - Commend Trish Kinlow and Tukwila Municipal Court as they were one of the first to get through all their *Blake* backlog and they are working with other courts now to assist.

Judicial Leadership Summit Recap

- The Judicial Leadership Summit is meant to gather not just the voting members of the BJA but also all the folks who have a place at the table for information sharing to see how we can be more effective/ work more collaboratively/ speak as a unified voice when engaging with the legislature and with the executive. There has been a lot of conflict as this is the first time for a lot of people in government to experience not having a lot of money.
- The Judicial Leadership Summit had a lot of engagement/small group discussions.
 - Key takeaways:

- Listen to learn rather than listen to respond; Go into a conversation with other stakeholders listening to their priorities/goals rather than responding with our priorities.
- Slow down! Sometimes we don't have that capability during session, but when possible, slowing down as it is a mad dash during session.
- It is important to be intentional with the use of our time, even scheduling time "just to think." Sincerely enjoyed that everyone was willing to contribute and wanting to engage.
- Our goals are often very similar; there are just different ways to get there. Being able to sit and listen to those different pathways will often allow for the goal to be achieved.
- Collaboration in person is different as you can have the initial discussion and the follow-up. We often don't get to have follow-up discussion because we are going directly to a different meeting, but being able to have those conversations in person is helpful.

Legislative Branch Update

Senator Pedersen:

- Budget problems that we encountered in the last session are not over. On a positive note: the budget was balanced in years 1, 2, and 4 as is required. The unfortunate truth is that the cuts (~\$7 billion in reductions) that were made were mostly temporary. For the most part the legislature pushed out requirements in higher education, childcare and early learning that will come back into force in 2029 rather than having gone into effect in 2025.
- Revenue side: ~\$9 billion in taxes. The largest chunk of this revenue was the increase in vino tax; roughly half of that is a temporary surcharge on large companies. When we come back in 2027 with a new four-year period to review, we will have another shortfall (even assuming things don't get worse at the federal level.)
- The only major budget category that received a significant increase this year was K-12 education.
- People should be aware that our budget problems have not been solved, and we are likely to continue to face significant challenges. This does not mean you should not ask for things that you need to do your important work, but people should be clear-eyed about what the likelihood is. Be prepared with contingency plans.
- Working on tort liability, parole issues, DNA/wrongful convictions, the eviction process, theft of wire and its effect on telecommunications, hate crimes hotline, and the child support workgroup.
- The Uniform Consumer Debt Default Judgments Act: essentially provides some process requirements for collectors to take default judgments against consumers.

Representative Abell:

- WSBA Ambassador Program: attempt to do more public outreach.
- On the forefront of people's minds is the murder of the three young girls from Wenatchee, and whether there is anything that the legislature needs to make happen to prevent something like this from occurring again.
- Rural juror pay: looking forward to seeing the report for the Pierce County juror pay pilot project.

Questions/Comments re: Legislative Branch Update

Senator Pedersen:

- The current administration has created a climate where people are wondering what the risk of public service is, so there have been discussion/reconsiderations on whether anything can be done re: personal safety. There is likely to be more empathy for security requests.

Executive Branch Update

Kristin Beneski (Governor's Office):

- Update on judicial appointments:
 - o Governor Ferguson has made two appointments to King County Superior Court
 - Judge Benjamin Santos
 - Judge Kent Liu
 - o Upcoming vacancies in other counties
 - Okanagan
 - Spokane
 - Cowlitz
- Marijuana Justice Initiative:
 - o Governor Inslee began this initiative in 2019. This program is meant to expedite the processing of requests of pardons (not vacates) for folks that have misdemeanor marijuana convictions.
 - o A review of this initiative is being completed to determine how effective it has been. Initially, it appears to be underutilized, so we are looking at changes that we might make to expanding access to justice in that way.
 - o More info about this initiative can be found at:
[Marijuana Justice Initiative | Governor Bob Ferguson](#)

Committee Member Updates (Roundtable Discussion)

Judge Bill Bowman (COA):

- The Court is working on utilizing the traveling court system to share how decisions are made. The Court meets with students after court to explain how the system works and hopes that this will be beneficial in getting more people involved. They have done this in Skagit and Whatcom County; Eastern, WA has done that in some of their counties as well and it has been beneficial. COA will be in Tukwila later this year to conduct a traveling court.
- The COA has identified a couple of pieces of legislation for the upcoming short session. Neither have fiscal impact.
 - Legislation re: direct appeals from administrative/land use decisions which helped with the Superior Court workload from COVID sunsets in 2026. The Court would like this legislation to be made permanent.
 - The Court has also seen an increase in security threats. COA is asking for the ability to provide their own hired security with authority to investigate issues/threats.

Larry Jefferson (OPD):

- Thank you on behalf of the Office of Public Defense to the Legislature for the support that OPD received re: appellate backlog cases and contract attorneys for these cases. There was an appellate backlog in January/February of approx. 200 cases, the backlog is now down to ~75 cases, and with the knowledge of custody status for each case. Hopefully this will continue to improve to meet WSBA Standards.
- Indigent Defense Standards: Immense amount of help to public defense, especially with criminal cases. This is a beacon around the nation that is happening, and hopefully this will lead to the retention of public defenders.
- OPD is getting out into the public more; they attended the Blake event at the Tukwila Justice Center on Saturday, June 21, they are attending college campuses and courthouses. Public Defense without being in the public is not public defense, so they will continue to make these appearances.
- 08/05 – Public Defense Day: an event will be happening in Olympia to celebrate PD. The Parent Representation Program (PRP) is 25 years old, so they will be celebrating the initial contractors.

Commissioner Carolina Mejia (WSACC):

- Thank you to Chris Stanley for highlighting the budget cuts to Thurston County.
- The Washington State Association of Counties is in the same boat as the state, struggling with deep financial troubles across the 39 counties. Counties are looking for places/programs to cut as there was not much luck with revenue requests at the legislature this year.

- A meeting is occurring during the week of 06/23 to discuss the financial impacts of the Indigent Defense Standards, and they will continue to advocate for more varied revenue requests at the county level.

Judge Kevin Ringus (DMCJA):

- District and Municipal Court Judges' Association has passed the gavel to incoming president Judge Anita Crawford-Willis of Seattle Municipal Court.

Chief Justice Debra Stephens:

- The new member co-chair for the BJA as of 07/01/2025 is Judge Andrea Beall of the Puyallup Municipal Court, and she will serve a two-year term as co-chair, rotating off is Superior Court Pierce County Judge Alicia Burton.

Judge Kristin Ferrera (SCJA):

- Washington State Superior Court Judges Association has passed the gavel to incoming president Judge Cindy Larsen of Snohomish County.
- Family Law Bootcamp in Spokane: spoke about trauma informed family law practices, domestic violence, and looking at changes to legislation re: family law practices and hope that it is a positive change.

Sara Robbins (OCLA):

- Thank you to the legislature for fully funding the eviction right to counsel for the year 2026. Evictions continue to go up; ~60% higher than we were pre-COVID numbers.

Michael Terasaki (ATJ Board):

- Formal invitation to Access to Justice Conference: 09/18-09/19 in Yakima. Registration will be open soon.

UPCOMING MEETINGS:

- October 3, 2025: 9:30am-12pm.
- Tentative virtual meeting week of December 8th, prior to session.