



# WASHINGTON STATE SUPREME COURT

**T**he Washington State Supreme Court is the state's highest court and the head of the judicial branch of state government. The court's mission is to protect the rights and liberties guaranteed by the laws and Constitutions of the state of Washington and the United States.

The court is composed of a Chief Justice, Associate Chief Justice and seven Justices. Justices are elected by Washington voters, or appointed by the Governor when a vacancy occurs. The Chief Justice is then chosen by fellow Supreme Court Justices; the Associate Chief Justice is the member of the court with the most seniority.

The Justices are nonpartisan and serve six-year terms. They administer fair, impartial decisions based on laws that are equally applied to all.

## Cases

Washington's "court of last resort" receives requests to review more than 1,000 cases each year. Most of those cases come from the court of appeals, though some arise directly from superior courts and some come from the federal courts.

The Supreme Court does not have to accept all cases presented for review. Instead, the court exercises its discretion to grant review if the case presents issues that have generated conflicting appellate court decisions, that raise an important constitutional question, or that pose a question of substantial importance.

Requests for review are heard by a "department" of five justices. The department can decide if a case will be heard by the full Supreme Court. If the department is not unanimous, then the entire court considers whether to grant review.

## Oral arguments

The Supreme Court holds argument sessions in spring, fall and winter and hears oral arguments for approximately 45 cases per session.

During oral arguments, the court considers legal issues. It is up to the county and municipal court judges and juries to decide the facts of a case. When a case is heard at the Supreme Court, no additional witnesses are called and no additional evidence is taken.

## Decisions

At the end of each oral argument, the justices decide the



case by majority vote. Opinions, including the concurring or dissenting opinions, are then published and set precedent for subsequent cases.

Parties can seek direct review of superior court decisions — without going to the intermediate court of appeals — in limited circumstances. Such circumstances include a trial court ruling that a statute or ordinance is unconstitutional, a claim that two laws conflict, and an assertion that the issue has broad public interest and requires a prompt and ultimate determination. One example is a recall petition against an elected official.

The court's decisions have a large national following. A Supreme Court of California study published in 2007 found that the Washington Supreme Court's decisions are the second most widely followed by the appellate courts of all other U.S. states from 1940 to 2005.

#### **Governing responsibilities**

The Supreme Court also governs the state court system. That includes adopting court rules applicable to proceedings in the state's courts such as civil and criminal procedure rules and rules of evidence. It also includes ensuring equal access to justice, through court oversight groups like the Minority and Justice Commission, the Gender and Justice

Commission, and the Interpreter Commission.

The Court also regulates the practice of law in Washington, including the admission of new lawyers to the Bar Association and disciplining lawyers who violate their ethical responsibilities or cause monetary losses to their clients through unethical practices.

In addition, the Supreme Court has administrative responsibility for operation of the state court system, and supervisory responsibility over certified court interpreters, certified professional guardians, limited practice officers, and certain activities of the Washington State Bar Association, including attorney discipline.

#### **Public access**

In 1995, the Washington Supreme Court became one of the first courts in the world to allow gavel-to-gavel coverage of all cases. TVW, Washington's very own public affairs network, televises court proceedings year-round at [www.tvw.org](http://www.tvw.org). In addition to televised coverage, members of the public are welcome to visit the court during normal business hours.

Visit [www.courts.wa.gov](http://www.courts.wa.gov) to learn more about the Washington Supreme Court Justices, read published opinions, and view the current docket schedule.

