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## 25 new state judges proposed

*Governor's plan would also increase court reserves*

By Glenn Jeffers  
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Gov. Gavin Newsom boosted funding to the state's judicial branch and allocated funds for 25 new judgeships in his revised 2019-2020 budget proposal Thursday, a longstanding request by several lawmakers, lobbyists and jurists.

The budget would add \$30.4 million in general funds for the upcoming fiscal year and \$36.5 million annually through 2024 to bump up the superior court roster statewide, according to the revision. The judges will be allocated to the necessary counties following a needs assessment by the Judicial Council set for later this summer.

The revision also increased the cap on trial court reserves from 1% to 3% beginning June 2020, allowing the courts to handle unexpected mid-year operation costs, such as payroll fluctuations and drops in fee revenue.

Other significant investments included additional funding for renters in need of legal aid in landlord-tenant disputes, interpreter services in civil matters and court-appointed dependency counsel, bringing the judiciary's budget to \$4.2 billion.

Several judges and attorneys praised Newsom for addressing the state's funding and staffing issues within the judiciary, which many had petitioned the governor's office to address for more than a decade.

"The Governor's revision to his state budget proposal reflects his deep support for our goal of achieving equal access to justice for all Californians," California Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye said in a statement. "The proposal would provide judges for those living in communities where there has long been a need."

According to a November 2018 report from the state's judicial branch, the Legislature hasn't kept pace with the workload in all state trial courts, "leaving some with serious shortfalls — as high as 45 percent — between the number of judgeships needed and the number that have been authorized and filled."

"Additional judges will particularly alleviate backlogs of civil cases, which have faced major delays in many regions of the state," Nancy Drabble, CEO of the Consumer Attorneys of California, said in a statement.

One reason for the lag has been the steady growth in California's population, which is now estimated to be just below 40 million, according to news reports. While the population has increased, judges have remained relatively stagnant since 2008.

In prior years, the state authorized 100 "critically needed judgeships" — 50 in 2006 and 50 in 2007 — to understaffed counties, but stopped in 2008 when the nationwide credit crisis hit, leaving 50 authorized seats unfilled, according to a judicial branch report.

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# Newsom budget plan would add 25

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"During the recession, the court's funding was eviscerated, resulting in a severe lack of access to justice for our residents," Sen. Richard D. Roth, D-Riverside, said in a statement.

It's been particularly difficult in counties like Riverside, which is the fifth-fastest growing county in the nation, according to a 2019 U.S. Census bureau report. San Bernardino County has seen a 13% population increase over the last decade, according to the judicial

branch report.

In December, Roth introduced SB 16, which called for \$8.9 million to fund staffing for six new superior court judges from those 2006 seats, of which only two have been filled. If passed, Newsom's revision would fill 25 of those remaining 48 seats initially authorized 13 years ago.

"The Riverside/San Bernardino area in particular experiences some of the state's most dire need, with delays and long drives for citizens seeking an open courthouse," Roth said in a statement. "This impacts

everything from the ability for people to file restraining orders, seek child custody, or strive for redress [when] they've been aggrieved."

Brian Kabateck, president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, also applauded the revision but noted the proposal still has to go through the state Legislature.

A major hurdle in the past has been the cost of a staffing a judgeship, which costs \$1.46 million, including judicial compensation, operating expenses, equipment and staffing, according to the judicial

## judges in California

branch report.

"There's a time to be fiscally prudent, and we can't go crazy. But an awful lot of people think that the judicial branch got the short shrift," Kabateck said. "The Legislature has finally recognized the need for more judicial funding. It's overdue and they know it."

Drabble said she is optimistic given Newsom's interest in the judiciary. The son of late 1st District Court of Appeal Justice William Newsom Jr., Newsom has worked closely with the Judicial Council since taking of-

ice, attending the branch's State of the Judiciary address in March.

And on his first pass on the state budget in January, Newsom proposed an extra \$327 million boost for the state judiciary from last year.

"Nothing is guaranteed in the Legislature, but what the governor's has proposed drastically increases the prospect that it will approved," Drabble said. "The hardest part is having a governor commit to spend the money."

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