

California Courts News Transcript

Title: State of the Judiciary

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This was the 15th annual “State of the Judiciary” address to a joint session of the state Legislature for Chief Justice Ronald George. But in no other year has California been in such a precarious financial situation. The Chief Justice said the judicial branch feels the pain.

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“Like all areas of public and private life, our court system has been severely affected by the recent economic downturn and the fiscal crisis facing state government.”*

Yet at the same time that courts have had their resources cut, there’s been a rapid rise in case filings in several areas.

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“But although the state of the judiciary is fundamentally strong, our courts are increasingly hard-pressed to meet their obligation to provide accessible justice.”*

The most visible symbol of the economic crisis in the courts is the “CLOSED” sign on courthouse doors one day a month.

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“These statewide closures must not continue into the next fiscal year.”*

But the Chief Justice said it would be unwise to pay for day to day operations by raiding the court’s infrastructure accounts:

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“I refer specifically to the California Court Case Management System (CCMS) and the court facility construction and management program — each of which is as vital a part of California’s infrastructure as our bridges and highways and fundamental to administering justice.” These endeavors cannot be shelved when we encounter bad times — the welfare and safety of Californians depend upon proper investment in the long-term future of our state, and our plans will enhance California’s economy to benefit us all.”*

He acknowledged that there are differing opinions in the judicial branch – which he called “healthy debate.”

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“The vast majority of the state’s approximately 1,700 judges plus hundreds of subordinate judicial officers — whatever their personal or local differences — are firmly committed, along with court staff, to engaging in healthy debate and working together in a constructive manner to resolve the funding and access-to-justice issues challenging the courts today.”*

And the Chief Justice said he is not asking for increases, but for sufficient and secure funding in the coming fiscal year.

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“One simple truth prevails. 45:39 Courts are not a luxury to be funded in good times and ignored in bad times. Justice cannot be available only when it is convenient to pay for it. We shall attempt to address and absorb the reductions in our budget during these difficult times. But all of us — in each of the three branches of government — must remain*

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committed to continuing the progress we have made toward meeting the goal of a fair and accessible system of justice.”

The address was warmly received, as always. But legislators have some difficult budget talks ahead, with a multi-billion dollar deficit. Chief Justice George hopes legislators will respond appropriately to his pleas.

Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice of California *“I think that many realize that there’s no fat, if there ever was. There’s certainly no flesh left, we’re into the bone with these cuts, so we have to do something. We can’t rely on going to our infrastructure funds, we can’t rely on temporary measures; we have to have secure funding.”*

I’m Leanne Kozak reporting from the Capitol for California Courts News.