

California Courts News Transcript

Title: Council Approves Audits and Campaign Reform

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Finance experts with the Administrative Office of the Courts have been performing routine audits of the trial courts for almost 10 years now. In 2004 the Judicial Council approved the Internal Audit Services Unit charter, which articulates its mission, scope and objectives. An Audit Program Working Group was formed in 2007, made up primarily of court CEOs. And now an ongoing working group will be named, to add further court perspective to the process.

At this public meeting, Judicial Council members considered enhancements to the audit process.

Hon. Michael Vicencia, Los Angeles *"I'm particularly pleased with that part which talks about the importance of audits not just to point out when things have not gone well, but also to show us where in parts of the branch things are going well."*

CEO Kim Turner's court in Marin has been through it. She says an audit addresses important responsibilities.

Kim Turner, Marin CEO *"How well is the organization controlling public funds and controlling the flow of information and how well has it in fact put its operations in place so there is some confidence in the public as to how the organization is running."*

Riverside Judge Sharon Waters was impressed with the experience in her court.

Hon. Sharon Waters, Riverside *"We learned a lot in the process, it clearly was not a 'gotcha' process at all. Our court executive and myself both appreciated the opportunity to tighten up all of our procedures."*

Staff suggested putting finalized audit reports on the court's statewide web site. They're already available for public inspection, but web posting would make them easier to access.

And staff explained the comprehensive nature of the audits, which cover not only finances, but also operational and compliance issues - which raised some serious concerns.

Hon. Dennis Murray, Tehama *"It is a very sensitive issue and I think we need to back up and take a look at it. I just think on merits it's something that needs further review."*

So the Council tabled the audit recommendations until there's more study and input.

Ron Overholt, AOC Deputy Administrative Director *"We're happy to go back and consult with all the stakeholders, court execs and others in this process."*

Judge Murray said he just didn't think there was a complete understanding of the audits.

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Hon. Dennis Murray, Tehama *“I think it’s important that the presiding judges understand what it entails, what’s going to become public, what the auditors are going to do, what opportunity they will have for feedback. Since they’re the one that are running the court we’ll be auditing, I thought it was important that they get a little feedback in there before the council make a final approval.”*

Staff also provided a progress report on an audit of the Administrative Office of the Courts. Under the direction of the Council, the California Department of Finance has been asked to prepare a proposal for auditing the AOC this year, and then every three years.

Mike Planet, Ventura CEO *“Audits aren’t just good government, they’re good management.”*

Hon. Michael Vicencia, Los Angeles *“Not only do I think audits are a good idea but also making the results of the audit public so that all of, the entire state, all of our citizens, but also all of the shareholders in the organization are clear that we’re keeping a good eye on the public’s money.”*

On the subject of judicial campaign finance reform, the Council unanimously endorsed three recommendations from the California Commission for Impartial Courts. Details are on our website.

I’m Leanne Kozak reporting from San Francisco for California Courts News.