Legislative Budget Cuts to the California Courts Threaten Access to Justice

December 1, 2017 -- San Francisco -- Since 2008, California courts have faced drastic budget cuts, disrupting operation and function in all 58 counties. The fiscal allocation to the San Francisco Superior Court has declined over 40 percent since then. As a result, the San Francisco Superior Court was forced to lay off 13 Commissioners, redirect court settlement conferences, and eliminate numerous assistance programs to pro per litigants. In our county and others, courts’ inability to complete jury trials on consecutive court days due to understaffed courtrooms have prevented litigants from efficiently and fairly disposing of their cases. Our courts have not been able to recover the amount of human resources required to administer to the public’s needs.

Today, the additional reductions have affected the Court’s ability to stay open for the public. Before the budget cuts in 2008, San Francisco Superior Court had a budget of $90.5 million. By contrast, the current budget is $51.7 million ($5.3 million less than just last year). As of this past August, the San Francisco Superior Court reduced the court’s hours of operation and instituted furloughs every other week. Presiding Judge Teri Jackson also asked judges to donate one day’s salary per month towards court funding operations, and a majority of the judges have agreed to do so.

The limited hours of operation hit hardest the low-income and unrepresented litigants, particularly those seeking redress related to family law, custody, domestic violence, and housing. The concentric effect of underfunding the judicial branch of the government means weakened protection to vulnerable citizens and reduced accountability to injurious parties. Our democracy cannot safely function when a co-equal branch of the government is compromised.

The Bar Association of San Francisco remains a stalwart advocate for the vulnerable and underrepresented members of our legal community. Where judges cannot advocate for themselves, we need to do so. We will be circulating a letter for our membership to participate in urging the Governor to increase funding to California Courts.

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