

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.

###

The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) is a nonprofit voluntary membership organization of attorneys, law students, and legal professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area. Founded in 1872, BASF enjoys the support of more than 7,500 individuals, law firms, corporate legal departments, and law schools. Through its board of directors, its committees, and its volunteer legal services programs and other community efforts, BASF has worked actively to promote and achieve equal justice for all and oppose discrimination in all its forms, including, but not limited to, discrimination based on race, sex, disability, and sexual orientation. BASF provides a collective voice for public advocacy, advances professional growth and education, and attempts to elevate the standards of integrity, honor, and respect in the practice of law.