

NEWS RELEASE

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SAN FRANCISCANS FACE LONG LINES, 5-YEAR CASE DELAYS FROM STATE BUDGET CUTS THAT FORCE THE COURT TO LAY OFF 200 EMPLOYEES, CLOSE 25 COURTROOMS

SAN FRANCISCO -- Two hundred San Francisco Superior Court employees will receive their 60-day layoff notices this week as the Court prepares for an unprecedented dismantling of court operations with far-reaching public impacts, Presiding Judge Feinstein announced today.

"The civil justice system in San Francisco is collapsing," Judge Feinstein said. "We will prioritize criminal, juvenile, and other matters that must, by law, be adjudicated within time limits. Beyond that, justice will neither be swift nor accessible."

Judge Feinstein outlined these consequences for the public brought about by the recently passed state budget:

- Paying a traffic ticket or a criminal fine at the Hall of Justice could take hours of standing in line as fewer windows will be open due to staff cuts in the Traffic Division (Room 145) and the Criminal Clerk's Office (Room 101).
- Obtaining criminal and civil records will take months.
- Only cases of unlawful detainer (eviction), those facing dismissal due to the

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passage of nearly five years and civil cases with statutory preference will proceed to trial. The rest will face extraordinarily long delays. Obtaining a divorce will take at least 1½ years.

- Self-help services for litigants without attorneys will be severely reduced, which will further add to delays in civil and family law cases.
- Reduced hours in all clerks' offices.

Although San Francisco is only one of six counties that is home to two complex litigation departments, which have proven to be extraordinarily efficient in resolving complicated civil actions, both those departments will be closed so that San Francisco's court resources can be focused on serving everyday people seeking resolution of their disputes.

"Equal access to justice is one of the fundamental underpinnings of our democracy," Judge Feinstein said. "It is hard for me to fathom our great City – which is known worldwide for its justice and fairness – with a diminished, under-serving Court. Our employees and our citizens deserve better."

The Court's \$13.75 million deficit for the fiscal year that began July 1, 2011 is the result of state budget cuts last month that delivered a \$5 million blow to the bottom line. With the \$350 million budget cuts to the judicial branch statewide and the sweep of \$310 million from a court construction fund, lawmakers approved a state budget last month that left a gaping hole in the Court's budget and few options for the Administrative Office of the Courts to backfill cuts to the trial courts.

"After we downsize this Court in the next 60 days, we will be a shell of what we once were. We will also have the possibility of additional cuts in January if the projected \$4 billion in additional state revenue does not materialize," Judge Feinstein said. "Then next fiscal year, we will be facing even further cuts even though we will have laid off 40 percent or more of our staff."

The layoffs include employees from every division serving every function of the Court.

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After the layoffs, the Court will have just 280 employees. The Court has 591 authorized positions.

Employees who are laid off will be placed on a re-employment list for up to five years. If the Court is able to hire employees during the five-year period, they would be brought back by seniority.

Eleven hearing officers and commissioners who hear certain matters, including traffic, criminal, juvenile and probate cases, were given a 60-day notice of separation from Court service.

"This is an especially painful time for our cohesive Court," said Judge Feinstein. "Many loyal and talented commissioners will be walking out the courthouse door through no fault of their own. Unfortunately, the Governor and legislature have left us no choice."

Judges are constitutional officers and as such, are not subject to layoffs. They will be covering the departments that typically have been presided over by the Commissioners.

The layoffs take effect September 30, 2011. Beginning October 3, 2011, 25 courtrooms will be closed indefinitely, mostly concentrated in the Civic Center Courthouse, and the Court will be drastically re-organized. Under the reorganization plan, the Court will close:

- 12 Civil Trial Departments;
- Two Complex Litigation Departments;
- One Law & Motion/Discovery Department;
- One Case Management Department;
- One Juvenile Dependency Department; and
- One Juvenile Traffic Department;

Other departments will be consolidated to reduce the number of required court support staff.

Those Collaborative Justice Courts that will remain open will be those that serve a sizeable number of clients and have proven successful in preventing defendants from re-offending and returning to jail.

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“The Governor and the legislature, in enacting their budget some weeks ago, have left this Court with no alternative other than to slash judicial services, layoff our skilled, hard-working employees, and compromise the timely delivery of civil justice to the citizens of this county,” Judge Feinstein said. “It is with deep regret that we today make known the specific consequences of these sweeping budget cuts.”

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