

# Deep budget cuts in Los Angeles, California court system

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The Los Angeles County Superior Court system, the largest in the country, already sustaining a budget loss of \$70 million, has had its budget slashed another \$30 million. More cuts are anticipated in fiscal year 2012-2013. The budget cuts are tied to the state's budget crisis, resulting in a reduction to the California judicial system's budget as a whole of \$652 million.

Across-the-board cuts eliminated approximately 431 jobs. Many of the job cuts relate directly to courtroom staff, who were laid off on June 15 or otherwise adversely affected. This represents 1 of 10 employees of Los Angeles Superior Court (LASC).

"This is the unfortunate human impact of the need to reduce our spending," Presiding Judge Lee Smalley Edmon told local NBC affiliate Channel 4 June 15. "We are laying off people who are committed to serving the public. It is a terrible loss both to these dedicated employees and the public."

Those laid off were given just two weeks' paid leave, and were told they could avail themselves of workshops dealing with post-employment benefit issues, supposedly to help orient them so that their road to unemployment would be made easier. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represents the court workers, has assumed the role of assisting the courts by individually notifying those who are being laid off.

Many employees have been reduced to part-time, going from a five-day workweek to three days of work, losing up to 40 percent of their previous wages. Others have been transferred to new locations because of the elimination of their former jobs or the closure of courtrooms. For some, this entails the challenge of Los Angeles' high gas prices and driving longer distances on already overcrowded freeways.

People who have worked decades for LASC have

found themselves unexpectedly without jobs, while others who were promoted to entirely new positions lost seniority. Many long-time court workers now confront quickly retraining for new demands.

Fifty-six courtrooms in Los Angeles have been closed. Among them are 24 criminal courts, 24 civil courts, 4 juvenile delinquency courts, 3 family courts, 1 probate court and all 13 informal traffic courts for youth. Judges whose courtrooms have been closed will be reassigned to fill vacancies due to vacations.

In some cases, judges will seek to resolve cases without trials. Court reporters will no longer be provided by the court for civil matters. Such changes in the day-to-day operations of the courts bear disastrous consequences on the judicial process and the lives of those filtering through the system.

Family law courts will hear the most pressing cases first—meaning those that involve child custody issues will be the priority. It is expected that other civil cases will drag on for months or even years before they will be heard.

The LASC has been stripped bare over the past decade; since 2002, the court system has reduced the number of budgeted positions by 23 percent.

In 2011, 500,000 people went through the Santa Monica Courthouse and 350,000 cases were filed in the West district alone. Now, these cases will be dealt with by judges with fewer courtrooms and even less support staff.

Four child dependency courts have been closed along with all 13 of the informal juvenile traffic courts. The implications of closing all of the informal traffic courts are well known. Thousands of cases that involve petty crimes that students are cited with around campuses—disorderly conduct, possession of tobacco, jaywalking and other victimless crimes—will instead be

funneled into the remaining 24 delinquency courts that often deal with felonies and other violations considered criminal if committed by adults. Juvenile traffic cases are being sent to adult traffic court.

David Sapp, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), said: “We’re pushing those kids into a system that puts kids on formal probation and many times has to send kids away to juvenile probation camps.”

The state budget crisis has led to a reduction to the California judicial branch as a whole of \$652 million. If the governor’s tax proposals fail in November, more budget cuts are anticipated.

“California citizens who use the courts have been placed in a tidal wave,” said Niall P. McCarthy, attorney and co-chair of the Open Courts coalition. “Sadly, they and their constitutional rights are being washed away.”



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