Los Angeles County courts hold in-person proceedings despite deaths of three employees from COVID-19 in January

Shawn Velia
9 February 2021

January 2021 proved to be the deadliest month of the COVID-19 pandemic so far for Los Angeles County, with more than 6,400 deaths. Included are three Los Angeles County Superior Court employees—two Spanish-language interpreters and one court clerk. With more than 5,000 employees and nearly 600 courtrooms across 38 courthouses, the Los Angeles Superior Court is the largest local trial court system in the United States.

Despite the more than 340,000 positive COVID-19 cases reported in Los Angeles County in the month of January alone, bringing hospital emergency rooms and intensive care units to the brink of catastrophe, and at least 445 positive tests among court staff since March 2020, county courthouses are continuing to hold in-person hearings for traffic court, criminal cases and eviction proceedings.

These events are inevitably super-spreader situations. Large numbers of unrelated people must wait in poorly ventilated and crowded corridors and courtrooms to contest traffic tickets. Inmates are transported in buses and then held in tanks before they emerge into courtrooms. According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, criminal defendants, lawyers, sheriff's deputies and even a witness have participated in courtroom proceedings without wearing a mask.

Additionally, while there is supposed to be a moratorium on evictions in California, landlords are still filing unlawful detainer lawsuits. Tenants have only five court days to respond. Judges frequently require tenants to visit the courts in-person to demonstrate why the moratorium should apply to them.

While a court spokesperson has reported that all courtrooms are capable of conducting remote proceedings, there are still a number of cases being handled in person.

In some cases, the involved parties have insisted on holding in-person hearings, while others lack the internet or phone access that is needed to be able to attend hearings remotely or simply are not aware of the option. Unless a party secures a fee waiver, it costs $15 per remote appearance via audio and $23 for video.

Some court interpreters reported having to purchase their own face shields for use in courtrooms. One sought approval to self-quarantine at home on paid leave after exposure to COVID-19 from a court stenographer but was denied. Days later, she tested positive herself.

In the wake of this incident, other interpreters attempted to self-quarantine, but were subsequently denied paid leave, while others continued to show up to work at courthouses due to fear of retaliation or lack of available sick pay.

While the Superior Court asserts that its functions are essential, many of its operations should be delayed. Traffic citation hearings should be postponed through the end of the pandemic, and eviction proceedings halted immediately.

Landlords should be barred from filing eviction lawsuits in the midst of the pandemic. Nearly 10 million Americans are currently unemployed, and they should not be forced to worry about losing the roof over their heads or face a higher risk of testing positive for COVID-19 by defending their right to stay in their homes.

All hearings that cannot be delayed should be held remotely free of charge until conditions have improved. Holding court proceedings in-person unnecessarily

© World Socialist Web Site

places judges, lawyers, defendants, witnesses, jurors and court employees at higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site