

Attorneys Say There is No Appeal to Budget Cuts

COURTS: Personnel losses expected to hurt some, help other business litigants.

“Terrible” is how **David Gurnick** describes the budget cuts implemented at Los Angeles Superior Court on June 14 that resulted in 177 layoffs.

Gurnick, an attorney at **Lewitt Hackman** in Encino and president of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association, said the layoffs are just one sign the state legislature is short-changing the judicial branch of government. Other signs include the closure and physical deterioration of courthouses and an outdated, overloaded filing system for cases.

“It makes it harder for lawyers to do their jobs, but ultimately it hurts the clients,” he said.



Gurnick

injury, collections, small claims, probate and traffic cases in fewer courthouses; and eliminate the remaining part-time court reporters for civil cases.

The actions will cut spending by \$56 million annually. Previous actions, including layoffs in 2010 and last year, hiring freezes and cuts in supplies, had trimmed \$110 million from the court’s budget. Since 2008, total

“It means even slower filing procedures, longer delays in getting cases heard by judges and even fewer people to assist you at the court.”

In addition to the layoffs, the court will shut down eight courthouses outside the greater San Fernando Valley region; consolidate personal

spending has been sliced 24 percent.

“We have reached the new normal. And there is nothing to like about it,” said Presiding Judge **David Wesley**, in a statement.

Mary Hearn, the court’s director of public information, said most of the laid-off employees are assigned to courtroom jobs such as clerical assistants and court reporters. All layoffs will be based on seniority.

For business clients, Gurnick predicted the cuts will hurt those who need justice quickly and benefit those who prefer delays. For example, in a debt-collection case, a system with long delays will favor those companies that haven’t paid their bills. In insurance cases, it will favor the insurance companies that haven’t paid claims.

“Clients will look more to their lawyers as to why there are these delays and how to expedite the case,” Gurnick said. “They will try to get matters settled themselves or use more mediation.”

Reporting Success

Amid news of court layoffs, the Coalition of Court Reporters of Los Angeles is reporting success in finding alternative employment.

The organization was formed by six L.A. Superior Court reporters who were laid off or relegated to part-time status during the budget cuts last year. In total, about 100 court reporters lost their jobs last year. And since then, the organization has found work for 60 of them, including reporters in Granada Hills, Santa Clarita, Simi Valley and Northridge.

If the court doesn’t provide reporters, the attorneys in the case must hire reporters to make a record of the proceedings. The attorneys on both sides usually split the reporter’s fee. In addition, reporters are needed for hearings in administrative courts and arbitrations or depositions in law offices.

The coalition acts as an agency where lawyers can find reporters with knowledge of court protocols and familiarity with specific types of cases. In the last year, the coalition has served 895 clients, handled 2,071 cases and provided 4,568 assignments.

Jorge Dominguez, managing partner at the coalition, said the organization was built to mimic the way the court system assigns reporters to cases.

The coalition is ready to help newly unemployed reporters find work, but Dominguez said the increasing absence of official reporters in the courtroom will present legal problems for attorneys and clients. For example, if a proceeding doesn’t have a court reporter, there will be no record of testimony and an appeal becomes extremely complicated.

“The implications of the cutbacks are far-reaching. The most significant damage that could result from this new round of cutbacks will become evident when litigants want to appeal a court ruling or trial verdict,” he said.



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