

State of the Judiciary
Chief Justice Craig F. Stowers, Supreme Court of Alaska
Message to the Alaska Legislature
February 10, 2016, in Juneau, AK

President Meyer, Speaker Chenault, Senators and Representatives, and honored guests. I wish to recognize one honored guest in particular: my wife Monique flew down from Anchorage today to be here to watch my inaugural State of the Judiciary. She is my biggest supporter, and I couldn't do all that I do without her. Thank you for coming today, Monique. (I'm going to pay for that later.)

Good morning everybody and thank you for the privilege and the honor to speak with you today. I come to have a conversation with you about the budget challenges that the State of Alaska is experiencing, and more particularly what the Alaska Court System is doing to help you meet the daunting challenges that you face. The stark reality is that the government, of which the courts are a part, can't afford to continue operating as it has in the past. It can't; and it shouldn't. You have sent the clear and proper message that we cannot have what we cannot afford. Therefore, one part of the solution is that the size of government must be reduced. There are other considerations – raising additional revenue, for example – which are not within the court's responsibility, and I thankfully am not called upon to speak to those interesting issues today.

I will say this, and it is perhaps the most important thing I can say to you. Now, more than at any time in Alaska's history, we Alaskans need smart, wise, and effective leadership. We need the kind of leadership that the delegates to Alaska's Constitutional Convention exercised. Notwithstanding vast differences in political philosophy and ideas about the proper role of government, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention met and conferred, they exchanged ideas and debated, and they collaboratively created a constitution that has become a model for the world. The new State of Alaska faced economic challenges at least as daunting as those that face you. But the delegates had a vision of what the government of Alaska should be, and what it could do in the future to protect and advance the best interests of all Alaskans. Alaskans have benefitted from their vision and work in countless ways.

You are our leaders today, and we Alaskans need your leadership and wisdom and collaborative efforts as never before in our history. There is a book that says if you need wisdom, ask for it. I encourage you to ask for transcendent wisdom, and I will also ask for you. That book also says that you were called to such a time as this. I have no doubt that with wisdom and good faith and courage, you will rise to the occasion and make history just as the delegates to the Constitutional Convention did.

My Friends, do not be afraid: fear is the mind killer. Be bold. Also be selfless and look to the greater good. You are our elected leaders, and leaders sometimes have to make hard decisions that their constituents don't immediately understand or agree with. But the represented will support leaders when leaders make wise decisions that protect and advance the best interests of the people.

In a time of great darkness and existential threat, Winston Churchill said, “nobody ever launched an attack without having misgivings beforehand. You ought to have misgivings before; but when the moment of action is come, the hour of misgivings is passed.” Churchill also said, “we must not lose our faculty to dare, particularly in dark days” and he proclaimed, “the price of greatness is responsibility.”

I say to you: I believe in you. You have the capacity for greatness. I know you have the intelligence and desire to do what is necessary and what is right: to preserve and protect our great state; to create policies and a budget that ensures that core government functions are maintained, and that essential state services and programs are provided; and to create that balance where no one is disproportionately harmed and where all Alaskans rightly and fairly share in the responsibility to support a strong and viable, properly sized state government. I believe in you, I wish you well, and I pray that you will be given great wisdom.

I was elected chief justice and took office last July 1st; I was well aware of the financial challenges facing Alaska and the Alaska Court System. I was also aware that you, the Legislature, and the Governor intend that the size of government in Alaska be reduced. In thinking about these economic challenges, I use two primary analytical approaches. The first is to answer the question: “what is the right size of government?” To answer that question, one must first answer the question: “what is the proper role of government?” What are the core functions that state government – or for my purposes, the Court System – is supposed to perform under our constitution and the laws of the state?

My second analytical principle is that everything has to be on the table, and nothing is sacrosanct. We need to evaluate everything that the Court System does to ensure that we do only that which is essential to our core mission, and that we eliminate all which is not essential, even if those non-essential things are of high value to the public.

I will not use my limited time this morning to describe in detail what the court’s core mission is: you well know that in our American history and culture the courts perform foundational public services to enable citizens, and businesses, and governments in the state to resolve legal disputes according to the rule of law and justice. Without rule of law and justice, democracy, and government of, by, and for the people cannot survive. Instead, I want to briefly remind you of exactly what the Alaska Court System is; and I want to share with you the Alaska Supreme Court’s decisions regarding the court’s budget for the remainder of the current fiscal year and the next fiscal year.

I. BACKGROUND

The Alaska Court System operates 39 trial courts and two appellate courts. We employ 65 trial judges, 3 court of appeals judges, and 5 supreme court justices. We also employ about 750 court employees, as of the beginning of this fiscal year, including administration, court staff, and magistrate judges. The Court System’s operating budget for FY16 is \$112.7 million, a mere 1.5% of the total state government operating budget. Most of the costs to operate the Court System are personnel costs: 76% of our budget is for employee salaries and benefits. For the current FY16, the Alaska Court System proposed, and you accepted, a \$3.4 million reduction to our budget.

Historically, because the Court System has operated with little excess in its budgets, there are no options available for cutting millions of dollars from our budget without directly affecting the level of court services that we provide to the public, and without directly affecting our employees and their incomes. There are many things that we have already done in response: we have and will continue to eliminate purchasing many supplies; we will defer purchases of new computers and printers and the like; and we can get by for several years without replacing worn courtroom and office furniture, old carpets, and things like that. We can do many other things like these, but these savings do not come close to adding up to \$3.4 million.

II. FY16 STRATEGIES

To make the level of cuts required by the new budget reality, for FY16 the supreme court adopted three principal strategies: (1) savings derived from attrition; (2) savings derived from employees taking voluntary leave without pay; and (3) savings derived from targeted court closures.

First, the Court System is achieving savings through the normal attrition of employees. When an employee retires or leaves employment, we can keep that position unfilled for an indeterminate period. This partial hiring freeze provides the biggest source of savings to us. All divisions – trial courts, appellate courts, and administration – have contributed to the long-term vacancy pool created by reduction in force from attrition.

Second, the Court System has achieved savings through employees taking voluntary leave without pay. We have asked all employees, including our judges, to voluntarily take a number of days off as leave without pay. On July 5, as my first act as chief justice, I sent a letter to all judges asking them to consider taking six days of leave without pay, which is the equivalent of giving up the 2.5% pay raise enacted at the end of the last session or foregoing the 2.5% raise altogether. I am pleased to report that every member of the supreme court, the court of appeals, and other judges have agreed to take the equivalent of at least six days of leave without pay during FY16. 84% of our judges contributed to voluntary leave without pay, as have the senior administrative staff. And many of the Court System's non-judicial employees have positively responded. To date over 300 of the court's employees and judges have contributed approximately 9000 hours of voluntary leave without pay or taken a reduction in salary; this has achieved a savings of over \$650,000. I must tell you that many of the Court System's staff employees are relatively low paid employees, and it's astonishing to all of us and the Court System is very proud of these people who are willing to contribute part of their relatively small salaries to try to make up the difference and to help us help you make up the difference. I express my deep and profound gratitude to each court employee who has contributed so selflessly to the Court System and to the State of Alaska to meet our budget goals.

The third strategy to achieve savings in FY16 is targeted court closures: all courts throughout the state were closed this last fall the day after Thanksgiving and then the day before Christmas. We also selected three additional days for potential court closures this spring: March 25; April 29; and May 27. For the court's non-judicial employees, court closure results in furlough without pay for each of these days.

However, on all closure days the court in Anchorage and a small number of other courts operate or will be operated by a skeleton staff to act on emergency petitions for domestic violence protective orders, involuntary commitment orders, Child in Need of Aid matters, bail hearings, and other similar emergency or critical proceedings. Having said this, I am happy to report that we believe we will be able to meet our FY16 budget requirements without actually closing on these days this coming spring because our strategies to reduce the size and cost of the Court System have generated more savings than originally anticipated.

III. FY17 STRATEGIES

For FY17, beginning next July 1, I anticipate that the Court System will be required to take additional budget reductions. The supreme court has proposed a 3.5% reduction to our budget below what we received last year: this amounts to another \$3.8 million reduction. Now that may not sound like a lot in the grand scheme of things, but please remember, the Court System's FY16 operating budget is just \$112 million; that's a thin sliver on the overall State of Alaska operating budget pie chart. To meet these additional cuts, the Court System will again continue to rely in large part on reductions in force from attrition; voluntary leave without pay; and limited and targeted court closures. But the Court System's approach to court closure is going to change in FY17 because there are only so many positions that can be eliminated while still providing core court services. As I mentioned earlier, not counting judicial officers the Court System employed about 750 employees last year. We have already achieved a reduction in force from attrition of 35 positions since the beginning of this fiscal year. This translates into a 4.7 % reduction in court staffing so far this fiscal year. We expect to add another 17 positions to our attrition-based reduction in force pool by the end of this fiscal year. We thus have achieved a very significant reduction in the size of the Court System; but I must warn that given how small the Court System is in real terms, given how small the Court System is compared to overall state government operating costs (1.5%), given the vast size of the Court System geographically, and given the scope of critical justice services that we provide, additional loss of positions will have a direct negative affect on the public services we are able to provide.

The supreme court has decided to close courts statewide during FY17 each Friday afternoon, beginning at noon July 1st. All non-judicial court staff will be furloughed every Friday afternoon: no court proceedings apart from emergency proceedings will be allowed. The practical effect of Friday afternoon closures will translate into an approximate 4% reduction in pay for non-judicial employees. The theory behind this approach is that it is fairer to ask all employees to take relatively small pay cuts rather than resort to the option of laying employees off. Obviously, this strategy goes only so far. If the Court System receives a larger than 3.5% budget cut, we will have to consider other options, including staff layoffs and court closure of some low-volume courts. At the least, it is likely that some court locations with a very small number of case filings will have their hours of operation reduced, and some magistrate judge operations may be re-engineered. On a positive note, we expect that as our eFiling project becomes completed and operational in the next year to year-and-a-half – a project that will transform the court into essentially a paperless process – we will achieve substantial savings through reductions in the number of positions currently necessary to process paper court filings at every stage of court operations.

IV. THE WAY FORWARD

I understand that there are differences of opinion on what the best strategy may be to manage the Court System's budget situation. You understand that there are differences of opinion on how you should manage the State's budget situation. Some strongly believe that the better policy for the court is simply to lay off whatever number of employees it takes to meet the budget target, rather than modestly reducing court hours and service and requiring all staff to proportionally share in the reductions. Of course, the practical effect of laying off one employee is the same as one employee leaving court service and keeping that position vacant and putting it into our reduction in force pool. I wish to again emphasize: the Court System's number of non-judicial employees has already been reduced by about 4.7 % since the beginning of this year, and we expect additional positions to go into that pool by the end of the year.

Others have advocated closing completely those courts whose case filing numbers and activities are very small. I don't want to do that; the Court System doesn't want to do that. We've made, through your support and contributions, tremendous achievement in opening or operating courts in rural parts of Alaska. In many of these communities the Court System is the face of the State of Alaska. You know a lot of these communities don't have Troopers in them, some of them don't have Village Safety Protection Officers, and the Court System is there to provide services, helping people get domestic violence protective orders and protecting victims, and essentially being available to answer people's questions and conduct proceedings out there. It would be a terrible travesty to have to reduce those efforts that you and we have made to reach out to rural Alaska and rural Alaskans, including our Native brothers and sisters out there.

But this is a new budget reality for all of us and we all are going to have to do what it takes to meet the budget targets that you give us. I can respect that these alternative policy approaches are out there, and I will say that they may become options in future years if Alaska's financial circumstances continue to deteriorate. But for today and next year these more draconian strategies are not yet necessary because we are achieving substantial reductions in the size and cost of the Court System by less drastic means while preserving the court's ability to continue to provide high quality justice services to the people of Alaska.

I do not like having to close courts even on a very limited basis as a strategy to meet budget targets, but the simple fact is that there is a real and direct cost to the loss of funding. Down-sizing government necessarily means down-sizing the services government provides. I also reflect on the fact that closing courts on certain days was a common strategy used by many courts Outside during the recession in 2008 when those courts were facing then the problems that we are facing today. I want to make sure that what we do and what we pay for advances the Court System's core mission. This core mission includes providing a fair and impartial forum for the resolution of disputes, making our justice system as accessible to the public as possible, ensuring that all employees receive the training and support necessary to provide for the highest quality of service possible, and being good stewards of the public's money which is entrusted to us to meet our constitutional mandate.

The Alaska Court System has a well-deserved reputation of being a first-rate justice system. Through our efforts the Court System ensures that all parties receive due process of law and that the public who uses the Court System receives the service it has a right to expect. But the public

also understands that government, including the Court System, simply cannot continue to operate as it has in the past. We have a legal duty to work within the constraints of our budget, and we will do so. In the process we will become more efficient, and we will provide the best public service and access to justice as is possible. All Alaskans should be very proud of their Alaska Court System and its employees, who lead the way in finding innovative, effective ways to serve the public in the face of real financial cost to themselves. I thank all Court System employees for their dedicated service, and I thank you for your support of the Court System that you have given us unflinchingly year by year. We want to work with you, and we will continue to do so.

I will conclude by briefly reporting some good news that has resulted from our strategies. The court uses retired judges as pro tem judges for court proceedings when our regular judges become unavailable due to judicial vacancies, or peremptory challenges, or on occasion, long term illness. We could not do business without them and are grateful for their service. They, too, are sharing in our efforts to reduce spending. We have reduced using pro tems in all but the most critical circumstances; their daily pay has been reduced by 2/5s; and many of them are actually providing their services without charge. And I thank them all. The supreme court increased many court fees for filing and copying court documents. This will result in an additional \$1.2 million in income to the State's general fund (not to the Court System).

We have instituted a process for electronic distribution of court notices, orders, judgments, and other court filings. This means eliminating the cost of paper, envelopes, and postage. Using a very conservative estimate we expect to achieve an annual savings of approximately \$132,000. This sounds a little bit like hunting for change in the couch cushions, but I must say the people in our administration who put this program together are brilliant. The cost of a single piece of paper is just a fraction of a penny and our estimates are based on one piece of paper being mailed out in one standard size envelope with a standard postage stamp. But of course, a lot of our mailings have been voluminous, and the envelopes are sometimes large boxes, and the postage has been high. Saving dollars here and dollars there add up. We are now sending out all of these things electronically. The lawyers seem to be very happy with it and we're saving a lot of money. I commend this approach to other agencies and to you to just find small ways to make a difference and to save a little money. In this day and time, a little money saved will add up to big money. We hope.

We've instituted a process to monitor and reduce travel costs. As you know, the Alaska Court System is, geographically, the largest court system in the United States. We have courts from Ketchikan to Unalaska to Kotzebue to Barrow. We must pay to send judges to many courts where there are no sitting judges, and we pay to send judges when, for example, a judge in a one-judge court gets peremptorily challenged and we need another judge there in order to conduct a hearing and trials. We also pay for juror travel, which accounts for roughly one third of our travel costs and is largely uncontrollable. But we have reduced travel costs overall from December 2014 to December 2015 by \$600,000, a 38% reduction. This is due in part to a reduced number of cases going to trial; reduced juror costs; capping out-of-state travel; using videoconferencing instead of face-to-face meetings and the like; using videoconferencing for example to have foreign language interpreters be able to attend trials by video link in order to make translations instead of having these people fly out to court. We also use airline miles earned on state-funded travel to pay for expensive tickets for travel to remote court locations.

Expenses for supplies are \$300,000 less than they were this time last year. Our State law library expenses are down \$100,000. The Court System saved \$500,000 with the two court closures last fall. For FY17, counting all 52 Fridays, we expect to save about \$39,000 per Friday afternoon of court closure, or \$2.1 million overall.

V. SAVINGS TO OTHER STATE AGENCIES

I think it is important that the Court System be a good soldier and a good team player as we all work to solve the challenges of the budget crisis. We are therefore also working with other state agencies to help them achieve savings even though our efforts will not create direct savings to the Court System.

For example, we are developing videoconferencing capabilities at Department of Corrections facilities to allow prisoners to attend certain hearings via videoconference at the jail instead of being transported to courthouses, for example from Goose Creek Correctional Center to Palmer we've got a videoconference link, and from Anvil Mountain Correctional Center to Kotzebue and Nome. This will create saving to the Department of Public Safety and the Alaska State Troopers and Judicial Services from not having to bear the costs of transporting prisoners to what are often very short hearings of relatively small consequence. This also saves the transportation expense and the loss of valuable time required when State Troopers or Court Service Officers have to accompany these prisoners. Finally, this increases safety to the public and law enforcement officers by avoiding unnecessary prisoner transport. We have a number of these kinds of initiatives that we're studying and putting in place.

So here we are. I wanted to get this done in 20 minutes, because I know you're very busy, but I have one more very important thing that I want to do, and I ask you to bear with me. Before I take my leave, I wish to introduce my colleagues on the Alaska Supreme Court. The supreme court came to Juneau to hear four oral arguments in the Dimond Courthouse yesterday, and to visit with you earlier this morning. I thank all of you who took time away from your pressing schedules and business to talk with the members of the court this morning.

Justice Daniel Winfree is a lifelong, third generation Alaskan from Fairbanks. He has served on the court since 2008. Justice Winfree chairs a supreme court task force on elder law (not because he is old, but he is), developing processes to protect the growing population of aging Alaskans from financial and physical abuse and neglect. He is a member of the Appellate Rules Committee and is the court's liaison to the National Conference of Bar Examiners. My very good friend Dan Winfree. Justice Peter Maassen joined the court in 2012 after a long and distinguished private practice, much of which focused on appellate matters. Justice Maassen chairs the court's Judicial Education Committee and the court's Access to Civil Justice Committee. My good friend Peter Maassen. Justice Joel Bolger was appointed to the court in 2013. He has the unique distinction of being the only supreme court justice to have served as a judge at every court level: he was a district court judge in Valdez; a superior court judge in Kodiak; he was a court of appeals judge before being elevated to the supreme court. (He likes to say that he doesn't know how to keep a job.) Justice Bolger co-chairs the Criminal Justice Working Group. My good friend Joel Bolger.

Finally, I want to give special recognition to Justice Dana Fabe. Justice Fabe has served with distinction on the Alaska Supreme Court since 1996, and she will be retiring on May 31st of this year. Her professional accomplishments are astonishing. She began her legal career in Alaska in 1976 as a law clerk working for Justice Ed Burke. She went on to work as a staff attorney for the Public Defender Agency and eventually was appointed by the Governor to be the Chief Public Defender of Alaska. She was next appointed to the superior court in Anchorage, and then to the Alaska Supreme Court. She was the first woman to serve as justice, and she was elected by her colleagues on the court to serve three, 3-year terms as chief justice.

Her other many accomplishments and awards are too numerous to recount, but I will list five: Justice Fabe was elected to be president of the National Association of Women Judges; she co-chaired the Joint Federal-State Gender Equality Task Force; she is the recipient of the 2012 Distinguished Service Award from the National Center of State Courts; she is the recipient of the National Association of Women Judges' 2012 Justice Vaino Spencer Leadership Award; and she received the Woman of Achievement Award from the YWCA.

Most of all, Dana has been a wonderful friend and colleague to all of the justices who have had the privilege to work with her; and indeed, to all who have been fortunate enough to have worked with her throughout her illustrious career. She has contributed so much to Alaska and the law of Alaska, and she will be remembered for her leadership on the court. I will miss you, my friend. Justice Dana Fabe.

I thank you again for inviting me here to speak with you this morning; it's been a real honor. I look forward to continuing to work together with you for the good of the State of Alaska.

Thank you and good morning.