

State of the Judiciary  
Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero, California Supreme Court  
Message to the Legislature  
March 18, 2025, at State Capitol Building, Sacramento, California

Thank you, Senate President Pro Tem McGuire, Speaker Rivas, distinguished statewide constitutional officers and guests, and, of course, Governor Newsom.

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver my State of the Judiciary Address to a joint session of the California State Legislature.

I am very proud to be joined once again by my colleagues from the California Supreme Court (and our CEO and court staff); justices, judges, and court executives from local courts around the state; members of the Judicial Council; the California Judges Association; the Bench Bar Coalition; and our justice system stakeholders and partners.

Much has happened since I addressed you last year. I decided to start with an understatement.

In March of last year, I emphasized the Judicial Branch's priority with respect to advocating for a stable budget that the courts can count on to make public access to justice a reality in all 58 counties. In May, we were faced with \$97 million in reductions at the trial court level and the prospect of up to 7.95% reductions for other parts of the Judicial Branch.

I expressed the Judicial Branch's commitment to doing our part to address the State Budget deficit, while working diligently to mitigate and manage the impacts to the courts and to the public of this current fiscal year's budget cuts. It was definitely challenging—our courts found efficiencies but also had to implement some tough solutions.

Necessary actions included closing courtrooms and courthouses, implementing some form of furloughs, and reducing hours for self-help and clerk's office services.

But we appreciated the opportunity to maintain an ongoing dialogue with our sister branches of government regarding the details of our budget. And I am pleased to say that following the Governor's Proposed Budget in January of this year, courts have reported that the partially restored funding should help by:

- Reducing hiring freezes and delays;
- Reducing service impacts; and
- Preventing, eliminating, or scaling back on planned furloughs.

Unfortunately, much uncertainty remains. Nonetheless, we remain committed to working with the Governor's administration and the Legislature in the coming months as plans for the Budget Act are finalized.

We know and appreciate that you all face hard choices and that you weigh competing demands for scarce resources as you review the Proposed Budget.

It is our hope that you will continue to keep in mind the fundamental reason we seek our share of the budget. The mission, as you heard, of the Judicial Branch is to resolve disputes, and to interpret and apply the law consistently, impartially, and independently to protect the rights and liberties guaranteed by both the federal and state constitutions, in a fair, accessible, effective, and efficient manner. We need funding to properly fulfill this solemn responsibility— as a coequal branch of government—to safeguard the constitutional rights and liberties of all Californians.

In my third year as Chief Justice, I'm energized to be driving forward with the conviction of my own sworn oath to protect and defend the constitutions—guided, as all of our judges are, by a dedication to the rule of law, and inspired by the desire to give back, to deliver equal access to justice for all Californians.

We, of course, do not do our work on behalf of the public alone. I want to emphasize how important it is that all three branches of government in California are here together today. This reflects our commitment to work collaboratively, with civility, and with mutual respect, on behalf of the people that we serve.

Our relationships are informed by an understanding of our distinct roles and duties, protected by the checks and balances inherent in our democratic system of government, and strengthened by our personal commitment to the rule of law.

I know that you share that commitment. I've had the privilege of administering oaths of office to many public servants—including many of you here today.

The oaths we take represent the key pillars of our constitutional democracy—as we affirm to support and to defend the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of California.

This foundation supports a healthy climate of productive public discourse, and thoughtful and thorough deliberation on issues that impact our state, our counties, our communities, our families, and others. Because of this foundation of justice, no one is above the law, no one is outside of the law, and no one is excluded from its rights and protections.

And so with these principles in mind, I stand here proud to say that the state of the judiciary remains strong, and that we are ready, willing, and able to uphold our responsibilities and play our role to benefit the people who we serve in California.

I also spoke last year of three-branch solutions. I believe that concept continues to be of utmost importance. That is why I encouraged judges throughout the state to engage with their local senators and assemblymembers to foster communication between our two branches. And I continue to encourage all of you to meet with court leadership and staff in your home districts and to experience firsthand the services and access they provide to all of your constituents.

Since my address last year, at least 19 legislators spent time visiting nine local trial courts in their districts. I was pleased to be joined by President Pro Tem McGuire on a visit to the Superior Court of Mendocino County, and by Speaker Rivas on a visit to the Superior Court of Monterey County last year.

These visits create a greater understanding of the operational challenges facing courts and how courts focus on efficiencies and innovations and efficiencies to better serve the public. You will see firsthand the great benefits of remote proceedings. You didn't think I'd get through this without mentioning remote proceedings. Each business day, more than 6,500 remote hearings, civil and criminal, take place in our courts, saving court users an estimated 1.5 million trips to courthouses annually.

Remote proceedings have been universally praised by both court staff and court users—as both time and cost savers—and most importantly, because the option to appear remotely gives litigants a choice about how they access their court system.

I want to acknowledge and thank you for listening to our pleas for an extension of remote proceedings. Through budget trailer bills, we now have statutory authorization for criminal and civil remote proceedings until January 1, 2027.

Through your visits to our courts, you will also see and hear from the dedicated judges, court executive officers, attorneys, and staff who help make up the face of the judiciary. They are talented, hard-working, dedicated public servants who constantly respond to increasing workload demands. And I am proud to serve alongside of them.

Currently, we have about 67 judicial vacancies. I had to update the number since yesterday. We are grateful to the Governor and his Judicial Appointments Secretary for their ongoing work to fill these vacancies. As was recently reported, with nearly two years left in his term, Governor Newsom has already appointed 586 judges—including 131 in 2024—putting him on track to surpass prior administrations. We are all beneficiaries of Governor Newsom's commitment to identifying and appointing excellent judges and leaving a lasting imprint on the state judiciary. Thank you Governor.

I also would like to commend the proposal to provide long-overdue funding to support the Court-Appointed Counsel Programs for our Courts of Appeal and our California Supreme Court. They support an important need to provide effective, efficient, and experienced counsel for appellants with death judgments and indigent defendants on appeal.

This funding is critical to attract and retain qualified counsel and to help rebuild the statewide panel of attorneys whose work is fundamental to the effective administration of justice.

As with all the funding we receive, we recognize that we must be good stewards of the resources we seek. As part of our role in three branch solutions, I am committed to transparency and accountability with the public funds allocated to the Judicial Branch.

Courts are enhancing caseload management and case resolution for the workload reporting that we provide to you. At our April Judicial Council meeting, we will receive a report on our weighted caseload model—this helps us to accurately assess resource needs and equitably allocate the resources you provide. We seek to provide improved data collection and analysis that prioritizes actual level of effort and time to resolve cases over basic raw filings data.

We know that raw filings fell during the pandemic, and that filings are now rising once again. But even more significantly—the *complexity* of the workload for courts has exponentially increased.

We measure workloads using a “caseweight” methodology developed by the National Center for State Courts, and used in at least 30 other states, which allows us to consider both case volume and case complexity. For example, between 2017 and 2025, preliminary data shows that caseweights have risen 54% for felonies, 95% for juvenile cases, and 26% for conservatorship and guardianship proceedings. These are dramatic, fundamental shift that impacts our work.

The law evolves each year as your branch identifies important policy issues that must be addressed—ranging from important issues such as various ameliorative laws touching upon important issues such as post-judgment resentencing, Juvenile Justice Diversion, Collaborative Justice, and the Racial Justice Act—as well as measures reflecting the will of the people through ballot measures such as Prop 36.

These and other factors all affect the courts’ case volume, mix, and complexity and increases their workload. I look forward to providing the results of our Resource Assessment Study with you soon.

As we update and refine our post-pandemic data to establish solid baselines for our workload, resources, and judicial needs, we will continue to advocate for judgeships in those counties that need it the most, including San Bernardino and Riverside Counties.

And we will continue to focus on enhancing education and training for all of our judicial officers—so that we can deliver the highest quality of justice and service to the public—and to maintain the highest standards of professionalism, ethics, and performance.

We also continue to focus on other key issues and programs of mutual interest and concern. And I’d like to touch on a few of those now.

Since I delivered my last State of the Judiciary, our trial courts in all 58 counties have now implemented the Community Assistance, Recovery, and Empowerment (CARE) Act.

- Under the CARE Act, the courts continue to collaborate with the California Health and Human Services Agency to deliver mental health treatment, housing support, and other services through a civil court process for persons with schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders who often experience homelessness or incarceration without treatment.
- As of February 21, courts have received 1,258 CARE Act petitions and held 2,092 hearings. The numbers continue to improve. And the numbers do not tell the full story.

Behind the metrics are real people, real individuals, families, and communities benefitting from the act.

- And the holistic approach of unifying and coordinating public services, as has been done with our Collaborative Justice Courts, yields other benefits—because there are some who might not be eligible for the CARE Act who are nonetheless receiving referrals to other services to meet their specific needs. Through these efforts, we are seeing significant improvement in assisting Californians struggling with mental health issues.

When I spoke with you last year, I also stated that our court system must address the many issues presented by the developing field of artificial intelligence in a deliberative fashion.

- Since then, I appointed a task force led by Administrative Presiding Justice Brad Hill, who will continue to work with Administrative Presiding Justice Mary Greenwood and Judge Arturo Castro, as well as members of the Judicial Council on this ever-evolving issue.
- The task force has developed a Model Use Policy that outlines the guardrails for safely using generative AI. They have just circulated a draft Rule of Court for public comment and this we hope will ensure that court users are protected as the branch begins to implement generative AI—and the Judicial Council will vote on a recommended rule later this year. The task force has also developed guidance for judges using generative AI in their adjudicative role. Stay tuned as this issue continues to evolve.

Through funding you provided, we also launched the California Court Interpreter Workforce Pilot Program this fiscal year.

- The program covers training costs and exam fees for aspiring court interpreters with a commitment to work for the courts for at least three years after they pass all required exams.
- 19 courts are participating. More than 1,000 applications have been received from interested candidates. 126 candidates are in the program currently, and the application cycle opens again this month.
- Because this is a five-year pilot, we believe that the program will help address the growing need for qualified interpreters to serve California court users with limited-English proficiency.

Next, the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs support trained volunteers appointed by a judicial officer to advocate for children who are under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court.

- Volunteers spend time with children, monitoring their service needs, and provide child-focused recommendations to the court based on the best interest of the child.

- We have forty-five CASA programs in 52 counties; they serve 10,600 children with 7,400 trained volunteers, and we appreciate your ongoing support of this program.

The council and the courts are also collaborating with the California Department of Social Services to focus on a “Kin-First” Culture—the term used to describe a system that prioritizes placing children with their extended family network. These efforts are ongoing in Santa Cruz, Sacramento, Solano, and Kern Counties. And in San Diego County, this approach has seen an increase of 10% in children being safely placed with family.

And through our Judicial Branch Facilities Program, we seek to design and construct functional, economical, and secure contemporary court facilities for all of these court users and members of their local communities.

With your support, in the past year, the Judicial Council has successfully completed two new public buildings—in Shasta County and Riverside County. Construction continues on three projects anticipated to be completed this year, and one in 2026.

And in light of recent attacks and threats to courthouses, we continue to evaluate existing facilities to identify physical security improvements to make those courthouses safer for the public, judicial officers and court staff, and justice system partners.

Through all of these changes and improvements, the Judicial Branch is demonstrating its ability to play our role in effectively and efficiently serving the people of California.

Sometimes we face significant challenges along the way. The recent administration of the California Bar Exam comes to mind.

As you know, the California Supreme Court and the Legislature share an important partnership concerning oversight of the State Bar, with the court managing licensing and disciplinary functions and the Legislature setting the attorney licensing fee and auditing the bar’s governance and finances.

Over the past three years, in light of high-profile failures to address attorney misconduct, we both have implemented reforms to address attorney accountability and to improve the State Bar’s operations. The court has implemented conflict-of-interest screening for key positions within the State Bar, implemented transparency measures to ensure that seated bar leaders annually disclose conflicts of interest, and approved a new rule of professional conduct that requires attorneys to report other attorneys for serious acts of misconduct. And the Legislature undertook its important role in auditing the agency’s disciplinary system and finances, updating the agency’s disqualification standards, and creating a diversion program for lesser violations of attorney misconduct.

And this partnership will continue as we investigate the failures surrounding the administration of the bar exam last month. We understand the high stakes that are involved—for students who want to pursue a career and their dream of joining the legal profession, for those who hope to devote their talent and skills to helping others, for those who need the financial stability and

independence that will come from jobs that depend on their ability to pass the exam. It is literally life-changing for many students. The additional stress, frustration, and anxiety faced by some examinees is inexcusable.

For all those who had to endure these failures, I want to assure you that our court will exercise its plenary authority to implement appropriate remedies to help mitigate the harm.

In response to these unfortunate circumstances, the court plans to enhance oversight over admissions, including the role of the Committee of Bar Examiners, to ensure high standards and improve the administration of future bar exams.

Even before the founding of our State Bar, the court depended on the Committee of Bar Examiners to set high standards for entrance into the practice of law. But in recent years, the examiners' role has been diminished. I intend to explore restoring the examiners' importance in these matters by increasing their oversight of the admissions process, including its budget and the administration of the bar exam. Just as we trust the examiners to develop and enforce high standards to become an attorney, we should also entrust them to develop and enforce high standards to determine whether a vendor can administer an online bar exam without incident.

Our applicants deserve a rigorous and thoughtful process for ensuring that they sit for an exam that fairly measures their legal skills.

We hope that these students who pass the bar will all succeed, and as they do so, we hope they will commit to providing pro bono services to the most vulnerable among us. Nonprofits and pro bono providers can help ensure that low-income Californians have access to essential civil legal services. Like all pro bono providers, they should have our support and the freedom to represent those in need of their legal services, without fear of retribution or unwarranted criticism which threatens to have a chilling effect on the nature of the work they are willing to undertake.

I would also like to address the considerable stress, anxiety, and confusion surrounding the issue of immigration policies and enforcement as they relate to our courts. The federal government, of course, has the right and obligation to do its job but it cannot (consistent with the Tenth Amendment) compel states to enforce federal immigration law.

You have passed laws making this clear, including SB 54 regarding the sharing of certain information with immigration officials, and AB 668 which codifies the common law privilege against civil arrests in courthouses in California without a judicial warrant. These laws have been upheld against various challenges. And in fact, the federal government's own guidance document recognizes these important limitations—specifying such civil immigration enforcement actions should not occur in jurisdictions like California which prevent it.

None of this means state officials or judicial officers have any intent to violate federal laws that prevent anyone from “conceal[ing], harbor[ing], or shield[ing] from detection” those who are in our country illegally, particularly those who commit violent felonies.

Rather, we can all perform our independent obligations consistent with our constitutional mandates in support of the rule of law. The federal government can focus on federal immigration enforcement within the confines of the constitution; local officials can focus on local public safety; and our courts can focus on providing access to justice to every single person who comes before us.

It is within our purview to ensure that all members of the public can freely access our state courts, to safeguard individual rights, and to promote the fair and timely administration of justice; we will safeguard our authority and responsibility to do so.

So I will close with the same general thoughts I opened with this year: The Judicial Branch remains steadfast in its commitment to provide fair and impartial justice in accordance with our constitutional obligations.

And as we do so—whether we are talking about our financial operations, key issues and programs of mutual interest, or broader issues of public concern—I look forward with energy, enthusiasm, and commitment to working collaboratively with you as we continue to serve the public.

Thank you for your attention.