

State of the Judiciary
Chief Justice Barbara A. Madsen, Washington Supreme Court
Written Message to Legislature
January 2014

Greetings Governor Inslee, members of the Washington Legislature, judges, elected officials and residents of Washington,

It has become a tradition for the Chief Justice to provide a written State of the Judiciary report at the start of the short session of the legislature and I do so now with appreciation for the opportunity to provide a brief look at how the courts of Washington fared in 2013, as well as the challenges coming in 2014.

What follows is a series of articles and interviews that highlight some activities and accomplishments of the judicial branch this past year. I believe this new approach to reporting on the state of our courts will be more informative and will put a human face on the issues affecting the courts and the people we serve.

The past year has been one of innovative steps forward in addressing intractable access-to-justice problems (see page 4), advancing the highly effective therapeutic courts model with new statewide resources and research (page 6), working to keep age-old public defense promises (page 8), advancing and leveraging technology to keep systems safe and help courts handle ever-growing caseloads (pages 10 & 11), reaching out to residents in old and new ways (page 15), building new frameworks for accessing court administrative records (page 17), honoring history with an eye on the future (page 18), looking at old organizational structures with a critical eye toward efficiency improvements (pages 20 & 21), performing vital work on public defense and civil legal aid systems (pages 22 and 24), and celebrating with families and children (page 26).

Along with these advances and activities, Washington courts continue to process millions of case filings and manage tens of thousands of hearings each year with staff resources that, in nearly all counties, have been significantly reduced. The Supreme Court, for example, is at its lowest staffing level in 30 years. The judicial needs estimates calculated by the Washington State Center for Court Research continue to show that many courts lack a sufficient number of judicial officers for their caseloads.

We are aware that budget and resource problems have confronted state and local jurisdictions since the deep recession hit our nation, but I would be remiss if I failed to report this as an ongoing and serious challenge for the courts, which perform a core function of government and which cannot close or turn away criminal, civil and appellate cases for lack of funding.

However, I am proud to report that Washington courts are doing everything they can in creative ways to manage their caseloads with fewer resources.

For instance, Lake Forest Park Municipal Court received an award for its innovative program in which a judge adjudicates traffic infractions entirely online, while Pierce County District Court

launched a new program for online self-scheduling of traffic hearings which is expected to save the court thousands of phone calls and visits. Douglas County District and Superior courts are using video and scanning technology to manage the justice work of a widespread region (see page 14), and courts around Washington are taking steps like these to continue providing the highest quality justice they can with the reduced resources they have.

At the state level, the Administrative Office of the Courts has worked hard to leverage technology by providing more judicial education through interactive online classes, creating an online court interpreter directory and scheduling program, establishing a self-serve online security incident log for the courts, and much more.

Our challenges in 2014 include continuing to modernize and develop technology solutions and security to help the courts do their work; continuing to monitor public defense standards and improvements throughout the state; working to improve court interpreter resources for the courts; continuing to examine and address disproportionate minority contact with the justice system; and finding new ways to improve access to justice for all Washington residents.

As a final note, I'd like to remind lawmakers and residents of Washington that the courts of our state are always open and we invite you to visit your local courts to see your justice system in action, or learn how you can become one of the many volunteers who help the courts year-round.

Chief Justice Barbara A. Madsen
Washington State Supreme Court