



CONSUMER ATTORNEYS OF CALIFORNIA

Seeking Justice for All

Senate approves bill to ease COVID-19 courts backlog

SB 1146 enshrines use of web depositions and email service of process

SACRAMENTO (June 15, 2020) – The California Senate today approved a bill to preserve the use of web video and other internet technology to address the growing backlog of civil court cases caused by COVID-19 courthouse shutdowns.

SB 1146 by Sen. Tom Umberg (D-Santa Ana), co-sponsored by Consumer Attorneys of California and California Defense Counsel, won approval on a bipartisan unanimous roll call vote.

Progress on civil cases has been halted or dramatically throttled back because of courthouse closures caused by the coronavirus pandemic. A logjam of hearings and trials has been the result, with court leaders announcing that civil cases will be at the back of the line, pushed possibly into 2021 or later.

SB 1146 helps by writing into state law emergency actions taken in recent months by Gov. Gavin Newsom, Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye and the Judicial Council that have allowed remote video depositions and e-service of process during the health crisis. Those actions were taken to limit public exposure to COVID-19 while keeping civil cases moving toward resolution.

The new emergency rules, however, do not extend after the health crisis is over. Meanwhile, the backlog of cases caused by the courthouse shutdowns is expected to outlast the pandemic. SB 1146 will help clear that lengthy queue by making remote depositions and e-service a permanent working part of California civil cases.

“This legislation represents a much needed first step towards allowing justice to continue despite the devastating impact of the pandemic,” said CAOC President Micha Star Liberty. “This will help keep the gears of civil justice moving now and during emergencies in the future.”

The Assembly, meanwhile, approved CAOC-backed AB 3366 giving the state chief justice power during future statewide emergencies – war, acts of terrorism, natural disasters, and epidemics – to keep the wheels of justice turning. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response was delayed as the governor issued an executive order giving the chief justice full power to act. AB 3366 will allow the chief to take swifter action in the future.

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