



CONSUMER ATTORNEYS OF CALIFORNIA

Seeking Justice for All

Court cuts hit women, children, poor, disabled, elderly As governor prepares to unveil new budget, CAOC warns of impacts on California's most vulnerable citizens

SACRAMENTO (Jan. 9, 2013) – On the eve of the governor's release of his 2013-14 budget blueprint, Consumer Attorneys of California warned that further cuts to the state's already hard-hit courts would pose a dire impact on some of our most vulnerable citizens – women, children, the poor, the disabled and the elderly.

A new round of budget cuts will strangle courts that help battered women escape violent homes, protect children during domestic disputes, curtail elder abuse and act as a safeguard against the potentially violent mentally ill.

“We're facing a crisis,” said CAOC President Brian Kabateck. “Courts are a safety net for society, protecting our most vulnerable. This crisis is about real people who need help solving real problems.”

California's courts are already reeling from \$1.2 billion in budget cuts over the past five years, with General Fund revenue plummeting by more than 30 percent – among the biggest hits to any sector of the government. An additional \$200 million in cuts could potentially be part of the budget for 2013-14.

“Our civil justice system has been left teetering,” Kabateck said. “Our courts have been squeezed enough already. Even the most basic functions like paying a ticket or resolving a rental dispute have been turned into unbelievable inconveniences that cost average citizens both time and money.”

Staffing cuts at many courthouses have led to swelling lines and frayed tempers as the public has tried to tap the most basic services. In Los Angeles, people queued up to settle traffic tickets have in some instances been turned away at day's end and told to come back the next day. Such problems stand to grow even worse as the county grapples with more than \$150 million in court cuts in the last couple years. Already, 10 courthouses in Los Angeles County are in the process of being shut down and services are increasingly being centralized in a single courthouse, threatening to make a bad situation even worse.

The impacts of funding cuts have rippled up and down the state. Operating hours have been slashed in 30 counties, and 70% of the courts have instituted furloughs that have slowed down services. Self-help and family law courts are typically among the first services reduced. Court officials say that hit hardest by slowdowns have been foreclosure and rental disputes and individuals seeking restraining orders in a bid to escape the cycle of violence. In San Francisco, shrinking court resources for complex cases have meant that some terminally ill mesothelioma patients seeking justice in asbestos cases are in a race to begin trial before their lives end.

To stem the court's tide of red ink, a number of counties have followed Los Angeles in shutting whole courthouses down. Such closures put particular pressure on the poor and disabled who rely on public transit to reach distant branches after their neighborhood courthouse has been closed. For instance, the closure of the superior court in Chino means that residents who rely on the bus must resort to a 90-minute ride featuring a daunting 57 stops to reach the nearest courthouse in Rancho Cucamonga.

“It can mean taking a day off from work, taking a hit on your weekly paycheck, having to come up with child-care arrangements and other real-world impacts,” Kabateck said. “And for women facing situations of domestic violence seeking restraining orders, it can mean more time and more hassles to secure help. Some may simply give up.”

Kabateck also worries that the cuts could mean delayed civil court hearings on holding potentially violent people with severe mental health problems.

“Most people don’t think of the court system outside the criminal context, but there are all these other important services provided by the civil courts,” Kabateck said. “They help protect the elderly from abuse in nursing homes. They help protect women in battered relationships. They protect children in difficult family situations. At some point, enough is enough. We have reached that point.”

Consumer Attorneys of California is a professional organization of plaintiffs’ attorneys representing consumers seeking accountability against wrongdoers in cases involving personal injury, product liability, environmental degradation and other causes.

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