Administrative Office of the Courts

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SANTA FE _ Artie Pepin, director of the Administrative Office of the Courts, issued the following statement about a budget measure approved Friday by the House Appropriations and Finance Committee:

"We appreciate the hard work of the committee and its support for a strong Judiciary. The committee's budget represents a significant step forward in funding for state courts next year and will help the Judiciary meet its constitutional obligations," Pepin said.

"Our courts are grateful to the committee for approving additional funding to meet a constitutional requirement for providing legal representation for children and parents in child abuse and neglect cases. Without that funding for court-appointed attorneys, there could be unnecessary delays in resolving abuse and neglect cases that determine whether children are reunited with their parents."

"The courts are concerned that critical technology remains underfunded. The appropriation recommended by the committee for statewide automation is almost $238,000 below this year's budget and could force furloughs of workers needed for technology that courts rely on for processing cases.

"The committee's budget recognizes the great value of drug courts but statewide funding through the Administrative Office of the Courts to support treatment services in those programs remains $122,300 below current levels.

"As the budget continues to move through the Legislature, our courts will work with lawmakers to try to plug some holes in funding and ensure adequate resources are available to meet the justice needs of all New Mexicans," Pepin said.

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BACKGROUND:

- HAFC recommended $160.4 million from the general fund for the court system in the 2016 fiscal year, an increase of almost $3.3 million or 2.1 percent. That overall amount means taxpayers will spend 2.6 cents on the court system out of each $1 the committee allocated from the state's main budget account.

- Within AOC statewide programs, HAFC recommended $3.25 million for automation _ a reduction of 6.8 percent or $237,600 from the current fiscal year. The executive budget recommended a 17 percent or $594,600 reduction in general fund.

- For court-appointed attorneys in child abuse and neglect cases **next year**, HAFC recommended $5.2 million. That's an increase of $314,100 over the current general fund budget. Separately, the HAFC provided for a supplemental appropriation in the **current** fiscal year of $300,000 for court-appointed attorneys to represent children and parents in abuse and neglect cases. The AOC had requested a supplemental of $358,000.

- For drug court funding administered by the AOC (mostly for treatment services for programs across the state), HAFC recommended TOTAL funding of about $2.3 million _ a reduction of $122,300. The total funding is $1.58 million in general fund and $750,000 in liquor excise tax revenue. The executive budget recommendation would have resulted in a nearly $1.1 million reduction for drug courts and potentially about 300 fewer participants statewide.