Administrative Office of the Courts

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Jan. 22, 2015

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SANTA FE, N.M. _ New Mexico Supreme Court Chief Justice Barbara Vigil asked lawmakers on Thursday to approve budget increases for critical court services, including attorneys to represent children and parents in abuse and neglect cases.

In her State of the Judiciary address, Chief Justice Vigil acknowledged that New Mexico faces a tight revenue outlook in the upcoming fiscal year but she stressed that adequately funded courts are essential to efforts by the Legislature and the governor to make the state a better place to live.

"A strong court system improves the well-being and safety of everyone, particularly the poor and the downtrodden, and a Judiciary that is able to resolve disputes in a timely manner attracts business investment and supports economic development. When the Judiciary is given the resources necessary to function efficiently, all of New Mexico will benefit," the chief justice said in a speech to a joint session of the House and Senate.

Trial court judges presided over 399,000 new and reopened cases in the 2014 fiscal year.

"Each year, our trial courts are required to address and resolve an ever larger number of cases of greater complexity and an ever increasing number of cases

involving self-represented litigants, many of whom require collateral court services such as interpreters and pro-bono legal services," Chief Justice Vigil said.

The court system has requested a 9 percent overall budget increase in the upcoming 2016 fiscal year. That covers operations of the Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, district courts, the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court, magistrate courts across the state and the Administrative Office of the Courts, which oversees financial, personnel and information technology operations for the court system.

The judiciary's top priority is a 5.7 percent increase in base operating budgets for courts and the AOC, the chief justice said. That will provide critical funding for magistrate courts, for court-appointed attorneys to represent children and parents in child abuse and neglect cases, and to pay for jurors, court-ordered witnesses and interpreters.

Chief Justice Vigil said funding for court-appointed attorneys is as important for resolving abuse and neglect cases as additional money for the Children, Youth and Families Department, which investigates abuse and neglect reports and can bring legal action to take custody of the child.

"Increasing CYFD funding without increasing the Court Appointed Attorney Fund would create a bottleneck of abuse and neglect cases in our courts," she said.

The chief justice also stressed the importance of a $775,000 increase requested for problem-solving courts, such as DWI and drug courts, and $822,200 to create two additional district court judges _ one each in the 2nd Judicial District in Albuquerque and the 3rd Judicial District in Las Cruces.

Gov. Susana Martinez has proposed no budget increase for the judiciary next year, and the Legislative Finance Committee has recommended a 3.5 percent increase for the court system.

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