Administrative Office of the Courts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sept. 27, 2016

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Judiciary cuts mileage payments to address state's budget shortfall

SANTA FE - The New Mexico Judiciary will reduce spending by about a half million dollars a year by lowering the mileage reimbursement rate for travel by judges, staff, jurors, interpreters and court-ordered witnesses.

The Supreme Court ordered the reduction to address a state budget shortfall for the 2017 fiscal year, which started in July.

Effective Oct. 1, the payment rate will be reduced from 46 cents to 29 cents a mile for employees using a privately owned vehicle for travel on court-related business. The reimbursement of 46 cents a mile followed a regulation established by the state Department of Finance and Administration.

Jurors, interpreters and court-ordered witnesses accounted for the largest portion of mileage payments in the 2016 budget year, about $1.5 million. Jurors receive mileage payments for traveling from their homes to the courthouse. Interpreters are reimbursed for travel in a private vehicle to a courthouse for hearings and trials.

The Legislature is expected to meet in a special session to consider cutting the state budget to offset a shortfall from lower-than-anticipated revenues.

Chief Justice Charles Daniels, in a letter sent last week to Gov. Susana Martinez and state legislators, said the Judiciary's "ability to protect public safety and provide an acceptable justice system for our citizens will be critically diminished by reductions of our current modest appropriations beyond an additional 1%."

The Chief Justice said courts could be forced to close to the public for periods of times and court employees might be furloughed if the Judiciary's budget was cut by more than 1 percent across the board.

The current FY17 budget allocates about $161 million for the state court system. That represents a 6.17 percent increase since the 2009 fiscal year, when the state budget was reduced in response to a national recession. The state's general fund budget has grown 6.24 percent from the 2009 to 2017 fiscal years.

Appropriations for the Judiciary currently account for 2.58 percent of the state's general fund budget. That is unchanged from 2.59 percent in the 2009 fiscal year and down from a 2.76 percent share of the state budget in the 2010 fiscal year.

The Judiciary's budget covers operations of the Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, district courts in the state's 13 judicial districts, the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court, four dozen magistrate courts statewide, the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Supreme Court Law Library, the New Mexico Compilation Commission and the Supreme Court Building Commission.

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NOTE: Attached are copies of the Chief Justice's letters to the governor and legislators, and the Supreme Court order reducing the mileage reimbursement rate.