Administrative Office of the Courts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 23, 2020

Contact: Barry Massey, public information officer
bmassey@nmcourts.gov
505-827-4805
505-470-3436

Courthouse security improvements, additional judgeships among top budget priorities of judicial branch of government

SANTA FE – New Mexico courts are asking the Legislature to fund improvements in courthouse security across the state and create additional judgeships as part of next year's budget for the judicial branch of government.

The Judiciary is requesting an 8.8 percent increase, or about $16.2 million, for operations of the state court system — the Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, district and magistrate courts, the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). If lawmakers approve the request, the Judiciary would receive about $199 million in the 2021 budget year, which runs from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021.

"Our budget priorities advance judicial excellence by allowing courts to more efficiently handle their workloads and better serve New Mexicans. We also must make courthouses more secure for the thousands of people who visit them each day," Chief Justice Judith K. Nakamura said.

Key provisions of the Judiciary's budget request:

- $2.2 million for security improvements, mostly at the 47 magistrate court locations across the state. The funding would provide for full-time security personnel at the busiest magistrate courts and part-time security officers for courts with smaller caseloads. The Metropolitan Court is seeking $507,000 to pay increased costs to contract with the Albuquerque Police Department for security personnel at the court. Magistrate courts handle misdemeanor cases, traffic violations, civil actions up to $10,000 and hold preliminary hearings to determine probable cause on felony charges.

- $1.5 million for five new district court judges: one in the First Judicial District of Santa Fe, Los Alamos and Rio Arriba counties; two in the Second Judicial District of Bernalillo County; one in the Third Judicial District of Doña Ana County and one in the Twelfth

Judicial District of Lincoln and Otero counties. The funding also covers personnel to support each judgeship, such as a bailiff, court monitor and trial court administrative assistant. There is a need for 20.9 judges to handle the increasingly complex and demand workload of district courts across New Mexico, according to a study by the National Center for State Courts. Lawmakers last created new judgeships in 2014.

- $844,300 to implement and enhance pretrial services in district courts and expand a unit in the AOC that will conduct criminal background checks on defendants to provide more information to judges for pretrial release decisions.

- $100,000 to hire a full-time behavioral health manager in the AOC to help courts better respond to the needs of people with mental illness who are defendants in criminal cases or parties in civil lawsuits.

The Judiciary represents a small share of the overall state budget — about 2.6 percent of the nearly $7 billion currently allocated from the general fund for operations of government programs ranging from public education to prisons.

The Chief Justice and AOC Director Artie Pepin will outline the Judiciary's unified budget request on Thursday to the Senate Finance Committee. A webcast of the budget hearing will be available on the Legislature's webpage.

The Judiciary proposes legislation this session to assist older New Mexicans who want a permanent exemption from jury service. The measure would remove a current requirement that a person age 75 or older must submit a notarized affidavit attesting to their age when requesting a jury service exemption. The affidavit is no longer necessary because the Judiciary's electronic jury management system can verify birth information by drawing from three state databases – voter registration, personal income tax and motor vehicle records.

"Completing a notarized affidavit is time consuming and it costs money for older New Mexicans who are summoned to serve on a jury and find it too much of a burden because of their age," said Pepin.

About 9,500 people age 75 or older asked to be permanently excused from jury service in fiscal year 2018.

###