



DAY ON THE BENCH

PLANNING GUIDE

April 2026

COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM GOALS

THE MISSION OF THE DAY ON THE BENCH PROGRAM IS TO

Build effective relationships between the judicial branch and the California Legislature;

Convey judicial branch issues to the legislative branch through direct communication with judges and court leaders; and

Provide an opportunity for members of the Legislature and their staff to observe the judicial process so they might better understand the complexity of the daily operation of the courts.

The Day on the Bench (DOTB) program brings a legislator to a court in his or her district for a half-day visit and tour. Each visit is individually tailored and designed to give legislators a personal understanding of the volume, complexity, and variety of a judge's daily duties and responsibilities, as well as the extensive responsibilities of court clerks and administrators. This program is designed to impress upon legislators the significant role played by the courts and the justice system, their impact on the daily lives of our citizens, and the need for legislative support. The expectation is that this deeper understanding of the difficult job the courts have will come to mind as legislative decisions are made.

The following suggestions were taken from surveys completed by courts that have hosted legislator and staff visits. These best practices offer suggestions on opening the lines of communication with the legislator and key staff and propose activities during and after the DOTB visit. They will assist presiding judges, court executives, and other court staff when hosting a local legislator or legislative staff for the DOTB program. Best practices are outlined below:

Establish contact with the legislator and his or her senior legislative staff

- a.* For initial planning assistance, please contact Jackie D'Almeida (Jackie.D'almeida@jud.ca.gov) and Cliff Costa (CCosta@caladvocates.com).
- b.* Identify judges within the court who have personal or professional relationships with legislators. Existing relationships are most helpful when initiating contact with legislators.
- c.* If a judge has a personal or professional relationship with a legislator and/or senior legislative staff member, ask the judge to send a written invitation cosigned by the presiding judge. The judge, presiding judge, or court executive officer (CEO) should make a follow-up call to the legislator's office to establish personal contact with him or her, to ensure that the legislator is aware of the invitation, and to encourage him or her to visit the court. If the legislator is unable to schedule a visit, consider alternatively inviting the legislator's senior staff member(s).
- d.* For legislators who represent the county but with whom no judge in the court has a personal or professional relationship, the presiding judge and/or CEO should request an appointment to visit the legislator in the district office. During that scheduled visit, the presiding judge and/or CEO should provide the legislator with information about the court, discuss issues that are affecting constituents' access to justice, and invite the legislator to participate in the DOTB program.

Schedule the court visit

- a.* Like judges, legislators have demanding schedules, and legislators must divide their time between Sacramento and their districts. Begin planning the visit no later than six to eight weeks in advance. Limit the meeting to no longer than three to four hours or as requested by the legislator or applicable to the particular area(s) of interest expressed.
- b.* Host one legislator at a time. Doing so will provide an opportunity for one-on-one discussion and relationship building.
- c.* Familiarize yourself with the legislative calendar. Calendars for the Assembly and Senate can be found on their respective websites: www.assembly.ca.gov and www.senate.ca.gov. The calendars detail legislative holidays, fiscal and policy committee meeting deadlines, and other legislative events that should be avoided when scheduling visits. Legislators typically return to their district offices from Sacramento on Thursday afternoons. Fridays are often the best days to schedule visits, but they tend to fill up months in advance. Legislators tend to spend more time in their districts during the spring, summer, and fall recesses.
- d.* Discuss dates with the legislator's district office manager or scheduler to arrange a courthouse visit and to avoid conflicts. Always direct scheduling inquiries and follow-up calls to the office manager or scheduler's attention. If you need assistance with scheduling, you should contact Governmental Affairs (GA) at 916-323-3121.
- e.* Develop a rotating schedule to ensure that all legislators are invited to visit a court in their county or district annually.

Plan the tour

- a.* Research your legislator's areas of interest. Ask the legislator's staff in advance if the legislator and/or constituents have any outstanding issues or concerns with the local court or judicial branch.
- b.* Research any key legislation the legislator is carrying that relates to court or legal process issues. During the court visit, be prepared to address these bills or issues with the legislator and/or staff members. You can find legislative summaries and status charts at www.courts.ca.gov/policyadmin-oga.htm and www.caljudges.org. (CJA website access is generally restricted to current CJA members. For CJA membership and website information, please call 916-239-4068.
- c.* Judicial Council Governmental Affairs and/or CJA staff are ready to assist with any premeeting preparation or questions that may arise. Consider inviting a GA and/or CJA representative, especially when the DOTB is for legislative staff, who may ask more detailed questions.
- d.* Be aware that most legislators are not attorneys; hence, a brief presentation about court operations will be helpful to provide a better understanding. You may wish to provide materials with local and statewide information that includes caseload statistics and the number of individuals who interact with the court every year as case participants, jurors, etc. These numbers should be reinforced during the tour, demonstrating the court's efficient use of public resources.
- e.* Most legislators would prefer the tour to revolve around their areas of interest. Highlight a program that is unique to your court, especially if the legislator was instrumental in authoring or voting for legislation that established the program.

- f. The presiding judge or the court executive officer should conduct part of the tour. Try to underscore issues and challenges facing the court through an in-person demonstration. Keep the tour interesting by including a visit to a hearing or trial in session. Place an emphasis on issues facing high-volume courts; highlight areas of concern and identify major challenges that affect the court's daily operation (judgeships, facilities issues, etc.); walk the legislator or staff member through any parts of the courthouse facility in particular need of repair; and visit any crowded lockup facilities or trial court floors where the jurors and/or defendants are congregated.
- g. Discuss how these issues affect the local constituents' access to justice. In brief, be creative in thinking of ways to bring court issues and concerns to life during the tour!
- h. Previous successful DOTB visits have included lunch, which provides an opportunity for court leadership, other judges, local bar members, legal services leaders, and other key court users to meet with the legislator.

SUGGESTED AGENDA FOR A TRIAL COURT VISIT	
Greet the legislator or staff in judge's chambers	30 minutes
Court facility tour	30 minutes
Courtroom observation	1–2 hours
Lunch debriefing session	1–2 hours

Follow up with the legislator

- a. Each encounter should result in follow-up contact with the legislator or staff. Please copy Jackie D'Almeida (Jackie.D'almeida@jud.ca.gov) and Cliff Costa (CCosta@caladvocates.com).
- b. Be sure to follow up on issues of interest to the legislator or staff during the visit. Contact GA and CJA to inform staff of any concerns the legislator raised and key focus points, and to assist you in responding to any request for follow-up information. Call or write the legislator and/or staff member to offer more information on issues the legislator expressed interest in during the visit.
- c. Ask the court's public information officer to do a press release or social media post praising the visit and noting concern demonstrated by the legislator. Share the draft release or post with the legislator's chief of staff or press secretary before releasing it.
- d. Invite the legislator to court activities such as Adoption Saturday, Drug or DUI court graduation, or new judges' swearing-in ceremonies. Other possibilities for meetings include:
 - Coordinating with the courts in your Assembly Member's or Senator's district for a "Meet Your Judges" night to get acquainted and to provide information to the legislators about the courts.
 - Holding an evening open house at a court or in a community center, with an invitation to community leaders to meet with their judges and legislators.
- e. Consider hosting an annual legislators' luncheon and/or an annual legislative staff seminar as a meet-and-greet activity, which could also be used as an opportunity to present and discuss issues.

- f.* Invite the legislator to personal meetings with the presiding judge over coffee or lunch.
- g.* Consider inviting your legislators to attend a meeting of local court advisory committees, such as a domestic violence coordinating council or a citizen's advisory committee. These are often ideal opportunities for legislators to learn about issues of concern to the court and the justice community at the local level.

WHERE TO FIND LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION

General Bill Information Resources

To find the most up-to-date bill information, go to leginfo.legislature.ca.gov, the official site for California legislative information. Here you can search for bill text by bill number, author, or subject area. You can also find bill histories (the dates of action, committee votes, and amendment dates), previous versions of the bill, committee analyses from the legislative policy committees (e.g., Senate Judiciary Committee analyses), and floor vote information.

Other Informational Resources

California State Legislature: www.legislature.ca.gov

California State Senate: www.senate.ca.gov

California State Assembly: www.assembly.ca.gov

Overview of Legislative Process: www.leginfo.ca.gov/bil2lawx.html

Judicial Council Position Information

Information on the legislation of interest to the judicial branch, the status of Judicial Council-sponsored legislation, and the council's position on current legislation is available online at www.courts.ca.gov/policyadmin-oga.htm.

You may also obtain more information by contacting Governmental Affairs at 916-323-3121.

California Judges Association Position Information

Information on CJA's current legislative watch list and a list of CJA's positions on current legislation are available at www.caljudges.org. Look under the "Legislation" tab on the home page. Website access is generally limited to current CJA members. For CJA membership and website information, please call 916-239-4068.

You may also obtain more information by contacting Cliff Costa, Legislative Director, at 916-441-5050.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM COSPONSORS

ABOUT THE CALIFORNIA JUDGES ASSOCIATION

Established in 1929, the California Judges Association is the nation's largest professional association representing over 2,700 active and retired California judges, justices, and commissioners. Its mission is to promote judicial excellence to achieve fair and impartial justice.

CJA's board is composed of 26 representatives democratically elected by geographic districts, including one elected representative from the California Court Commissioners Association and three elected retired judges.

CJA publishes the Voice, a monthly bulletin on issues of common interest; the Bench, a quarterly magazine; and guidebooks on elections, retirement, spousal survival, and other issues. CJA's Ethics Hotline presently is the only resource whereby a judicial officer may receive immediate, confidential, practical, reliable, and free advice on an ethics issue.

CJA's remarkable history includes such creations as the Center for Judicial Education and Research, the Judicial College, and California's first Code of Judicial Ethics. The association continues to be a vital resource for judges, legislators, and the public. CJA is the voice of California's judiciary. For more information, please contact CJA at 916-239-4068.

CALIFORNIA JUDGES ASSOCIATION GOALS

- I. Preserve and promote the integrity and independence of the State Judiciary. Uphold the quality of justice and foster public confidence in the courts.
- II. Support and enhance the well-being and effectiveness of its active and retired judicial officers.
- III. Strengthen relationships among the three branches of government so as to achieve equal justice for all.

Source: California Judges Association Strategic Plan

ABOUT THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA

The Judicial Council of California is the policymaking body for the state court system responsible for improving the statewide administration of justice in California. Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero serves as chair of the Judicial Council, and Administrative Director Shelley Curran is the secretary to the council.

Under the direction of the Chief Justice and the 34-member council, the Judicial Council is responsible for a variety of programs and services to improve access to a fair and impartial justice system. The Judicial Council serves the courts for the benefit of all Californians by advancing excellence, leadership, and service in the administration of justice. The Judicial Council provides direct and indirect services to more than 2,000 judicial officers and 19,000 trial and appellate court employees of 65 courts at more than 500 locations. Judicial Council staff also work with members of 30 advisory committees, three task forces, and a number of commissions and working groups, helping the council to shape branch wide policy and create innovative programs essential to advancing the administration of justice in California's court system.

The Day on the Bench program is staffed by the Judicial Council's Governmental Affairs office. The mission of Governmental Affairs is to promote and maintain effective relations with the legislative and executive branches of government and to present the Judicial Council's recommendations on legislative matters affecting the courts under constitutional mandate. (Cal. Const., art. VI, § 6).

Governmental Affairs seeks to promote effective communications within the judicial branch and with the legislative and executive branches of state government through numerous outreach and information programs, including DOTB and the Bench-Bar Coalition. For more information about the Judicial Council and Governmental Affairs outreach programs, please contact Governmental Affairs at 916-323-3121.

JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA GOALS

I. Access, Fairness, and Diversity

California's courts will treat everyone in a fair and just manner. All persons will have equal access to the courts and court proceedings and programs. Court procedures will be fair and understandable to court users. Members of the judicial branch community will strive to understand and be responsive to the needs of court users from diverse cultural backgrounds. The makeup of California's judicial branch will reflect the diversity of the state's residents.

II. Independence and Accountability

The judiciary must maintain its status as an independent, separate, and co-equal branch of government. The independence of judicial decisionmaking will be protected in order to preserve the rule of law and ensure the fair, impartial, and efficient delivery of justice. The judiciary will unify in its advocacy for resources and policies that support and protect independent and impartial judicial decisionmaking in accordance with the constitution and the law. The branch will maintain the highest standards of accountability for its use of public resources and adherence to its statutory and constitutional mandates.

III. Modernization of Management and Administration

Justice will be administered by a highly qualified judicial and executive leadership team in a fair, timely, efficient, and effective manner by using modern management practices that implement and sustain innovative ideas and effective practices.

IV. Quality of Justice and Service to the Public

The judicial branch will deliver the highest quality of justice and service to the public. In order to remain responsive to the varying needs of diverse court users, the judicial branch will work with branch constituencies to better ascertain court users' needs and priorities. The branch will also employ community outreach to provide information about the judicial branch to the public, and effect programs and strategies to ensure that court procedures and processes are fair and understandable.

V. Education for Branchwide Professional Excellence

High-quality education and professional development will be provided to enhance the ability of all individuals serving in the judicial branch to achieve high standards of professionalism, eth-

ics, and performance. Judicial branch personnel will have access to the resources and training necessary to meet the diverse needs of the public and to enhance trust and confidence in the courts.

VI. Branchwide Infrastructure for Service Excellence

The judicial branch will enhance the quality of justice by providing an administrative, technological, and physical infrastructure that supports and meets the needs of the public, the branch, and its justice system and community partners, and that ensures business continuity.

VII. Adequate, Stable, and Predictable Funding for a Fully Functioning Branch

Consistent with the Judicial Council's legislative priority to advocate for investment in the justice system of California to preserve access to justice for all Californians, the judicial branch must make every effort to achieve greater financial independence and flexibility for funding the court system at a level of sufficiency.

Source: The Strategic Plan for California Judicial Branch, 2006–2016

Cosponsored by:

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