

“[T]he due administration of justice is the firmest pillar of good government.”
—George Washington, 1789

Judicial Council of California, 1926–2026: Celebrating 100 Years of Advancing Access to Justice

Created to mark the Judicial Council of California’s 100th anniversary in 2026, this exhibit commemorates the council’s constitutional role in advancing the statewide administration of justice. It highlights pivotal periods of evolution and innovative reform and honors the public service contributions of the council’s members and staff.

California Judicial Branch at a Glance

7 Supreme Court justices

6 Courts of Appeal, **106** justices

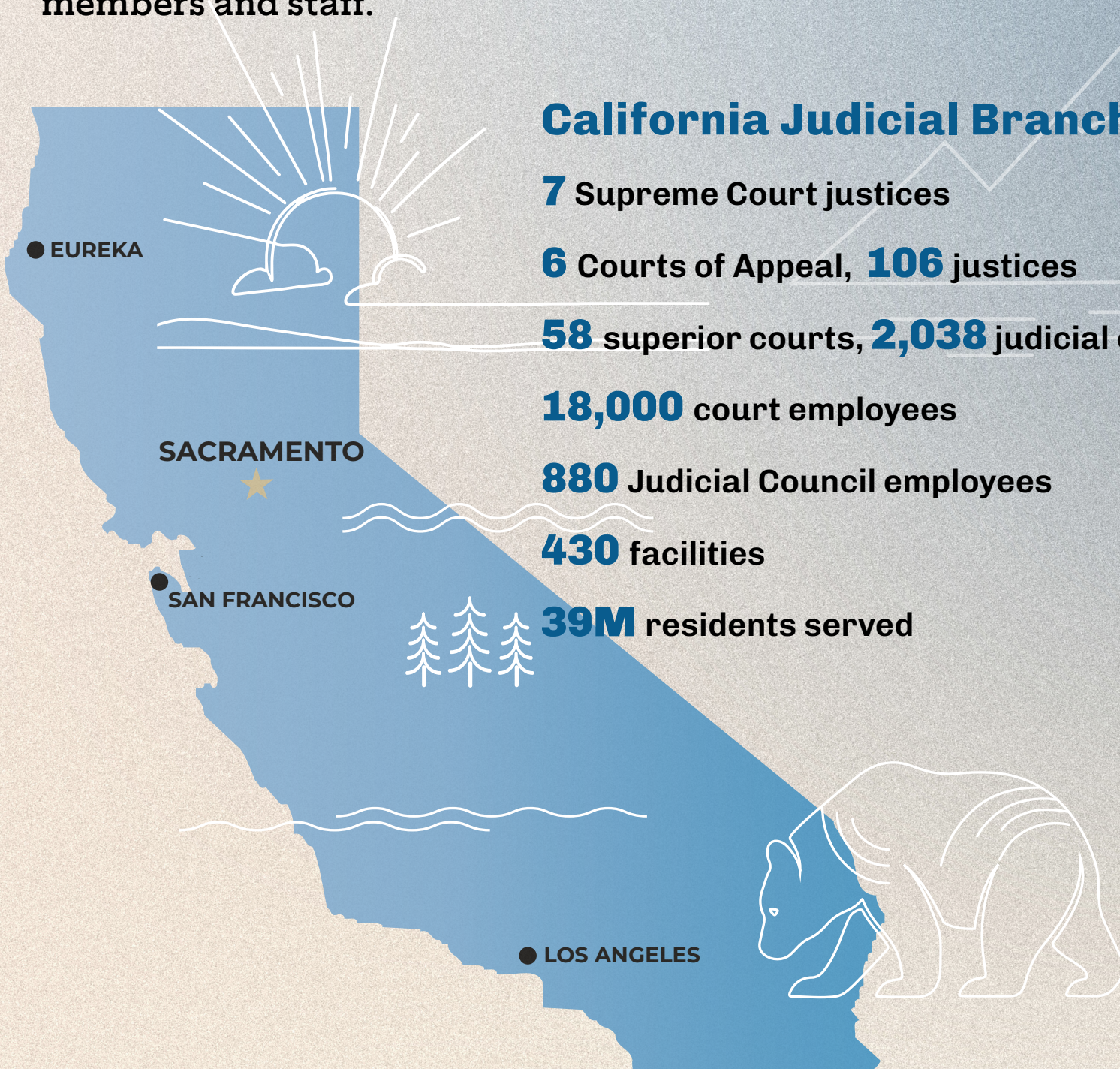
58 superior courts, **2,038** judicial officers

18,000 court employees

880 Judicial Council employees

430 facilities

39M residents served



California has the largest state judicial system in the country. Its judicial branch comprises three levels of courts: the Supreme Court (highest in the state), Courts of Appeal (intermediate appellate courts), and superior courts (trial courts, with one in each county).

The Judicial Council is the policymaking body for the judicial branch. It is responsible for ensuring the consistent, independent, impartial, and accessible administration of justice through California’s court system.

1926: The People Vote to Create a Judicial Council

JUDICIAL COUNCIL. Senate Constitutional Amendment 15. Adds Section 1a to, and amends Sections 6, 7 and 8 of, Article VI of Constitution. Creates judicial council, with chief justice as chairman and ten judges selected by him from various courts, to regulate court practice and procedure and exercise functions provided by law; eliminates judges pro tempore and provisions for judge acting when requested by Governor or Superior Judge; authorizes chairman to assign judge to act when calendar congested, judge unable to act, or vacancy exists, allowing assigned judge larger salary of assigned position; changes provisions for filling Superior Court vacancies.	YES	
	NO	

Proposition 27 ballot measure, 1926, UC Law SF Scholarship Repository.

The Judicial Council of California was established on November 2, 1926, when California voters approved Proposition 27. The 11-member council, chaired by Chief Justice William H. Waste, held its first meeting on December 10, 1926, at the Supreme Court in San Francisco. The formation of this state body marked a major first step toward ensuring that any judicial administration issues within the court system could be addressed promptly and effectively.

The Judicial Council was tasked with overseeing the administration of justice, providing guidelines for court operations, making recommendations

to the Governor and Legislature, and, later, establishing the California Rules of Court. These efforts aimed to enhance the quality and efficiency of the state's court system.

Serving the public and providing access to justice have been the core values of the Judicial Council of California. These values have animated the changes and reforms advocated by successive Chief Justices and members of the council since 1926. They have led to better funding and infrastructure for the judicial branch of government and inspired improvements and services to benefit the public.

“One of the troubles with our court system is that the work of the various courts is not correlated, and nobody is responsible for seeing that the machinery of the courts is working smoothly. . . . But with a judicial council, whenever anything goes wrong any judge or lawyer or litigant or other citizen will know to whom to make complaint, and it will be the duty of the council to propose a remedy.”

—Ballot argument for Prop. 27 by Senators M. B. Johnson and J. M. Inman, 1926



Initial members of the Judicial Council of California; California Judicial Center Library (Conrey, Shenk, Waste); Courts of Appeal (Finch, Tyler); Fang family San Francisco Examiner photograph archive, © The Regents of the University of California, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley (Harris, Johnson); LA Times via UCLA Digital Collections (Hollzer, Snyder, Willis); UC Davis Library (Shields).

How California's Rules of Court and Court Forms Keep Justice on Track

When Californians voted to amend their Constitution to establish the Judicial Council in 1926, they directed the council to “regulate court practice and procedure.” California Rules of Court and court forms developed and adopted by the Judicial Council are of vital importance to every self-represented litigant, practicing lawyer, court administrator, and judge. Rules and forms provide uniformity in practice and procedure, ensuring that courts across the state administer justice in a consistent manner, regardless of which court handles the proceeding.

The early publications of the rules came in the form of pamphlets, including the 1943 *Rules on Appeal* written by legal scholar and former Judicial Council member Bernard E. Witkin. In 1962, the Judicial Council produced a comprehensive set of the California Rules of Court, which covered all case types in both the trial and appellate courts. It was 190 pages, provided free to judicial officers, and available for purchase for \$1.56. Today, the rules are available online and span over 1,000 pages across 10 titles, reflecting decades of refinement.

Anyone may propose new or amended rules or forms. Advisory committees, supported by council staff, review and circulate proposals for public comment before recommending adoption to the council. These rules and forms are essential for litigants, lawyers, judges, and court administrators.



The Superior Court of Contra Costa County's Peter L. Spinetta Family Law Center.



Key improvements to the rules and forms include

- **Plain language:** To aid the growing number of self-represented litigants, rules now prioritize clarity and accessibility.
- **Standardization of forms:** Under constitutional authority, the council created mandatory and optional forms to streamline court processes. Many are translated for those with limited English proficiency.
- **Online access:** Rules and forms are published on the California Courts website, and the pages housing these are the most visited sections of the site.
- **Inclusivity:** Recent policies ensure gender-neutral language.

Court forms are accessible on the California Courts website and can be filled out on a computer or by hand.

Blueprint for Advancement: How Strategic Planning Shapes Justice in California

From its early days conducting court surveys to its current role as a national leader in judicial administration, the Judicial Council has consistently advanced reforms that make California’s courts more fair, efficient, and accessible. Its strategic planning efforts have helped strengthen the judiciary as an independent but coequal branch of government.

“We need to anticipate change and plan for action. We need to lead and not wait to be led into the next millennium.”

— Chief Justice Malcom M. Lucas, 1990

In the late 1980s, the Judicial Council began creating an annual plan for its priorities in relation to the judicial branch. Strategic planning became a formalized function of the council in the 1990s. The council’s first strategic plan, adopted in 1992, laid out five goals. As a living document, the plan has been amended over time to reflect the evolving needs of serving the public.

Each of California’s 58 trial courts is encouraged to develop its own local strategic plan in alignment with the council’s statewide goals for the judicial branch, accounting for local needs and community voices.



Mission

Under the leadership of the Chief Justice and in accordance with the California Constitution, the law, and the mission of the judiciary, the Judicial Council sets the direction and provides the leadership for improving the quality and advancing the consistent, independent, impartial, and accessible administration of justice.

Goals

- 1 Access, Fairness, Diversity, and Inclusion
- 2 Independence and Accountability
- 3 Modernization of Management and Administration
- 4 Quality of Justice and Service to the Public
- 5 Education for Branchwide Professional Excellence
- 6 Branchwide Infrastructure for Service Excellence
- 7 Adequate, Stable, and Predictable Funding for a Fully Functioning Branch

Mission and goals poster, Judicial Council of California.

Building a Unified Court System: Proposition 220 and Beyond

Although reforms in the 1950s pared down the number of jurisdictional courts in California, the unification of all trial courts in a county into a single-level court was not realized for almost another 50 years. In the 1990s, the Judicial Council played a leading role, particularly through its collaboration with the Legislature and local courts, in this unification. The most significant milestone in this journey came in the form of Proposition 220 in 1998, which enabled the voluntary unification of municipal and superior courts within each county.

The Judicial Council was critical in drafting, advocating for, and implementing this constitutional amendment. It developed statewide rules and procedures to guide unified court operations, ensuring consistency while allowing for local flexibility, and through its staff organization, the council provided administrative infrastructure, funding, and performance monitoring to help courts transition smoothly.

By 2001, each of the 58 counties had unified its municipal and superior court system into a single, countywide superior court.

Two further major reforms advanced by the Judicial Council followed unification. In 2000, the Trial Court Employment Protection and Governance Act changed the status of court personnel from employees of the county to employees of their courts. And finally, in 2002, the Trial Court Facilities Act transferred ownership and operational responsibility of state and local courthouses to the state judicial branch.



Chief Justice Ronald M. George (left) congratulates Judge Eugene Mac Amos, Jr., after swearing him in as a superior court judge of San Diego County; (top) judges' swearing-in ceremony for trial court unification at the Superior Court of Contra Costa County; 1998, Judicial Council of California.

Benefits of Trial Court Unification

For the courts



Operational efficiency



Flexible resource allocation



Enhanced case management



Accountability and oversight



Increased collaboration

For the public



User-friendly services



More consistent systems across counties



Community-specific specialized services



Standardized rules and procedures



Increased responsiveness and trust

Funding Courts: Investing in Statewide Access to Justice

Historically, trial courts were funded at the county level, which led to disparities in resources for ensuring service levels and maintaining infrastructure. The Judicial Council’s championing of the landmark Trial Court Funding Act of 1997 shifted this responsibility from the counties to the state, centralizing funding under the Judicial Council to promote consistency, accountability, and efficiency in court operations.



Governor Pete Wilson signs the Lockyer-Isenberg Trial Court Funding Act of 1997, with Senator Martha Escutia, Senator Bill Lockyer (fourth from right), Judicial Council Governmental Affairs Director Ray LeBov (second from right), and others who worked for the measure, June 26, 1997, Judicial Council of California.

“What the California judiciary deserves to be proud of is not just that it achieved state trial court funding but that it seized the opportunity created by state funding in a bold way, one unparalleled across the country.”

—Roger K. Warren, President Emeritus, National Center for State Courts, 2009

Through bust-and-boom economies since the passage of state trial court funding, the Judicial Council has maintained its focus on securing adequate, stable, and predictable funding for a fully functioning branch. Beginning in 2016, this included addressing a system of fines and fees that had morphed from a system of accountability

into a system that raised revenue for essential government services, including courts. The council worked with the Governor and state Legislature to wean the judiciary budget from dependency on fines and fees and have more funding for the court system come from the state’s General Fund.

Key Benefits of State Trial Court Funding

Funding equity across counties



Provides more equitable resources for courts, regardless of local fiscal conditions

Strategic planning and modernization



Supports long-term planning, technology upgrades, and infrastructure improvements

Operational stability



Sustains essential court services

Support for vulnerable populations



Expands access for juvenile dependency counsel and self-represented litigants

Transparency and accountability



Enables fiscal oversight through standardized reports

Connecting People to Justice

At the heart of the Judicial Council’s mission is the principle that all Californians—regardless of background, income, and language—deserve meaningful access to the courts.

The council has led efforts to modernize the physical and digital infrastructure of California’s courts. It has deployed and supported new financial, human resources, and case management systems that improve transparency, budgeting, and service delivery; expanded public access to electronic court records; and explored virtual courtroom technologies to better serve remote and underserved communities.



A day in the life of the courts: court interpreting in Fresno County, 2003, Jason Doiy, Judicial Council of California.

The council’s court programs and services are grounded in the lived and evolving needs and experiences of Californians.

- Jurors benefit from streamlined obligations through one-day or one-trial **jury service** as well as jury instructions in civil and criminal cases that have been rewritten in plain language.
- Families and individuals involved in dependency, mental health, and drug court cases are supported by **specialized programs** that reflect the council’s holistic approach to justice.
- The MyCitations **online ability-to-pay** tool, available through all 58 trial courts since 2024, allows defendants to request traffic fine

reductions online, eliminating long lines and resulting in over \$110 million in reduced fines. MyCitations is offered in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and traditional and simplified Chinese.

- Expansion of **interpreter services** accommodates California’s growing linguistic diversity, ensuring that non-English speakers and those who are deaf or hard of hearing can fully participate in court proceedings.
- The **online Self-Help Guide to the California Courts**, accessed by more than 7 million people each year, provides practical legal guidance on topics such as family law, domestic violence, and small claims.



Remote proceeding, 2025, Superior Court of Mendocino County.

The “100 Milestones for 100 Years” timeline chronicles the Judicial Council’s history.



Scan the QR code to view the timeline.

Trial Court Facilities Act: Safe, Secure, and Accessible Courthouses

Advocated for by the Judicial Council, the Trial Court Facilities Act of 2002 was a transformative law in California that transferred ownership and responsibility for nearly 500 court buildings from the counties to state government. This shift was designed to standardize the quality and safety of court facilities across all counties, ensure consistent funding and oversight, and improve public access to justice through better infrastructure.

The Judicial Council was given full authority over trial court facilities under this act. The council's responsibilities include owning and managing court buildings; setting statewide design and safety standards for new and renovated courthouses; prioritizing capital projects based on need, safety, and access; and ensuring compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and seismic and environmental requirements.

“Strengthening the physical foundation of our judicial system is more than a metaphor. Court-houses are as vital a part of California’s infrastructure as bridges and highways.”

— Chief Justice Ronald M. George, 2010



B. F. Sisk Courthouse, 2011, Superior Court of Fresno County.

Between 2002 and 2025, the council’s construction program completed 35 new courthouse projects. Another 18 projects are underway, with four new courthouses expected to be completed in 2026.

Significant Public Benefits Delivered by the Trial Court Facilities Act

Safer courthouses



Many older buildings were seismically unsafe or lacked basic security features. New and renovated facilities now meet modern safety codes.

Improved accessibility and consistent quality



All new courthouses meet the same high standards, including designs that meet ADA standards to ensure access for people with disabilities.

Better public service



Modern layouts support self-help centers, family law facilitators, and digital services to support remote hearings and language access and jury services.

Efficient use of public funds

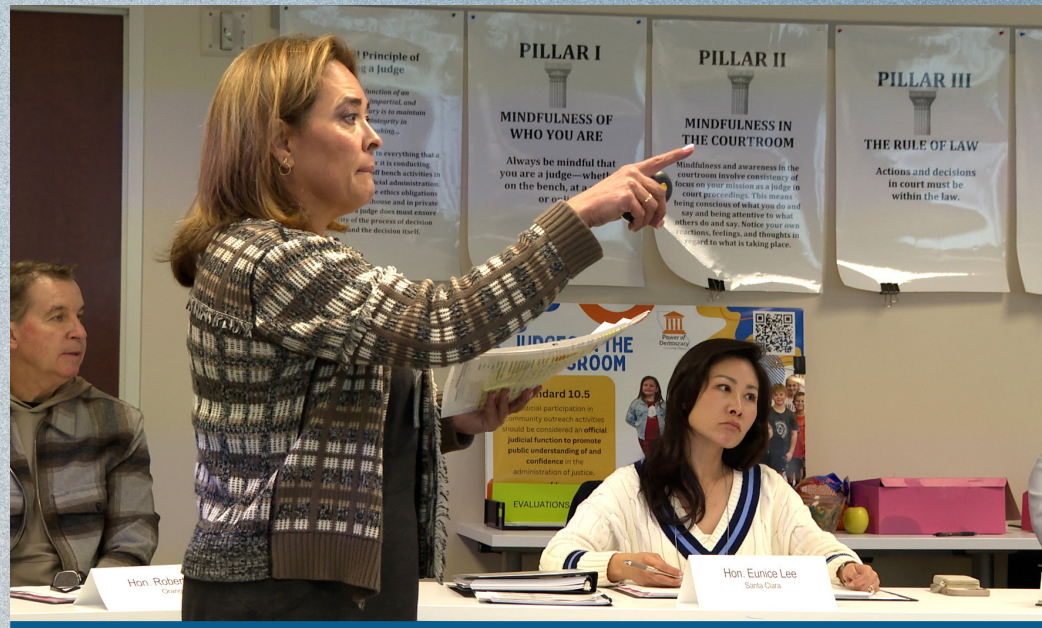


Centralized management allows the state to prioritize projects based on need and cost-effectiveness.

Judicial and Staff Education for Branchwide Professional Excellence

The Judicial Council’s education programs aim to equip judicial officers and court staff with the knowledge and skills to perform their duties competently and ethically; promote fairness, access, and diversity in the courts; standardize practices and improve court administration; and support adherence to the California Code of Judicial Ethics and the Code of Ethics for Court Employees.

Orientation and continuing education, online courses, webinars, and podcasts as well as in-person conferences and training events are offered for more than 2,100 justices, judges, and subordinate judicial officers and approximately 18,000 court personnel.



Judge Alicia Y. Blanco at the New Judge Orientation program in San Francisco.

“[E]very course in judicial education . . . rests on a single unified idea of what being a judge is all about: that what judges fundamentally do is ensure the integrity and honesty of the process of judicial decision-making and of judicial decisions.”

—Judge David M. Rothman, original author of the California Judicial Conduct Handbook and longtime instructor for the council’s B. E. Witkin Judicial College of California



In-person and distance education courses and resources available to judicial officers and court personnel.

Approximately 160 judicial branch members, including justices, judges, court administrators, and professional educators, serve on 10 education curriculum committees.

The Judicial Council provides judicial officers with a portfolio of 80 judicial publications, including benchguides and benchbooks, designed to provide practical guidance to assist courts in the accurate, consistent, and fair resolution of pending cases. The publications contain tools such as checklists, scripts, and tips to guide judicial officers in effectively overseeing courtroom procedures.

The Judicial Council's Staff Organization

The position of Administrative Director of the Courts was created by constitutional amendment on November 8, 1960. One year later, the Judicial Council adopted a resolution delegating authority to Ralph N. Kleps, the first Administrative Director, to establish the Administrative Office of the Courts as the council's staff arm. (The Judicial Council and its staff were later collectively referred to as the "Judicial Council of California" when the "Administrative Office of the Courts" name was retired in 2014.)

During the first two decades of its existence, the Judicial Council's staff organization was primarily responsible for the council's rulemaking process and prescribing operational procedures and forms requirements for courts of all levels. Staff also provided personnel, budget, and systems services to the appellate courts.

As a result of major judicial branch policy and administrative infrastructure reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, including state trial court

funding and unification, the Judicial Council's policy and programmatic responsibilities, and therefore the staff's scope of work, expanded significantly. Today, the professional skills and qualifications of a diverse workforce of approximately 880 public servants—from accountants, architects, attorneys, and editors, to auditors, labor negotiators, analysts, researchers, and web designers—implement statewide policy, programs, and services for the courts and the public.



Judicial Council staff members (clockwise, from upper left) Lyle Nishimi; Deanna Adams (center) with Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero and Administrative Director Michelle Curran; Catherine Lam; and Marcela Eggleton, Lucas Cendejas, and Alberto Cruz.



Partners in Progress: Judicial Council Advisory Bodies

By bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise, advisory bodies help ensure that California’s courts remain responsive to the needs of the public. Their recommendations lead to improvements in court services, greater access to justice, and increased public trust in the legal system. Advisory bodies are subject-matter-expert committees established by the Judicial Council or the Chief Justice to help

shape the future of California’s courts. These standing committees, assisted by Judicial Council staff, are composed of more than 500 volunteer judges, attorneys, court professionals, and justice system partners to study issues, propose solutions, and recommend policies that improve the administration of justice. Other working groups or task forces are appointed as needed.

Ways the Advisory Bodies Assist the Courts and Public



Recommend solutions to challenges in court operations



Propose updates to court rules, standards, and forms



Review and suggest legislation affecting courts



Recommend pilot projects and new programs



Ensure court policies reflect the state’s diverse population

The Judicial Council publicizes vacancies and solicits nominations to fill positions on its standing committees. As Chair of the Judicial Council, the Chief Justice makes the member appointments. Each advisory body receives an annual charge from the council. The 25 current advisory bodies review issues on a wide range of judicial administration areas, including

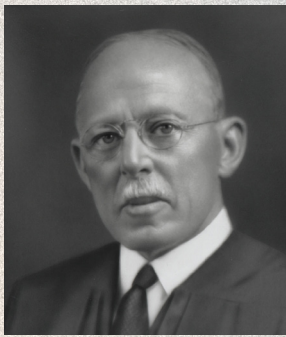
- Access and fairness
- Appellate court leadership
- Appellate court services
- Audits and financial accountability for the judicial branch
- Budget development and management
- Civil and small claims
- Civil counsel
- Collaborative justice
- Court facilities
- Court interpreters
- Court security
- Criminal law
- Data analytics
- Education
- Family and juvenile law
- Information technology
- Judicial branch workers’ compensation
- Jury instructions
- Probate and mental health
- Traffic law
- Trial court leadership
- Tribal court–state court partnership

A Century of Leadership in Justice

“The Judicial Council’s remarkable evolution as a unifying force for improving the statewide administration of justice has profoundly impacted how our courts operate and transformed the court-user experience. Our progress as an independent, coequal branch of government would not have been possible without the existence of the Judicial Council. Thanks to judicial visionaries, and thanks to the justices, judges, court executives, staff, and justice partners who made this possible, we will continue to advance judicial administration and access to justice for all Californians into the future.”

— Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero

Chief Justices and Chairs of the Judicial Council



William H. Waste
(1926–1940)



Phil S. Gibson
(1940–1964)



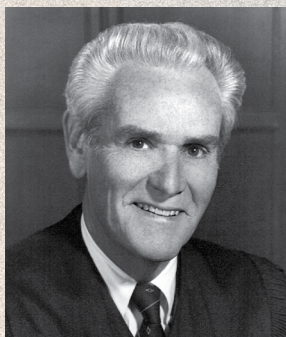
Roger J. Traynor
(1964–1970)



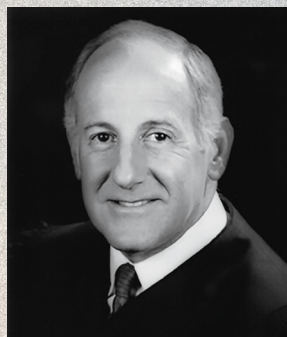
Donald R. Wright
(1970–1977)



Rose Elizabeth Bird
(1977–1987)



Malcolm M. Lucas
(1987–1996)



Ronald M. George
(1996–2011)



Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye
(2011–2023)



Patricia Guerrero
(2023–present)

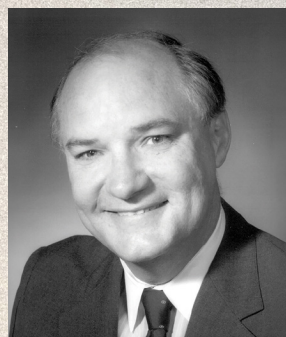
Administrative Directors



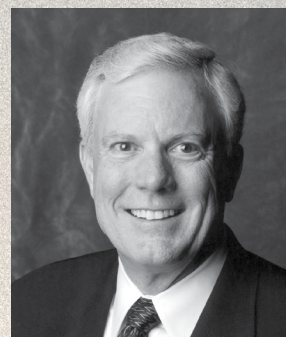
Ralph N. Kleps
(1961–1977)



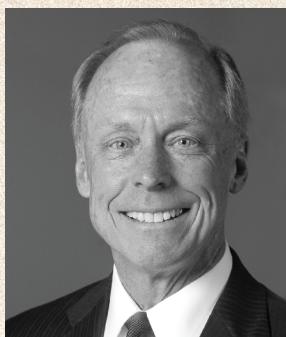
Ralph J. Gampell
(1977–1986)



William E. Davis
(1987–1991)



William C. Vickrey
(1992–2011)



Steven E. Jahr
(2012–2014)



Martin Hoshino
(2014–2022)



Michelle Curran
(2024–present)



Since 1926, 545 members have served on the Judicial Council.

Scan the QR code to view the roster.