



NEWS RELEASE

Release Number: 38

Release Date: July 28, 2009

JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF
CALIFORNIA
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Judge Gordon Baranco to Receive 2009 Aranda Access to Justice Award

San Francisco—Judge Gordon S. Baranco, of the Superior Court of Alameda County, is the recipient of the 2009 Benjamin Aranda III Access to Justice Award. Chief Justice Ronald M. George will present the award in October.

The California Commission on Access to Justice cosponsors the Aranda Award with the Judicial Council, State Bar, and California Judges Association. The award, named for the founding chair of the Judicial Council's Access and Fairness Advisory Committee, honors a trial judge or an appellate justice whose activities demonstrate a long-term commitment to improving access to justice.

“Our entire community here in Alameda County has been substantially improved because of Judge Baranco’s many efforts on so many issues,” said Judge Vernon K. Nakahara, of the Superior Court of Alameda County. “I knew Judge Aranda, and I know he would be proud to have Judge Baranco as a recipient of this prestigious award named after him.”

Rodney G. Moore, president of the National Bar Association, stated: “Throughout his legal career, Judge Baranco has been relentless in his pursuit of justice for all people and tireless in his efforts on behalf of those with limited or no means to gain access to the courts.”

Judge Baranco has demonstrated his deep commitment to improving access to justice throughout his career. He was instrumental in establishing the Alameda Countywide Homeless and Caring Court and has presided over the court since its inception in 2004.

Because of his direct leadership, the program is thriving in Alameda County, and Judge Baranco and others in the court system have helped to create a statewide network of at least 20 homeless courts.

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The Homeless and Caring Court features a compassionate and welcoming environment for homeless defendants, who ordinarily are reluctant to seek available help and are fearful of traditional court contacts. Many defendants have avoided necessary contact with the judicial system to address outstanding citations, infractions, nonviolent misdemeanors, and failure to appear charges.

The Homeless and Caring Court sessions are held every two months in nontraditional settings—such as drop-in centers for hot meals and counseling, soup kitchens, church halls, and drug treatment programs—to conduct its business in a more familiar, less intimidating, and more comfortable setting. The court is designed as a way to identify at an early stage individuals in the criminal justice system who need to be treated and housed as well as prosecuted. Often mental illness or behavioral dysfunction can lead to criminal activities

In addition, Judge Baranco began a collaboration between Alameda County courts and the Peralta Community College District to teach students to become certified court interpreters. The shortage of court interpreters throughout California has been a serious problem within the court system for years. Those most in need of interpreters—the poor and disenfranchised—are often trying to navigate a complex legal system without knowing the language.

The course is a two-year program where bilingual Spanish- and English-speaking students are given the opportunity to enter the field of legal interpretation as a career. The course is being designed to acquaint students with the profession, its code of ethics, and the different modes of interpretation: consecutive, simultaneous, and sight. Students will be able to supplement their course lectures with class visits by judges, commissioners, and court staff. They will also be given the opportunity to observe interpretation in action in court settings in Alameda County.

Judge Baranco also supports and works with Youth Uprising, a nonprofit organization that creates and sustains economic development of youth leadership, through programs in arts and culture, health and wellness, and career and education for low-income youth and young adults.

Judge Baranco is vice-chair of the Judicial Council's Access and Fairness Advisory Committee, where his work has included important contributions to the council's statewide strategic planning, grand jury reform, language access planning, judicial education, diversification of the judicial branch, and community-focused court planning. The judge also serves on the Judicial Council's Task Force for Criminal Justice Collaboration on Mental Health Issues and spent many years contributing to the Governing Committee of the Center for Judicial Education and Research.

In addition to the Aranda Award, Judge Baranco has received many other honors, including the Civic Achievement Award of the Bay Area Urban League in 2000, Judicial Distinguished Service Award of the Alameda County Bar Association in 2001, Judicial Excellence Award of the Charles Houston Bar Association in 2002, Bernard Jefferson Outstanding Jurist Award of the California Association of Black Lawyers in both 1988 and 2006, and the Rose Bird Judicial Excellence Award of the California Public Defenders Association in 2008.

Past recipients of the Aranda Award are Justice Judith D. McConnell (1999), Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division One; Judge Veronica S. McBeth (2000), Superior Court of Los Angeles County; Judge Charles W. Campbell, Jr. (2001), Superior Court of Ventura County; Judge Donna J. Hitchens (2002), Superior Court of San Francisco County; Judge Ken M. Kawaichi (2003), Superior Court of Alameda County; Justice Earl Johnson, Jr. (2004), Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District, Division Seven; Judge Aviva K. Bobb (2005), Superior Court of Los Angeles County; Judge Donna M. Petre (2006), Superior Court of Yolo County; Justice Kathleen O’Leary, Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division Three (2007); and Judge Francisco F. Firmat, Superior Court of Orange County (2008).

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