

CONTACT

POLICY DEPARTMENT

MARIA CILENTI

212.382.6655 | mcilenti@nycbar.org

ELIZABETH KOCIENDA

212.382.4788 | ekocienda@nycbar.org

**REPORT IN SUPPORT OF
THE JUDICIARY’S 2019-2020 BUDGET REQUEST
BY THE COUNCIL ON JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATION**

The New York City Bar Association urges the Legislature to accept the Judiciary’s 2019-2020 Budget Request (the “Budget Request”) in its entirety.

This year’s proposed operating budget of \$2.28 billion is an increase of \$44.7 million, or 2%, over available current-year funds. These funds will provide for the basic needs of the court system, which is still recovering from the adverse effects of the fiscal restraints imposed following the 2008 financial crisis. Beginning in the 2011-12 fiscal year, through attrition and layoffs, the court system ultimately reduced its staffing by 2,000 positions. Gradually, in recent years, the Judiciary budget has increased, and staffing levels have improved modestly. The Chief Judge announced the Excellence Initiative in 2016 and began its implementation over the past few years with the goal of achieving “operational and decisional excellence in everything we do.” Its focus is on the core mission of the Judiciary – to fairly and promptly adjudicate each of the millions of cases filed in the New York State courts every year.¹

The Budget Request is another step forward and should be adopted. It will enable the courts to increase court staffing, particularly in courtroom and back office positions – such as court officer, court clerk, interpreter, and court reporter – that are critical to providing a high level of service to the public. The increases in these line-items are minimal, but crucial to allowing the Judiciary to continue its progress towards true excellence. Additional judges and interpreters are particularly needed in New York City Civil Court where there are routine nine-month conference adjournments in Queens and only one Spanish interpreter in the Bronx. Additional staff is also needed to address the still difficult and time-consuming process to obtain access to court files that many consumer-debt litigants need to document their cases. And, the Criminal Courts continue to suffer from an insufficient number of non-judicial personnel – particularly court officers, clerks, and interpreters – resulting in inefficient proceedings. The Budget Request can help to ameliorate some of these problems.

We applaud the budget’s inclusion of \$100 million for civil legal services. These funds help ensure equal access to justice for low income New Yorkers facing housing, consumer debt and other legal problems concerning the essentials of life. Domestic violence victims, veterans, seniors and formerly incarcerated people all benefit from these services. Providing counsel to those in need also contributes to the efficiency of court proceedings and to achieving more just results.

¹ Judiciary 2019-2020 Budget Request, Introduction, Page i.

The budget request also will provide full funding for judicial raises in accordance with the mandate of the Commission on Judicial and Legislative Salaries. For the Supreme Courts and County Courts, an increase of \$28.8 million (6.4%) is requested, including funds for five new Supreme Court judgeships. These new judgeships are long overdue.

Increased funds for personnel include an additional 2.5% for Family Court, 5.2% for Surrogates Courts, 3.8% for New York City and District Courts, and 4.6% for Housing Court. \$600,000 is allocated to improving the judicial hearing officer program within the New York City courts. The JHO program is very important to supplement the work of Supreme Court justices and should be expanded.

The Capital Budget of \$24 million (33.3% increase over last year) will fund new and continued investments in technology, equipment associated with facility renovations, records-management projects and public-safety equipment. \$2 million will be used for digitizing and managing court records. These upgrades will enhance the efficiency of the courts. For example, many courtrooms lack WIFI and often litigants cannot access information on mobile devices due to weak signals. Jurors are also inconvenienced by the antiquated technology. In Kings County there is no WIFI in the jury room, which is a real inconvenience to jurors waiting to be called for service.

The Budget Request is incremental and pragmatic. It will help keep the court system on track to achieve the Excellence Initiative while hewing to the Governor's 2% cap. We urge the Legislature to adopt it.

Council on Judicial Administration
Hon. (Ret.) Carolyn E. Demarest, Chair

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