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State Bar calls for judicial salary increase

Mon, Jul 25th 2011 12:00 am

By MATT CHANDLER

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In response to the recession and continued economic downturn, many private companies have imposed wage freezes and even pay cuts to help avoid layoffs and keep costs in line.

For the judges of New York state, the concept of a pay freeze long precedes the economic crisis: They have gone 12 years without a salary increase.

A report issued this week by the New York State Bar Association suggested that the pay freeze threatens millions of New Yorkers who become involved in the justice system.

"New York judges have not had a salary adjustment since 1999, even though the cost-of-living index has increased by 40 percent during that time," said state Bar President Vincent Doyle III, a partner in the Buffalo law office of Connors & Vilaro. "We cannot afford to lose more talented and experienced judges."

Recent media reports say the number of judges voluntarily leaving the bench has dramatically increased since 1999 when 48 of 1,300 state judges stepped down. In 2010, the number was 110.

"It is important to have salaries that do not deter highly qualified individuals from seeking judicial office and to ensure that judges are fairly compensated on an ongoing basis so that we can retain them on the bench," Doyle said.

New York took over funding for the judicial system in 1977 and, according to the Bar Association report, pay raises have been infrequent.

"A pattern of long periods of salary stagnation (were) interrupted by occasional 'catch-up' increases," the report said.

"A judge serving since 1995 has received only one pay increase, in 1999. "A judge serving since 1988 - 23 years ago - has received only two salary adjustments, in 1993 and 1999, while seeing inflation dramatically erode his or her salary," it said.

The report calls for judicial salaries to be increased next year in an amount that least reflects the cost-of-living increase since 1999. Under the recommendation, state Supreme Court justices - whose salaries have been frozen at \$136,700 - would be paid at least \$192,011 in 2012.

There is no plan to make any increase retroactive, so the state would not be looking at making up for lost wages over the past 12 years, according to the report.

The Bar Association submitted the report to the Judicial Compensation Commission. The commission, created by a 2010 law, said its recommendations for judicial pay raises would take effect April 1 unless the Legislature modifies or rejects them.

The report can be viewed at www.nysba.org/judicialsalaries.

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