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Budget cuts have 'widespread' impact on NY state courts-report

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NEW YORK, Aug 16 (Reuters) - It's only been four months since legislators cut \$170 million from New York state courts, but the impact has been "serious and widespread," according to a report released by the New York County Lawyers' Association.

Reductions in the number of hours that court facilities are open, drastic staffing cuts, mounting backlogs and a reduction in access to child care in family courts have had a chilling effect on state courts that operate within Manhattan, according to a preliminary report issued Monday by the Task Force on Judicial Budget Cuts.

The cuts took effect on April 1, after Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the state's \$132.5 billion spending plan.

Michael Miller, who chaired a committee that examined cuts during the last judicial budget crisis in 1991, and former Justice Stephen Crane are co-chairing the current effort, and the mandate was to prepare a preliminary report within 60 days.

"The real-life impacts are being felt as we speak," Stewart Aaron, the president of the county lawyers' association, said in an interview. Rather than wait for more time to pass, they thought it best to "start sensitizing the public, the legislature, the mayor and the governor about the real-life effects as they ponder their future budgets," he said.

The court system has 1,151 fewer employees as a result of layoffs, early-retirement programs and hiring freezes, the report said. In the layoffs, those with less seniority were bumped, creating situations where senior people may be unfamiliar with the policies and procedures of their new jobs.

"ACCESS TO JUSTICE"

The budget cuts have raised the price for "access to justice," Miller said in an interview. "What's the price to someone who has a small claim and they can only go in the evening, because they work during the day, and they go down and expect to have their dispute resolved and they're told to come back?" Miller said.

The task force was divided into subcommittees that focused on each court, including New York City Civil Court and the criminal and civil terms in state Supreme Court. The task force's executive committee met with Chief Administrative Judge Ann Pfau and Judge Lawrence Marks, administrative director of the Office of Court Administration.

Pfau told them that the courts were quickly confronted with a serious problem when Brooklyn arraignments were taking more than 24 hours in violation of the law. Redeploying personnel and moving to round-the-clock arraignments have eased the situation, the report said.

In an interview Tuesday, Pfau said that the court system has tried to be as flexible as possible. "What we have to be vigilant about is to make sure that the resources we have are used as effectively as possible so we can minimize the impact on people who come to the courts," she said.

So far, NYCLA has been the only bar association to issue a report documenting the impact, Pfau said, and her discussion with them was helpful.

"Our partners in this are the bar associations," she said, adding, "When they stop to tell us what the impact is on the people they serve, that's just great for us."

The work of the task force is ongoing, and public hearings will be held in the fall, Miller said. A preliminary report on the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York will be issued shortly.

(Reporting by Jennifer Golson)

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