

NY Judiciary Seeks \$44.4M Budget Increase but Stays Within 2% Cap

BY JOSEFA VELASQUEZ

THE STATE'S unified court system is asking the governor and Legislature for a budget increase of \$44.4 million for the judiciary for the upcoming fiscal year, according to the budgetary request released Friday.

The budget request totals \$2.23 billion for the upcoming fiscal year and stays within the 2 percent spending growth Gov. Andrew Cuomo has asked state agencies to abide by. The budget request also includes an \$18 million capital appropriation to be used for

technology, security and records request managements in an effort to advance Chief Judge Janet DiFiore's Excellence Initiative, which

\$2.23 billion

Total judiciary budget request for the upcoming fiscal year

seeks to reduce chronic backlogs in the court system and reduce the time it takes to dispose of cases.

The 2 percent budget increase

request will allow for "adequate court staffing, especially in clerk, court officer, interpreter, court reporter, and other courtroom and back office positions that are critical to providing a high level of service to the public," the budgetary request to Cuomo and members of the Legislature says. The increase request will also allow the judiciary to "incrementally restore" a number of programs that were cut due to budget constraints in previous years.

"For example, we will be able to provide increased funding for such programs as the Community Dispute Resolution Centers,

which recruit, train and supervise volunteers who provide free and low-cost mediation and other alternative dispute resolution services in civil, criminal and Family Court matters for parties who are unable to afford these services. We will also be able to increase funding for the Court Appointed Special Advocate program," the 188-page budgetary request says.

The judiciary's requested budget also seeks a \$500,000 funding increase in the Justice Court Assistance Program to help mitigate the costs associated with off-hours arraignments.

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Most of the judiciary's \$18 million capital request will go toward modernizing the judiciary's computer network and providing computer equipment for judges, court staff and court system's data centers. Of the \$18 million, \$3 million would go toward modernizing security equipment, including X-ray machines and security cameras and another \$2 million of the requested amount would go toward digitalization of records.

At an Assembly hearing held Friday in Manhattan to discuss the 2017-2018 fiscal year judiciary budget, Assembly Judiciary Chair Jeff Dinowitz asked how the judiciary has fared with relatively flat budgets over several years.

Michelle Smith, the chief of staff to Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives Edwina Mendelson—who is out of the country—did not have an immediate answer to Dinowitz's question. Another hearing on the judiciary's budget is expected early next year when the lawmakers come back to Albany for the legislative session.

Dinowitz, a Bronx Democrat who was recently appointed as the head of the judiciary committee, remarked on the "enormous need" for additional Supreme Court justices in areas of the state experiencing "enormous" backlogs.

"We know that there are many people who languish in jail for ridiculous amounts of time," Dinowitz said. "It seems to me ... one of the problems is that we need more judges."

Assemblyman David Buchwald, a Democrat from Westchester,

asked Anne Erickson, the president and CEO of the Empire Justice Center, how the state should prioritize the expansion of civil legal services.

"One of the things we need to really start thinking about is how are we funding the delivery system [of civil legal services]. Right now with the judiciary legal services we are really funding the one-on-one representation," Erickson said. "But to really fund a delivery system, we really have to be looking at funding things like the training, the support, the technical assistance; the coming together of attorneys working on similar issues."

Budget negotiations between the Senate, Assembly and governor's office begin in earnest in March, with a financial plan due by April 1.

@ Josefa Velasquez can be reached at jvelasquez@alm.com. Twitter: @J_Velasquez