

The Supreme Court of Ohio

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The Supreme Court of Ohio Budget Testimony Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Ohio Senate Finance Committee

**Submitted By:
Robert W. Horner, III, Administrative Director
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Chairman Cirino, Vice-Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and
Members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee:

I am Robert Horner, the Administrative Director of the Supreme Court of Ohio. On behalf of Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy and the Justices of the Court, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Biennium Budget for the Supreme Court and the Ohio Judiciary. With me here today are Ronda Carver, Chief Financial Officer; Stephanie Nelson, Director of Court Services; and September Coyne, Legislative Counsel.

The strength of the judiciary and its adherence to impartiality and equality under the law are crucial to maintaining public confidence in this institution and preserving the wisely structured separation of powers as established by the framers of our state and federal Constitutions. Article IV, Section 1 of the Ohio Constitution vests the judicial power in the Supreme Court and the inferior courts. The Supreme Court is Ohio's court of last resort

and most of its cases are appeals from one of the twelve district courts of appeals. The Court also exercises original jurisdiction over certain types of actions such as the issuance of extraordinary writs, and the processing of affidavits of disqualification filed against Ohio judges. The Supreme Court has additional constitutional responsibilities including regulation of the practice of law and promulgating rules governing the superintendence and practice and procedure in Ohio's courts.

In the tradition of home-rule, Ohio has a non-unified judicial system. This means judges are elected locally and function independently under the Ohio Constitution and state law. Rather than directly supervising the local courts, the Constitution vests the Supreme Court with general superintendence authority over all courts in the state to ensure the prompt disposition of all cases.

This general superintendence over all the other courts leads into a discussion of the Supreme Court's role in the requested budget proposal before you today. It is important to recognize that the Supreme Court's direct budgetary control extends only to a portion of the requested funds. Much of the requested budget you see before you today is statutorily directed by the General Assembly. However, the portion of the budget request the Supreme Court *can* control is governed by the Court's philosophy, and strategic plan, to perpetually look for improvements in the processes we oversee so that we may use resources wisely. This has and will continue to afford the Court ongoing opportunities to eliminate instances of waste, and wherever possible, to make efficiency-based cost reductions for the benefit of the taxpayers. The Supreme Court's budget request today reflects this mindset while executing the Court's prescribed responsibilities.

One example of the Court's ongoing efficiency efforts is the Judicial Assignment Program. The Ohio Constitution vests the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court with the authority to make temporary assignments of sitting and retired judges to serve in any Ohio court in the absence of a judge due to certain circumstances. In 2023, Chief Justice Kennedy met with judges throughout the state in an effort to optimize the assignment process. These efforts resulted in a streamlined process for courts and Supreme Court staff. This work paid off in terms of processing time and overall cost. Prior to Chief Kennedy's initiatives, the processing time for a requested assignment averaged 11 days. Now the average processing time is less than one day.

Exercising the court's superintendence authority and ensuring fairness and efficiency across Ohio's courts takes many forms, including the collaboration with, and support of local courts. Local courts are on the front lines when it comes to identifying and, solving the many challenges confronting our justice system today. Every day, our local courts come face-to-face with some of the most vexing problems in our society. I would like to share with you some of the ways the Supreme Court assists local courts in facing these challenges and in promoting high standards and best practices across the judicial branch.

Utilizing Collaboration and Innovation to Assist Local Courts

Collaboration among partners in the judiciary, makes our courts more efficient, accessible, and effective. A notable example of this collaboration at the local level throughout the state is the establishment of Specialized Dockets.

One of the most pressing challenges facing Ohio and its judicial system is addressing the needs of individuals struggling with substance use disorders and or mental

health conditions. The Supreme Court and its Commission on Specialized Dockets collaborate closely with local courts operating specialized dockets to promote the implementation of proven standards and the effective use of resources through proper certification. These efforts aim to not only support individuals on their path to recovery, but to help them reintegrate as productive members of their communities.

Today, Ohio's courts operate 255 certified specialized dockets across 68 of our 88 counties (77%), covering 93% of Ohio's total population. Among those dockets:

- 197 serve adults with substance use disorders,
- 36 serve adults with mental health disorders, and
- 22 serve juveniles with substance use or mental health disorders

Since we began collecting data in 2019, a total of 17,831 individuals have been admitted to specialized dockets. At any given time, more than 6,000 individuals are active participants, undergoing intensive behavioral monitoring and making frequent appearances before the judge overseeing their progress toward recovery.

These specialized dockets are making a difference. Graduation rates—representing the percentage of participants who successfully complete their treatment programs—are consistently around 55% to 60%. Through these programs, we are helping individuals regain stability and reducing their risk of recidivism.

Ohio's specialized docket certification standards are drawn from the national best practice standards. In 2013, the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (now known as All Rise) released the Adult Drug Court Best Practice Standards. These evidence-based standards represent more than 25 years of research in the fields of substance use disorders, pharmacology, behavioral health, and criminal justice. By certifying specialized

dockets in Ohio through rigorous standards, the Supreme Court is helping courts improve the lives of individuals and families, one case at a time.

The numerous other areas of support to local courts provided by the Supreme Court include the following:

- The Court's Case Management Section works with courts to improve their case management processes and reduce the time it takes to render decisions. The Court promulgates case processing timeline standards and works directly with courts around the state to help them meet those standards.
- The Court's Children and Families Section is engaged in a broad range of matters affecting domestic relations, juvenile and probate courts. Among the programs this section oversees are efforts to improve guardianship practice and to advance best practices in the foster care system.
- The Court's Dispute Resolution Section promotes the use of mediation to resolve part, or all, of a case. Mediation does not work in every case, but when it succeeds, the parties avoid costly, time-consuming litigation and are often more compliant with outcomes in the long run. This section also offers a mediation service to local government officials who find themselves in disputes with one another.
- The Language Services Section provides support to local courts through training, testing, certifying, and rostering interpreters with about 150 interpreters trained each year.
- The Supreme Court's Information Technology staff continues to support statewide databases and other IT resources for local courts, to include the Ohio Courts

Network (OCN). Court IT staff also plays a key role in the Court's competitive technology grants process for awarding technology grants to local courts.

Ohio Courts Network Utilization

The Ohio Courts Network is a centralized data warehouse of court-case related information. This secure, internet-based criminal justice information portal provides access to case data to justice system partners across the state. Rule 34 of the Ohio Rules of Superintendence requires any court with a case management system that is capable of sending case data in the data format required to the Ohio Courts Network to be connected to the OCN. Additionally, Rule 34 requires any new case management system purchased, built, or otherwise procured shall be capable of sending case data to the OCN.

As a result, to date, around 99% of all Ohio courts are connected to the OCN, with the vast majority of courts uploading case information at the end of every business day. In addition to court participation, the Supreme Court of Ohio engages in data sharing partnerships with the Attorney General's Office, and the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. These partnerships give law enforcement agencies timely access to statewide case information.

Education for Ohio's Judges and Court Personnel

The Supreme Court also provides education to Ohio's judges and court personnel through its Judicial College. First originating in 1976, the Ohio Judicial College provides mandatory continuing judicial education and professional educational and training programs to judges, magistrates, and court personnel. Through its offering of nearly 400 judicial branch education programs, the Judicial College provides timely, practical, and interactive instruction and best practices on current challenges facing our courts and

ensures the effective administration of justice for all Ohioans. Last year alone, 349 judicial education courses were delivered to over 19,800 judicial officers, court personnel, guardians, and custody evaluators (54% live in-person or webinars and 46% online and available on demand).

One example of a program the Judicial College offers is the Court Management Program. The Court Management Program is a certification program designed to help court leaders improve court operations and support the administration of justice that is delivered in conjunction with the Institute for Court Management at the National Center for State Courts. The growing complexity and need for accountability in court management has increased the demand for high quality educational programs using a standardized and uniform approach to court administration.

E-Filing Requirements in the Courts

These education efforts have also involved promoting and encouraging e-filing among Ohio courts. Building on the momentum of the recently enacted e-filing legislation; the Supreme Court has been informing courts of the S.B. 94 requirements and of the upcoming implementation date. This has been done through the hosting of e-filing webinars and the offering of legislative presentations. Related webinars have highlighted the benefits of e-filing as well as provided best practices and options for providing e-filing within their offices. Furthermore, the Supreme Court has designated a portion of its technology grant awards to support adopting digital systems for e-filing in courts.

Focusing on Efficiency and Timeliness

Lastly, the efficient and timely resolution of cases is one of the foundational tasks of Ohio's courts. Courts throughout the State had over 1.9 million cases heard and resolved

in Fiscal Year 2024. Out of the 250 working days last year, courts disposed of 7,715 cases each working day. That number breaks down to resolving 1,334 family law cases, 1,802 civil cases, 1,357 criminal cases, and 3,222 traffic cases each working day. While these numbers provide an important look at annual performance of Ohio Courts in terms of cases brought to final resolution, it is important to note that it does not encompass the total number of cases handled by Ohio courts.

Timely case resolution is critical in maintaining a well-functioning court system and preserving the trust of the citizens of Ohio that their causes will be handled promptly. Significant achievements this past year include a 31% reduction in over-age criminal cases, a 32% reduction in over-age family law cases, and a 46% reduction in backlogged civil cases.

The Budget

The Supreme Court's budget is a relatively small portion of the state budget, accounting for only 0.22% of the overall state budget with the GRF portion accounting for only .48% of the state GRF budget in the current biennium. Anticipating a more constrained fiscal environment, the Chief Justice and Justices of the Court directed the submission of a conservative budget proposal, asking only for items that are mandated or necessary.

For FY 2026-2027, the Court has submitted a total budget of \$472.6 million, which breaks down as follows:

- \$255.1 million (54% of the total), for statutorily mandated salaries and benefits for Ohio judges. This portion includes 100% of the salaries and benefits of appellate judges, approximately 93% of the salaries and benefits of common pleas judges,

and approximately 60% of the salaries and benefits of municipal and county court judges statewide. These percentages are based on current salaries pursuant to O.R.C. 141.04.

- \$87.3 million (18%), for salaries and benefits of nearly 295 employees of the 12 courts of appeals.
- \$130.2 million (28%), for the operation of the Supreme Court, including the physical operation of the Thomas J. Moyer Ohio Judicial Center which houses the Clerk's office, the justices' offices, the law library, and other administrative functions. This portion funds the delivery of services to courts statewide, including the Ohio Courts Technology Initiative, Specialized Dockets, Case Management, and Education and Training.
- Of the Court's total request, \$427.8 million (91%) is allocated for personal services, the bulk of which are required by statute, while \$44.8 million (9%) is allocated for operational expenses, which includes maintaining the Thomas J. Moyer Ohio Judicial Center and the Ohio Courts Network, funding passed on to local courts and other non-profit justice system partners through technology grants, civil justice grants, and federal Court Improvement Program (CIP) funds to support local court operations.

On the whole, the Court is requesting a modest budget increase of 2.3% in 2026 and 2.7% in 2027. Much of the increase is due to judicial salaries set by statute and to rising costs of employee benefits and other program chargebacks required by the Department of Administrative Services or the Office of Budget and Management.

As highlighted earlier in the testimony, this budget request as submitted allows for the advancement of efficient and effective administration of justice to ensure Ohioans have access to a responsive, impartial, and effective judicial system. Some key initiatives supporting that mission include:

- Expanding e-filing and technological integration as a crucial step toward modernizing Ohio Courts with \$3.4 million annually in technology grant awards that support adopting digital systems and enhancing overall efficiency;
- Hosting webinars and providing educational toolkits and bench cards to courts on the topic of properly reporting information to the Bureau of Criminal Investigation.
- Enhancing Marsy's Law, strengthening victims' rights and access to justice for victims, through translating forms in more languages;
- Achieving more timely case resolution and reducing backlogged cases, reflecting the real impact on the lives of Ohio citizens, through streamlined processes and reduced delays.
- Delivering approximately 350 courses, including mandatory continuing judicial education and training programs to judges and court personnel, instructing on current challenges facing the courts and providing a standardized and uniform approach to court administration.

This budget proposal is conservatively tailored to meet the operational needs of the Court, fulfill our constitutional and statutory duties, and continue to ensure that the Ohio judiciary remains strong, efficient, and dedicated to the cause of justice for the citizens of Ohio. On behalf of Chief Justice Kennedy and the Justices of the Supreme Court, thank

you for the opportunity to present this budget testimony. I am pleased to answer any questions you might have.