

Improving the Judicial Data and Supporting Judicial Staff

Key Takeaways:

- Texas courts continue to face historic backlogs exacerbated by the pandemic, and the state judiciary is facing significant IT and staffing needs.
- One-time investments in data and IT infrastructure, increasing judicial staff compensation, and offering more support for backlog-related needs would not only address current problems, but set up the judiciary for long-term success.

Background:

We have enough data to know that the court backlog in Texas was greatly exacerbated by the pandemic. The impact of 157,000 additional pending cases since March 2020 has delayed justice for litigants, families, and victims of crime, as well as for the tens of thousands of Texans in pretrial detention waiting for their day in court. Even as Article IV employees have seen the highest turnover rate in 5 years, judges and court staff have been adapting to new technology and a new, post-pandemic reality.

Relying on the data we have, the Legislature made a down payment last year in SB 8 (87-3) by directing federal ARPA funds judges and staff. But even with the most granular data that is currently reported to the state from district and county courts leaves many important questions unanswered about the way courts administer the laws passed by the legislature and even the health of the Texas judiciary. The data from appellate courts are even more obscure, with reporting for only two case types – “civil” and “criminal.”

Proposed Action:

Adopt OCA Exceptional Items 1, 2, 3, and 4 into the base budget. These items will make much-needed updates to legacy systems that would enable the collection of case-level data from trial courts and provide appellate courts with a much-needed improved case management system. These items will also provide non-judicial Art. IV staff with a needed pay increase and allow OCA to continue providing direct IT services to the judiciary.

Adopt a similar funding strategy to what the legislature provided in SB 8 (87-3) in giving additional resources to assist local jurisdictions with court backlog-related needs.

Budget Cost Estimate:

According to OCA’s LAR, Exceptional Items 1 through 4 will cost **\$19.2 million** in FY2024, and **\$5.8 million** in FY2025.

Additional funding to help local jurisdictions address the court backlog is scalable, but should be at least \$10 million to mirror what the Legislature provided in 2021.*

Public Policy Impact:

Most of these items are one-time investments that will not only help alleviate the court backlog, but set up the judiciary for longer-term success by providing the technological capacity to collect better data, manage cases more effectively, and deploy IT solutions where appropriate to effectively administer justice for all Texans.

