

# Close to Home: Staffing crisis at Sonoma County Superior Court

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A crisis is unfolding at the Superior Court of Sonoma County that should concern every resident of the county. In January, the North Bay Workers Rights Board, a project of North Bay Jobs with Justice, held a hearing about the working conditions of employees at the court. The workers are represented by SEIU Local 1021. Testimony by workers to a panel of community leaders revealed widespread discontent and declining morale at the courts due to inadequate staffing and a dramatic increase in workloads.

Several themes were evident in the testimony.

First, understaffing has eroded the quality of court services and limited public access. The number of court reporters has dropped from 22 in 2010 to 13 today, which has caused delays in court proceedings. Court reporters have to rush from one courtroom to another and often arrive late for their next assignment. Attorneys, their clients and the judge may have to wait as long as an hour for the court reporter to arrive. Attorneys often charge clients for the wait, and, if public defenders are assigned to a defendant, the taxpayer foots the bill.

Short staffing also has meant longer lines at the Hall of Justice to process legal documents and to pay fees and fines — and the front counter closes at 3:30 p.m. instead of 5 p.m. due to inadequate staffing. Court workers must professionally serve residents who are understandably upset by long waits and limited access to the court.

Second, there is a serious fiscal crisis at the Superior Courts. According to the CEO of the Sonoma County Superior Court, José Guillén, the state Legislature has cut Superior Court funding statewide. Raquel Silva, executive director of the San Francisco Municipal Executives Association, confirms Guillén's assessment, asserting that since 2008, nearly 4,000 court employees have been laid off across the state and 200 courtrooms closed down.

Court workers acknowledge the depth of the crisis at the courts, but a veteran information technology court employee testified that Sonoma County Superior Court management has spent more than \$10 million over the past decade on a series of case management software upgrades that still do not function properly.

In Sonoma County, the huge expenditure on failed software has certainly exacerbated the court's funding problems.

Moreover, court employees allege that management's attempt to justify understaffing by attributing it to a budgetary shortfall is contradicted by the \$16,000 raise given to selected upper-level managers and by generously staffing the main administration office.

In comparison, court workers settled their contract this year for a 2 percent annual pay increase, and many court employees have experienced a sharp increase in workloads since 2010.

Third, court employees unanimously testified that there is a lack of respect by court management for their employees and a top-down punitive management style that has undermined employee morale and eroded trust between management and workers.

Court employees assert that this autocratic management style contributed to their decision to strike for three days last January.

After a prolonged investigation, the Workers' Rights Board found that the court is attempting to solve its budget challenges by short-staffing, increasing workloads and disciplining court employees who object.

The board also concluded that judges, who hire the court chief executive officer, should be held responsible for the working conditions.

The Workers' Rights Board calls upon management to recognize that severe understaffing and punitive management practices are not the solution to the court's financial crunch.

The board urges court management to work collaboratively with its staff and their union, develop meaningful mechanisms for employee input and suggestions, and incrementally increase staffing where there are unfair employee workloads.

*Matt Myres is chairman of the North Bay Workers' Rights Board, an organization composed of 26 leaders from faith, labor, academic and community organizations. The full report on the Superior Court can be downloaded at [www.northbayjobswithjustice.org](http://www.northbayjobswithjustice.org).*