

# Superior Court Workers Report Erosion in Public Access



## Worker's Rights

**Superior Court workers report serious erosion in public access to legal system**

By Bonnie Petty

Let's say you have been involved in a court case that has finally come before the **Sonoma County Superior Court**. But 30 minutes past the time court was to begin, the entire courtroom is still waiting (your attorney's fees are multiplying) because the court reporter is still in another courtroom. When that trial is over, she will have to pack up her gear and race to your courtroom and set up her gear again.

"Oftentimes I am scheduled in multiple courtrooms in a day and packing up my gear and driving over to another courthouse is considered my break," says Court Reporter **Becki Peterson**.

It was only one example of the serious deterioration in working conditions and the subsequent erosion of public access to the legal system at the Sonoma County Superior Court, as related by the workers themselves. On Saturday, January 14th, the North Bay Workers' Rights Board convened a hearing on the working conditions of those court workers, which they requested as a result of the administrators' failure to respond to their multiple requests for redress.

A court reporter since 1990 and employed at Sonoma Superior Court since 2001, Peterson said, "I respect our Bench...I love my job...that it is so difficult for me to do this [give testimony]...should give you some measure of the horrible atmosphere that we must endure." During Peterson's time with the Sonoma court, the number of court reporters has dwindled from 22 to 13. She says many have left due to the poor working conditions and management simply fails to hire replacements. Chronic understaffing is a problem in every department and workloads have become unmanageable.



## Technology Failures & Poor Working Conditions

One possible factor in the short staffing problem could be the millions of dollars the administration has wasted on bad technology decisions.

In 2006, according to testimony of **Wendell Phillips**, Court Software Analyst, the new V2 CMS statewide computer system was set to replace the county's aging system. Consultants and extra staff were hired to implement the system; four years later, in 2010 the system was still not operational and the state declared the system dead. Phillips' testimony detailed a years-long timeline of setbacks and fiascos that continues today. Millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on software systems that still have not delivered on the promise of a single, efficient computer system.

Even more troubling, Phillips revealed that a serious security breach happened in 2011, where the traffic ticket payment portal, which included credit card and personal data, was exposed. No one was ever notified of the breach.

In 1998, state legislation was passed, allowing the judges in California counties to "unify" their court systems into separate government agencies and by 2001, every county had done so. With

that change, Sonoma County court employees became employees of the Superior Court – not the County. The judges employ a CEO to manage everything, while they choose to have no involvement, except to approve the contract, once settled.

In 2009, **Jose Guillen** was hired as the CEO and has lead a management team that workers portrayed as having no respect for them and the jobs they do, along with a complete disregard for their needs as workers and human beings. One worker related a scene of intense verbal abuse by a manager; others reported a dismaying lack of compassion for workers experiencing life altering events. One worker, who was evacuated from her Lake County home during the recent fires, was sent home for not wearing “appropriate court attire”; another worker’s sudden hospital stay exhausted her sick leave and her request to use vacation time was refused because it wasn’t “pre-approved”.

Workers reported that various efforts to get their concerns addressed have been met with either silence or retaliation. Attempts by workers and their union representatives to engage the judges, have been met with referral back to the CEO.

While Phillips’ testimony was focused on the technology issue, his concluding statement could easily sum up the overall testimony: “The Sonoma Superior Court must be held responsible to the public for the estimated waste of well over \$10 million dollars for 3 failed court CMS systems over an 11 year period. The failure to manage these projects properly with a lack of transparency is a major public concern. These failed systems have caused security breaches, lost data and civil rights violations. This deplorable waste of tax payer dollars is severely reducing court services to the public, reduced court staffing and most importantly reduced access to justice.”

The Workers’ Rights Board will follow up with further investigations into the working conditions and complaints against the court’s administration. The WRB panel made efforts prior to the hearing to meet with the administration and the judges; they were also offered the opportunity to appear at the hearing to make a statement. The offers were declined but they may submit a written response for inclusion in the WRB’s deliberations. Once the final investigations are complete, the WRB will compile their findings and issue a full, written report that will be made available to the public.

Immediately following the hearing, contract negotiations reached an impasse and the workers, represented by the **Service Employees International Union (SEIU)** Local 1021, went on strike for several days in mid-January. According to the union management has failed to negotiate an acceptable contract; wage and benefit offers are woefully low, given that some managers have just been given a 16% raise. To date, the union claims while management teams remain fully staffed, they have made no effort to acknowledge or address any of the staffing issues or concerns over working conditions of the front line staff.

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