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Commission Mulls Hiking NY Judges' Salaries

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(CN) - The Special Commission on Judicial Compensation is meeting in Albany on Wednesday for the first public hearing to decide whether New York state judges should receive pay raises to keep them from leaving the bench.

Although they earn six-figure salaries, state judges complain that their pay has not increased in 12 years. In 1999, Supreme Court and family court judges started making \$136,700 annually, and criminal and civil court judges earned \$125,600 a year. The judges say that the cost of living has increased with inflation since that time, but their pay has not been adjusted with the changing economy.

Nearly one-tenth of New York judges leave annually, often to become attorneys, The New York Times reported earlier this month, citing an unspecified new study.

New York City Corporation Counsel Michael A. Cardozo plans to tell the commission that the exodus is reaching a "crisis" point.

"On behalf of Mayor Bloomberg I am here today to tell you that the judiciary in the state of New York is in crisis and as a result, the very structure of government of this State is in crisis as well," Cardozo said in a prepared statement. "A strong and independent judiciary is essential to the proper functioning of government. New York's failure to compensate judges properly is weakening the judiciary and therefore weakening our entire government."

Cardozo acknowledged that judges' current salaries are not an "insignificant amount of money, particularly given the current economic times," but he added that they judges earn less than senior public attorneys in the New York City Law Department, the District Attorney's Offices and the Legal Aid Society.

To become a criminal court judge, the chief attorney of New York City's Appeals Division would have to agree to a 20 percent pay cut, Cardozo said.

"As a result of the existing salary disparity, more experienced public sector attorneys are simply not applying for judgeships," Cardozo wrote.

The hearing is ongoing.

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