

After court layoffs, report seeks 41% -62% raises for state judges

Written by

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ALBANY — After laying off hundreds of court employees this year, New York court administrators are asking for pay raises as high as 62 percent for judges, to make up for more than a decade of wage freezes.

The request was part of a report this week from Chief Administrative Judge Ann Pfau, in which she criticized the "unfairness and damage" caused by the state's \$136,700 judicial salaries.

She argued that New York judges deserve to be paid \$192,218 to \$220,836 a year.

"Never in New York's modern history have judges been paid so little relative to living costs or the real salaries of other judges nationwide," Pfau wrote.

State judges haven't had raises since Jan. 1, 1999, and are among the lowest paid in the nation based on cost-of-living measures.

If each of the roughly 1,200 judges were to

get a \$60,000 raise — the lower end of Pfau's request — it would cost taxpayers an additional \$72 million.

Her report is now before the state Commission of Judicial Compensation, a panel created last year to take away control of judges' salaries from state legislators, who also haven't had a pay raise since 1999.

The panel met for the first time Monday. It will set salaries for a four-year period, beginning April 1. Its recommendations will become law unless state lawmakers try to halt them.

State Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins said Pfau's opinion will be one of many the commission will consider as it decides how much judges should make. She said those findings should be released at the end of August.

"At that time, my colleagues in the Legislature and I will review the recommendations and decide accordingly

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as to whether or not further action is needed," she said in a statement.

The request for pay raises comes months after the Office of Court Administration laid off more than 500 employees to save \$170 million. The layoffs were part of the largest decrease in court services in nearly 20 years. The last round, which affected 363 employees, took effect June 1 and included 41 court staffers in the Lower Hudson Valley.

The funding cut has led courts to reduce services, including ending court sessions at 4:30 p.m. each day, reducing jury pools and eliminating judicial hearing officers to handle cases.

Pfau said the state's fiscal crisis should not be a factor in deciding if, or how much, to raise judges' salaries. She said the state ignored requests to raise judicial pay during years of "relative plenty" and now must address the inequity.

Court officials are also concerned that too many judges are returning to private practice, where they can make more money. In Westchester, former county Judge Rory Bellantoni left the bench in 2009 after six years, saying the job simply didn't pay enough.

Pfau said inflation has eroded the value of judges' salaries, which are often less than what their staffers make. She said the \$136,700 salary was once on par with U.S. District Court salaries, but that no longer holds true.

Courts are also dealing with a record number of civil cases, which grew 35 percent between 1998 and 2010, from 1.3 million to 1.8 million. Criminal caseloads have remained flat.

To offset the lack of pay raises, New York judges receive \$10,000 yearly expense allowances, costing taxpayers about \$12.4 million a year. There are also 17 state judges who collected both salaries and pensions last year.

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