



## **Supreme Court**

STATE CAPITOL

DES MOINES, IOWA 50319

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **IOWA JUDICIAL COUNCIL ANNOUNCES** **TENTATIVE PLAN FOR RESTRUCTURING STATE COURT SYSTEM**

Des Moines, November 19, 2001 —Citing the need to address a \$5.5 million cut in the Judicial Branch budget and future budget constraints; the Iowa Judicial Council released a tentative plan for restructuring the state court system. The Judicial Council is seeking public comment on the plan, which reduces the number of Iowa's judicial districts from eight to five, and reorganizes court services into 28 court service areas.

"The plan is not set in stone by any means; it is a launching pad for public discussion," said Chief Justice Louis Lavorato of the Iowa Supreme Court. "It's a long-range proposal that will require considerable study and public debate before it's ever approved and implemented."

The Judicial Council's plan calls for the creation of 28 court services areas within the state. Each court service area would support a minimum population of approximately 50,000. Most court service areas would contain multiple counties to achieve the minimum population base. Each court service area would include one court service center that would be located within a one-hour drive for most residents of the area. The court service center would contain a clerk of court office, and would be the location for district court services other than trials.

Under the plan, two key aspects of the court system would remain the same – trials and magistrate court would continue to be held in all 99 counties as needed.

"We plan to maintain some court presence in every county, said Chief Justice Lavorato. "We cannot afford to operate 99 full-time clerk of court offices; however, I'm confident that we can find new ways to provide all Iowans with access to essential court services."

The court service areas would be grouped within judicial districts for purposes of administration. Presently, there are eight judicial districts; the plan calls for five.

The proposal for new districts would also result in a more equitable allocation of the state's existing judicial resources by enabling the courts to schedule judges in communities where their services are needed most.

The Judicial Council's plan relies on technology to greatly expand public access to the courts. The plan calls for statewide implementation of an electronic filing and document management system, and Internet access to court information, which would enable online public access to the courts, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The Iowa Judicial Branch plans to begin the first phase of its Internet public access service by the end of the year. The first phase would provide basic court information such as child support records, fine records, and basic case information, for free. The second phase of the service would provide information about liens and schedules for a fee of \$25 a month. The third phase would enable people to pay court fines and child support online.

Written comments about the long-range plan may be sent to:

Iowa Judicial Council  
700 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Upper Level  
Des Moines, Iowa 50319

The Judicial Council has not set a deadline for public comment. Once the Council recommends a plan, the plan must go to the Iowa Supreme Court for its consideration. Certain aspects of the plan, including reducing the number of judicial districts and clerks of court would require statutory changes.

In the meantime, the judicial districts are developing plans for operating with a significantly reduced workforce to cope with the budget cuts. Earlier this month, the Judicial Branch announced it would eliminate approximately 185 jobs statewide in January, which includes about 125 FTEs (full-time equivalent employee) in clerk of court offices primarily in rural counties.

Due to the cuts, clerk of court offices in many rural counties will likely operate on a part-time basis, but at a minimum during magistrate court hours and district court service days. Some districts may reschedule magistrate courts and district court service days to help facilitate the coordination of clerk of court services. Details of any changes in clerk of court office hours and court schedules will be announced once they are available.

The Iowa Judicial Council consists of the chief judges of the eight judicial districts, the chief judge of the court of appeals, and the chief justice of the supreme court. The Council advises the Iowa Supreme Court on the supervision and administration of the Iowa Judicial Branch. Final authority for any policy decisions concerning the administration of the Iowa Judicial Branch rests with the Iowa Supreme Court.

[Click here to view](#) the map of the initial concept for Court Service Areas and Redistricting.

[Click here](#) to read the Judicial Council's report, "Initial Concept for Restructuring Court System."