

**Iowa Judicial Council  
Report: Initial Concept for Restructuring Court System  
November 16, 2001**

**Iowa Judicial Council**

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.

**Background**

On November 8, 2001, the Iowa legislature met in special session to address the state's budget crisis. The Legislature cut nearly \$200 million from the state budget for the current fiscal year. The budgets of most agencies and departments were cut 4.3%. The Iowa Judicial Branch's budget was also cut 4.3% or \$5.5 million.

The budget problem is not limited to the current fiscal year. State officials are predicting that the budget shortfall for the next fiscal year will be worse, and that the problem may continue into following years.

On November 13 through 15, 2001, the Iowa Judicial Council met to discuss short-term strategies and long-term solutions for addressing the cut in the Judicial Branch budget. In light of the severity of the problem, everyone agreed that the Judicial Branch must streamline its services, implement a broad range of efficiencies, and restructure the court system.

The Judicial Council developed a tentative plan for restructuring the state court system. The plan is to serve as a vehicle for public discussion. 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.

Once the Council adopts a final version of the plan, the plan must go to the Iowa Supreme Court for its consideration. In addition, certain aspects of the plan, including reducing the number of judicial districts and clerks of court would require statutory changes.

**Tentative Restructuring Plan  
Court Service Areas**

The plan tentatively 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.
- The clerk's office would be staffed in proportion to its workload.
- The court service areas would be grouped within judicial districts for purposes of administration.

### **Trials and Magistrate Court**

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.

### **District Administration**

Presently, there are eight judicial districts, each with a chief judge and administrative staff. The Judicial Council proposes reducing the number of districts from eight to five.

The key characteristics of the five districts include:

- Northwest Region: Population - 528,000; 27 counties
- Northeast Region: Population - 677,300; 19 counties
- Central Region: Population - 675,700; 9 counties
- Southwest region: Population - 345,000; 24 counties
- Southeast Region: Population - 685,100; 20 counties

The proposed plan would:

- Reduce administrative overhead, which would save money.
- 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.
- Result in a more efficient operation.

### **Technology**

The Judicial Council strongly recommends that the Judicial Branch implement electronic technology to enable online public access to the courts, 24-hours a day, 7 days a week. Specifically, the plan calls for:

- Statewide implementation of an electronic filing and document management system (EDMS), and
- Internet access to court information.

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.

### **Comments to Plan**

Written comments about the 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.

### **Short Term Strategies to Address Budget Cuts**

To comply with the budget cuts, the Judicial Branch announced plans to eliminate approximately 185 jobs statewide in January 2002. The lay-offs include about 125 FTEs (fulltime equivalent employee) in clerk of court offices, primarily in rural counties.

The Council agreed that:

- Clerk of court offices in many rural counties would likely operate on a part-time basis, but at a minimum during magistrate court hours and district court service days.
- The chief judge and district court administrator in each district would work with the clerks to coordinate services.
- 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 would be announced once they are available.
- Trials and magistrate court would continue to be held in all 99 counties.

The Council recommended that the Supreme Court seek legislation to reduce the duties of clerks of court that are obsolete and not directly related to case processing.