

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE JUDICIARY STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 24, 2025

1:00 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Andrew Gray, Chair
Representative Chuck Kopp, Vice Chair
Representative Ted Eischeid
Representative Genevieve Mina
Representative Sarah Vance
Representative Mia Costello
Representative Jubilee Underwood

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ALASKA COURT SYSTEM

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

NANCY MEADE, General Counsel
Alaska Court System
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave an overview of the Alaska Court System.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:00:44 PM](#)

CHAIR ANDREW GRAY called the House Judiciary Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. Representatives Underwood, Costello, Mina, Eischeid, Vance, Kopp, and Gray were present at the call to order.

CHAIR GRAY made opening remarks encouraging the committee to lay the foundation for future success. He welcomed disagreement in an effort to produce better laws and honored two previous House Judiciary Standing Committee chairs: Lesil McGuire and Max Gruenberg.

OVERVIEW: Alaska Court System

[1:05:06 PM](#)

CHAIR GRAY announced that the only order of business would be an overview of the Alaska Court System.

[1:05:38 PM](#)

NANCY MEADE, General Counsel, Alaska Court System, gave an overview of the Alaska Court System (ACS), beginning with its basic structure. The system is unified with central administration in Anchorage. There are four judicial districts, each with a presiding judge. She detailed the trial courts, the Court of Appeals, and the Supreme Court, noting that ACS makes up 1.5 percent of the state budget. She said the 38 magistrates are not evenly distributed throughout the four districts; instead, placement is determined by caseload. With regard to the budget, she explained that ACS does not retain any of the money it receives. All funds are deposited into the general fund (GF). Last year, nearly \$7.8 million was deposited into the GF. She added that instead of following regulations like executive branch agencies, ACS follows procedural rules adopted by the Supreme Court, termed the Alaska Rules of Court ("Court Rules"). The Constitution of the State of Alaska permits the legislature to amend Court Rules with a two-thirds majority. She referred to the pie charts on the document titled, "FY 24 Trial Court Case Filings Statewide" [included in the committee packet], which illustrated the breakdown of case filings by offense in the superior and district courts.

[1:20:58 PM](#)

MS. MEADE, in response to committee questions, said most but not all court filings are done electronically and anticipated that everything would be electronic within the next year. Electronic filings are helpful to the court because it gives everyone access to the same information. With regard to the backlog from the COVID-19 Pandemic, she said progress has been made. As of January 1, 2025, there are 25 percent fewer criminal cases pending compared to January 1, 2024, which is on par with 2019.

She continued the presentation by describing the courts' administrative offices, which include libraries, a fiscal department, and human resources, for example. She reported that last year, over \$1.5 million in restitution was collected and distributed to victims. She reflected on reported delays and time to disposition, and attributed this to requests for postponement, which occur for various reasons, such as a new attorney being assigned to the case, a conflict of interest, public defenders leaving the agency, the defendant being in treatment, filing a motion to suppress evidence, or victims and/or witnesses becoming unavailable. She acknowledged that delays have always been a problem, and one that is growing.

[1:44:32 PM](#)

MS. MEADE, continuing the presentation, discussed strategies to improve to the backlog, including scheduling orders, continuance policies, and shorter deadlines for class B and C felonies. She explained that the backlog developed because during the COVID-19 Pandemic, jury trials were suspended. She expounded on the clearance rate, noting that the statewide average is 107 percent, which she characterized as excellent. She segued to therapeutic court, which aims to stop the cycle of criminality for high need, high risk individuals, such as those with substance abuse or mental health issues and detailed the inner workings of the program.

[1:56:48 PM](#)

MS. MEADE, in response to a series of committee questions, explained that the rate of recidivism lessens the longer an individual stays in therapeutic court. She estimated a 20 percent recidivism rate for both graduates and nongraduates of therapeutic court, versus a 56 percent rate statewide. She discussed the two Tribal courts in Kenai and Sitka, for which the judge makes a conscious effort at culturally sensitive discussions, sanctions, and incentives. Addressing vacancy rates, she reported that there are four vacant judgeships right now, but temporary retired judges are available to fill the positions as needed. For non-judge staff, there is currently an 11 percent vacancy rate and funding allows for a 7 percent rate. She acknowledged that the pay raise provided by the legislature several years ago was helpful in improving the vacancy rate.

[2:13:20 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Judiciary Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:13 p.m.