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Association of Counties
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Study Finds That Many of Washington's Courthouses Lack Weapons Screening
Washington's Superior Court Judges' Association report shows a lack of security in courts due to lack of funding.

Olympia, WA (January 8, 2018) – Safe and secure access to the justice system is a fundamental part of ensuring a fair and impartial criminal and civil justice system. However, that system continues to be in jeopardy in Washington State.

The Washington State Superior Court Judges' Association (SCJA) has released a report that finds many of Washington's county courthouses lack important security measures like weapon screenings, cameras and adequate training for security employees.

Judge Sean P. O'Donnell, the President of the Superior Court Judges' Association said, "The fact that half of county courthouses across this State have no weapons screening at public entrances should be a call to action. The past formula of asking for help, suffering disaster, and then rushing to 'fix' the problem needs an urgent refresh."

In 2017, the Washington Supreme Court adopted Court Rule GR 36 to, "encourage incident reporting and well-coordinated efforts to provide basic security and safety measures in Washington courts". In anticipation of this new rule, the Superior Court Judges' Association, which represents superior court judges and court commissioners in Washington State, surveyed presiding judges in Washington's 39 counties about the current state of security in their courthouses. The survey found that over 50% of county courthouses in Washington do not have weapons screening at their public entrances. Of those that do, only 68% have screening at all public entrances.

According to the report, "74% of superior courts have experienced at least one security incident within the last five years." One superior court reported that while its security personnel did not confiscate weapons, they prohibited 1,711 knives and 127 guns from entering the courthouse during their screenings in 2016 alone.

According to the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) from 2005 to 2012 Washington State had the 8th most documented courthouse incidents in the nation. Correspondingly, Washington was ranked dead last in state funding for trial courts in 2012 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Those two statistics are not a coincidence.



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“The problem is that the state legislature has yet to address the counties’ structural revenue problem,” said Eric Johnson, the Executive Director of the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC). “Counties are a constitutional agent for the state and perform services, such as the trial court system, for Washington State’s seven million residents. Yet, funding for those services are continuously neglected by the Washington State Legislature year after year.”

Johnson continued, “There are several solutions that we have proposed that include allowing counties to have a more diverse set of revenue sources, revising the property tax limit to inflation plus population growth, and most importantly having the state actually contribute an appropriate level of funding to pay for core public safety and justice services including the costs associated with assuring secure and safe courthouses.”

Throughout Washington’s 39 counties, the work done by superior courts are done on behalf of the Washington State government. Superior courts are located in each county and are mostly funded by the counties’ dollars. It is important to remember that superior courts are actually state courts with state judges applying state laws. Adequate state funding of these courts remains a significant issue.

The SCJA and WSAC will continue to work proactively with the state legislature to advocate for increased funding for criminal and civil justice issues. Among those priorities will be to ensure that county courthouse security is addressed, so that violence in courthouses can be prevented. Jurors, litigants, the accused, employees and the public all have the right to a secure and safe judicial environment.

You can find the full report here:

https://www.courts.wa.gov/content/publicUpload/Reports/Courthouse_Security_Report-2018.pdf

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