

Sonoma County Liaison Report – Written Report  
Hon. Rebecca Wightman

On February 18, 2020, I had the privilege of visiting the Sonoma County Superior Court. Little did any of us know that less than a month later, lives and businesses – including courts – would be upended everywhere in the country in a way that no one could have imagined. Despite struggles courts have had over the past six months, many have worked hard to pivot to new technology in order to keep their courts and cases moving forward – including Sonoma. But first, a report on my visit.

Sonoma County is located approximately 50 miles north of San Francisco, with a population just under approximately 500,000 people. It covers an area of 1,768 sq. miles and can boast that last year, the city of Santa Rosa landed in the top 100 best cities to live ranked by the U.S. News. The court currently has 25 judicial officers – 20 judges, 3 Commissioners and 2 pre-trial Commissioners, and as of the date of my visit, the court had 192 employees (7 newly hired were starting that very day). The presiding judge is the Hon. Brad DeMeo; the Assistant Presiding Judge is the Hon. Shelly Averill; and the Court Executive Officer is Arlene D. Junior. I met for a good part of the day with the CEO, as well as with Judge Averill, and various departmental employees, including IT and Facilities.

The Court's FY 2019-2020 budget was estimated to be over \$32.5 million in both revenues and expenditures (up from approx. \$30 million in FY 2018-2019), with court filings across all types of cases at about 63,000. There are four courthouse locations, including the Hall of Justice, Civil & Family Law Courthouse, Juvenile Justice Center and Empire College Annex. Since the last liaison visit in 2016, both the county and the court has had challenges: in October of 2017, a week after CEO Arlene Junior had started, multiple fires burning in the county caused the court to shut down for 9 consecutive business days (primarily due to smoke). Twelve employees and 4 judicial officers lost their homes at that time. And again in 2019, the Kincaid fire swept through, where the court was under a 4-day evacuation order. Both times, the court had to hold its arraignments in the jail.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the many challenges the Court has made progress. Through re-organization from the top down, among other things, the CEO was able to provide the employees a very long overdue COLA (10% over multiple years), although salaries there are still about 20% less than neighboring bay area counties. Also, since 2016, they have migrated to a new case management system (Odyssey), where they no longer have to pay and are no longer reliant on the county for the old system. Phase II went live in 2017 with criminal and juvenile (Phase I the year before was for civil, family and probate). It has taken 2 years, with hiring and training, and

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, there is yet another fire this year affecting the county, part of what is called the LNU complex fire.

over 5 thousand unentered minutes behind, but they have just about caught up. The court believes that there are still more opportunities to take advantage of the potential of the new system. At the same time, however, their IT director noted they had to delay other IT projects in the meantime (e.g. they were still using Office 2010 and hoping to complete the Windows 10 migration within the next few months). Both the phone system and jury system are outdated, leaving them with the feeling of always playing “catch up.” The court has a vision of increasing e-filing to family, civil, probate and DCSS cases for 2020-2021.

During my tour, it was clear that facilities upkeep continues to be problematic, as the buildings housing many of the courtrooms and administration offices are deteriorating. Indeed, a major water leak and flooding the night before I arrived was evident in one location we toured. I was struck by how the various buildings housing the different courtrooms revealed numerous disparities in shapes and sizes, with varying accommodation capacities. In addition, with increasing rents, and new construction having only recently begun, the court is grappling with how to manage the growing cost divide – with leasing costs being one of the specific challenges noted.

There were two other challenges specifically identified in terms of costs. The cost for Pro Tem Court Reporters has been growing with increasing concern. In addition, the cost for mental health evaluations in 2018-19 was almost \$500,000. This is seemingly unique to Sonoma, as there are few counties that request these on all misdemeanor arrests for certain offenses, and there is an increasing difficulty with the availability of doctors.

On the positive side, the Sonoma Court was one of the recipients of a grant for Pretrial Release (Aug. 2019), and in early 2020, the court just hired 2 new Pretrial Court Commissioners. The court was already used to doing risk assessment and is excited about the ability to expand to pre-trial and the opportunity to collaborate with justice partners.

I cannot thank enough both Judge Averill, and especially CEO Arlene Junior, for all of the time they (and staff) took out of their busy day to show me around and provide me with information. CEO Arlene Junior was gracious and amazingly calm – despite receiving and dealing with the unwanted news while I was there that unannounced ICE arrests had just occurred on court grounds. I was equally impressed with her knowledge and kindness towards every one of the employees whose paths we crossed (addressing each by name and knowing what was going on with them, and in each area of the court). It was a memorable day.

Respectfully submitted,  
Hon. Rebecca Wightman (SF), Judicial Council Advisory Member

P.S. I have attached some photos taken during my 2020 February visit. Since the pandemic, I was able to see that Sonoma has indeed risen to the technological challenges faced by many courts, pivoted to using remote video technology. They are using the Zoom platform and have made it easy on their website for the public to access their proceedings.

PHOTOS FROM FEBRUARY 2020 LIAISON VISIT TO SONOMA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT

CEO Arlene Junior and APJ Hon. Shelly Averill



Sonoma Superior Court (600 Administration Dr.)



Sonoma Superior Court – Inner Courtyard

Small Claims – Criminal entrance (HOJ)



HOJ hallway



Below are some of the varied courtroom types and sizes from various locations







Recent Water damage

Original Vault – Sonoma Superior Court



Inside Vault



Other Court locations (including at Empire College)





Courtroom at Empire College location...



...and Children's Waiting Room

THANK YOU, SONOMA SUPERIOR COURT!



CEO Arlene D. Junior and Hon. Rebecca Wightman (JC Advisory Member Liaison]