
Judiciary Committee

ESSB 6317

Title: An act relating to the establishment of an office of superior courts.

Brief Description: Establishing an office of superior courts.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Padden, Takko, Dammeier, Hargrove and Hobbs).

Brief Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill

- Creates an Office of Superior Courts within the Administrative Office of the Courts to advance the efficient and effective operation of the superior courts of the state.
- Establishes an oversight committee consisting of five members of the Superior Court Judges' Association to direct and oversee the activities of the Office of Superior Courts.

Hearing Date: 2/24/16

Staff: Edie Adams (786-7180).

Background:

Superior courts are constitutionally created courts of record that have original jurisdiction over a wide range of civil and criminal matters and appellate jurisdiction over cases arising in courts of limited jurisdiction within their counties. Superior court judges are elected to four year terms, and a person must be an attorney admitted to practice in Washington to qualify for the position.

The Superior Court Judges Association (Association) consists of all judges of the superior courts and is governed by officers elected at the annual meeting of the Association. The Association establishes uniform rules for the government of the superior courts, promotes the objectives of statutes relating to the Association, and engages in other efforts supporting improvements in the court system.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) operates under the direction and supervision of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The AOC operates with four divisions governing administrative services, judicial services, information services, and management services. The AOC is charged with administering various aspects of the state court system, such as coordinating state court operations and fostering court efficiency; providing education and training programs for judicial officers and personnel; providing legal services such as creation of bench books, court rules, and pattern forms; conducting research into justice system issues; administering state funds for improving the operation of the courts; supporting maintenance and operation of the state-wide information system for the courts; and providing judicial branch budget planning and development services.

Summary of Bill:

An Oversight Committee of the Office of Superior Courts (Oversight Committee) is created and consists of the following five members of the Superior Court Judges' Association: the current, incoming, and immediate past president; the chair of the legislative committee; and a member of the board. Members of the Oversight Committee do not receive compensation but may be reimbursed for travel and other expenses. The Oversight Committee oversees the activities of a newly created Office of the Superior Courts, including selection and retention of staff as well as directing the work of the staff in developing and researching policy issues on behalf of the superior courts.

An Office of the Superior Courts (Office) is created as an office within the AOC. The director of the Office is appointed by, and serves at the pleasure of, the Oversight Committee. The director must:

- respond to legislative requests for data to improve court operations through policy, program, and budget development;
- evaluate and promote best practice programs to improve public safety in the criminal justice system;
- pursue improvements to family and juvenile justice by maximizing investment in juvenile court cases and promoting policies that equalize access to proven methods of service across the state;
- work collaboratively with the AOC and other key stakeholders on implementation of statewide technology advancement;
- report quarterly to the Oversight Committee;
- submit a biennial budget request;
- conduct studies and complete activities related to the efficient and effective operation of the superior courts;
- employ staff, with the consent of the Oversight Committee;
- enter into contracts to implement and complete the operation, activities, and services of the Office.

The Office must work collaboratively with the Supreme Court, AOC, and statewide county association to advance the efficient and effective operation of the superior courts in all 39 counties of the state.

The Office must carry out its duties within the existing appropriations of the AOC.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.