Vision 2025 - KCSC Strategic Plan

MISSION

The mission of the Kern County Superior Court is
to provide justice fairly and efficiently for all.

VISION

It is our vision to ensure that all members of the public have
access to a fair and independent court that provides justice under the law,
and serves each person professionally, with integrity and respect.

PURPOSE OF STRATEGIC PLAN

Rule 10.603(c)(9) of the California Rules of Court requires the presiding judge of the Superior Court to: (a) prepare and adopt, with assistance from appropriate court committees and input from the community, a long-range strategic plan that is consistent with the plan and policies of the Judicial Council, and (b) ensure the court regularly and actively examines access issues, including physical, language, or economic barriers that impede the fair administration of justice.

By this strategic plan, the Kern County Superior Court ("KCSC") affirms its mission and describes the initiatives it will undertake to achieve the court's vision over the next five years. The strategic plan initiatives represent the court's vision as applied to seven categories that are the KCSC's key priorities:

1. Vision for Access to Courts
2. Vision for Court Facilities & Security
3. Vision for Courtroom Operations
4. Vision for Court Administration, Finance & Public Affairs
5. Vision for Court Technology
6. Vision for Jury Services
7. Vision for Court Excellence

The strategic plan is a resource for efficient court management, not a "wish list" or "checklist" of things to do. It should facilitate the successful implementation of initiatives the court now sees as a priority, but never at the expense of good sense. If unforeseen circumstances arise, new strategies may be required, and the plan may have to change. The plan may also provide reasons to postpone or decide against new undertakings that do not immediately serve the KCSC vision.

The plan is informed with input from judicial officers, court management and staff, stakeholders and court users, civic leaders and members of our community. The plan has been examined for consistency with the plan and policies of the Judicial Council. Careful consideration has been given to access issues and barriers that may impede the fair administration of justice.

STRATEGIC PLAN SETTING

The KCSC currently serves a diverse, growing local population of approximately 897,000.[1] The KCSC is comprised of 38 judicial officers and seven non-judicial officers conducting court sessions throughout Kern County's metro and multi-divisional court facilities.[2] There are currently three vacancies for judicial office, which includes two new positions allocated to Kern County and funded based on a recent statewide workload assessment.[3]

The KCSC facilities are situated in Bakersfield [Metro Division, Metro Justice Division, Juvenile Justice Center ("JJC"), and Metro Traffic Division], east Kern County [Kern River, Mojave and Ridgecrest], north Kern County [Delano and Shafter], and south Kern County [Lamont and Taft]. Available courtroom space in the existing KCSC facilities for additional judicial officers is limited.[4]

Historically, the KCSC has been one of the most underfunded courts in the state. A change in the state's funding methodology for courts—placing greater emphasis on workload—is now addressing that inequity.[5]

Ongoing state funding for KCSC operations is not expected to change significantly over the next five years. The KCSC funding allocation for fiscal year ("FY") 2020-21 is expected to represent an increase over the two preceding fiscal years.[6] However, the state budget for FY 2020–21 was "developed against the backdrop of an extraordinarily strong economy," according to the Governor's budget summary. State revenue growth over each of the next four years is projected to be slower than 2019-20, constraining new spending commitments.[7]

At the same time, the KCSC workload is expected to increase.[8] While overall case filings may remain relatively static, there is an upward trend in the number of self-represented litigants, particularly in family law and civil matters. Cases involving crimes committed by prison inmates in Kern County have essentially doubled over the last four years.[9] Statewide changes in criminal justice law and policy may reduce the prison

population statewide,[10] but are also likely to effect a net increase in the KCSC criminal case workload.

The KCSC responded well to budget challenges that led to court closures in other counties less than a decade ago. Excellent management, a hard-working and well-trained staff, creativity, and the flexibility to adapt, made it possible for the KCSC to do more, with less. These practices must continue and evolve in order to meet future demands and the many variables that can affect the KCSC mission.[11] The success of existing court policies and procedures, as well as the initiatives discussed in this strategic plan, should be measured[12] and evaluated at appropriate intervals to ensure the KCSC remains accountable to its mission and vision.

STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVES

1. **Vision for Access to the Courts.** *This category includes initiatives to remove physical, economic and language barriers to court access, such as initiatives related to access to, and use of, court facilities, case files and information, court resources, and the ability of all court users and self-represented litigants to effectively file, respond to, and meaningfully participate in, court proceedings*.

   Initiative #1.1: Expand self-help services for self-represented litigants, to include enhancing availability of technological and human resources where feasible.

   Initiative # 1.2: Improve access, fairness and efficiency by developing self-help videos viewable on the public website, particularly on the topics of conservatorships, unlawful detainer, small claims, family law, and presenting a case in court.

   Initiative # 1.3: Improve access, transparency and efficiency by investigating the feasibility of developing technology and infrastructure to provide remote public access to all civil and probate case documents according to California Rule of Court 2.503.

   Initiative #1.4: Evaluate needs and resources, and if feasible, provide a dedicated Veteran's Treatment calendar that would be an extension of (but not replace) the successful Veteran's Court held annually at the Veteran's Stand Down.

   Initiative # 1.5: Investigate the availability of resources and measures to stabilize the Juvenile Justice Center Indigent Defense Program juvenile panel, particularly in dependency cases.

   Initiative # 1.6: Investigate feasibility of measures to enhance services for self-represented litigants filing conservatorship documents, such as self-help, workshops and reference materials.

Initiative # 1.7: Investigate feasibility of providing periodic expanded hours for traffic and revenue recovery personnel to arrange for traffic hearings and payment of fines.

Initiative # 1.8: Enhance availability of all language interpreters where feasible, including the ability to attract and retain full-time Court Interpreters.

Initiative # 1.9: Enhance existing daily public calendars, including, if feasible, the development of public website calendars searchable by name, case number, location, and courtroom, with directions to courtrooms.

Initiative # 1.10: Evaluate needs and resources, and establish priorities to improve signage inside and outside all court facilities while promoting a supportive, informative and professional appearance of the Court.

2. **Vision for Court Facilities & Security.** *This category emphasizes the physical plant and equipment (excluding technology); includes initiatives to investigate, evaluate, study feasibility, plan, design, improve, build, lease, equip, or provide security for, court facilities, e.g., courtrooms, buildings, parking, etc., security equipment inside and outside courtrooms, evacuation plans and emergency/disaster preparedness*.

Initiative # 2.1: Complete construction and fully furnish the new metro division courtroom for use by June 2020.

Initiative # 2.2: In conjunction with planning for the assignment of additional judicial officers (see Initiative # 4.1, below), investigate and evaluate suitability of all options for utilizing available unused or limited-use courtrooms and facilities, available space to lease, and other options, including evaluation of compatibility of proposed use with existing operations, and any limitations or other factors that should be considered, e.g., proximity to jury services, availability of parking and public space in all KCSC courthouses, etc.; investigate and evaluate costs of designing, planning and constructing necessary upgrades or improvements.

Initiative # 2.3: Evaluate needs and resources, establish priorities, and if feasible, provide or improve perimeter security fences and cameras at all KCSC facilities.

Initiative # 2.4: Collaborate with County of Kern and Judicial Council to modernize and better maintain all KCSC facilities to ensure their appearance, redolence and function inspire respect for, and trust in, the KCSC.

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3. **Vision for Courtroom Operations.** *This category emphasizes day-to-day court operations; includes initiatives related to case calendaring, case files, hearing and case record management, exhibits, staff protocols and procedures, court forms and information, arranging for court-provided interpreters, and preparation and management of minutes, rulings and orders*.

   Initiative # 3.1: Survey all divisions and multi-divisional facilities to evaluate needs, resources and feasibility of providing infrastructure and procedures to enhance availability of remote telephonic and video court appearances, consistent with the Rules of Court.

   Initiative # 3.2: Study needs and feasibility to recruit, train, and provide additional Judicial Courtroom Assistants (JCA's), including cross-training JCA's for all court assignments.

   Initiative # 3.3: Survey all KCSC divisions to review and ensure all commonly used information, notices and forms are consistent and current.

4. **Vision for Court Administration, Finance & Public Affairs.** *This category emphasizes overall Superior Court management, policies and procedures; includes initiatives related to acquisition, management and allocation of courtrooms and facilities, funding, grants and financial resources, human resources and equipment, and public affairs and information*.

   Initiative # 4.1: Evaluate needs and resources, establish priorities, and if feasible, implement plan for a designated long cause family law trial court, including assessments for staffing, the location of the courtroom and alternatives.

   Initiative # 4.2: Evaluate needs and resources, establish priorities, and if feasible, institute coordinated Family-Guardianship-Juvenile court center where judicial officers and court staff are cross-trained in all areas, and can handle cases that "cross lines" between subject areas.

   Initiative # 4.3: Evaluate needs and resources, establish priorities, and if feasible, implement plan to more fully utilize Juvenile Justice Courtroom J-1.

   Initiative # 4.4: Evaluate and implement use of digital technology for all employment-related activities, including employee "on-boarding."

   Initiative # 4.5: Evaluate and implement use of streamlined procedures, forms, and spreadsheets to minimize steps and/or completion times in the finance department.

   Initiative # 4.6: Evaluate and implement use of electronically-maintained personnel files as appropriate, consistent with human resource best practices and applicable law.

Initiative # 4.7: Enhance public engagement and reduce or eliminate misinformation through public education, community outreach and media relations.

Initiative # 4.8: Investigate availability of grant funding for additional legal representation of low-income parties in conservatorship matters.

Initiative # 4.9: Investigate feasibility of having a DMV representative available to court users at Metro Traffic.

Initiative # 4.10: Increase communication of opportunities to judicial officers and executive managers to encourage involvement in Judicial Council committees and affairs to stay current on statewide trends and decisions regarding programs and court funding.

5. **Vision for Court Technology.** *This category emphasizes technology, communications and related infrastructure; incudes case management systems, information storage and management, web-based strategies, internet security, remote access, publicly available information, electronic recording, courtroom and jury room computers and AV equipment, and remote audio/video court appearances and conferencing*.

   Initiative # 5.1: Deploy a new case management system in criminal, traffic and juvenile cases within the next 48 months.

   Initiative # 5.2: Evaluate needs and resources, establish priorities, and collaborate with the Probation Department to implement feasible pretrial release and detention reforms.

   Initiative # 5.3: Survey all KCSC divisions, with coordination from the KCSC Public Affairs Officer, for input on additional resources, forms and information that should be available on the KCSC website.

   Initiative # 5.4: Enhance availability of probate hearing notes on public website.

   Initiative # 5.5: Continue to improve processes to enhance paperless environment in all divisions where feasible.

6. **Vision for Jury Services.** *This category includes initiatives to enhance services to citizens who serve as jurors, increase the number of jurors available to serve, and efficiently use jurors who are available*.

   Initiative # 6.1: Evaluate and implement solutions to remedy the high rate of jury duty "no-shows."[13]

Initiative # 6.2: Evaluate and implement solutions to streamline and enhance jury service and experience.

7. **Vision for Court Excellence.** *This category includes initiatives to educate and train judicial officers and staff, promote justice, judicial independence, accuracy, efficiency, professionalism, and accountability in all KCSC decisions and operations*.

Initiative # 7.1: Develop and implement plan for ongoing skills training for KCSC supervisors and management.

Initiative # 7.2: Implement best practices and innovative local initiatives to hire and retain experienced, trained and valued staff by creating a satisfying work environment and organizational culture.

Initiative # 7.3: Ensure staff in each KCSC division is properly trained, and cross-trained as appropriate, concerning all applicable operational procedures.

Initiative # 7.4: Train additional research attorneys for pro tem assignments as needed by the presiding judge.

ENDNOTES

[1] Census data shows Kern County's population increased from 544,981 in 1990, to 651,632 (+20%) in 2000, to 839,631 (+29%) in 2010. The City of Bakersfield's population increased from 183,959 in 1990, to 244,217 (+33%) in 2000, to 347,483 (+42%) in 2010. Recent estimates suggest the rate of increase has slowed, but there remains a steady upward trend. See Table 1.

Table 1

	2010 Census	2017 / 2018 Estimates	Increase
Kern County	839,631	896,764	57,133 (+6.8%)
• Bakersfield	347,483	383,579	36,096 (+10.4%)
• East	78,538	79,835	1,297 (+1.7%)
Ridgecrest	27,616	28,940	1,324
California City	14,120	14,217	97
Tehachapi	14,414	12,432	-1,375
Mojave	4,238	4,222	-16
Rosamond	18,150	20,024	1,874
• North	108,281	116,230	7,949 (+7.3%)
Shafter	16,988	20,058	3,070
Wasco	25,545	27,976	2,431
McFarland	12,707	15,182	2,475
Delano	53,041	53,014	-27
• South	43,751	46,515	2,764 (+6.3%)
Arvin	19,304	21,522	2,218
Lamont	15,120	15,597	477
Taft	9,327	9,396	69

[2] The primary assignments for Kern County's judges and commissioners for calendar year ("CY") 2020 are:

- Presiding Judge: 1 judge
- Civil & small claims: 3 judges, 1 commissioner
- Felony: 12 judges
- Misdemeanor: 5 judges
- Family Law: 4 judges, 1 commissioner
- Probate: 1 commissioner
- Juvenile: 3 judges
- Metro Traffic: 1 commissioner
- East Kern (Kern River, Mojave, Ridgecrest): 3 judges, 1 commissioner
- North Kern (Delano, Shafter): 3 judges, 1 commissioner
- South Kern (Lamont, Taft): 1 judge, 1 commissioner
- Current vacancies: 3 judges (2 new judges; 1 recently retired)

[3] Kern County was identified as one of several counties statewide in need of additional judicial officers. When a vacancy occurs, the amount of time the office remains vacant typically depends on when the Governor fills the vacancy through the appointment process. The specific timing of such appointments is uncertain. In addition, there will likely be several judicial retirements over the next five years creating additional vacancies.

[4] In Bakersfield, there is one courtroom currently available in Metro Division, one new courtroom under construction that should be available for use in June 2020, and one small courtroom without a jury box that is used on a limited basis at JJC, where parking is limited. The Kern River and Taft facilities are used on a limited basis for traffic court proceedings, only. One judicial officer in north Kern divides time between courtrooms in both Delano and Shafter.

[5] The current trial court funding system is based essentially on three historical events: (1) The Trial Court Funding Act of 1997, which consolidated the costs of operating trial courts at the state level; (2) a constitutional amendment which unified the superior and municipal courts in 1998; and (3) the Trial Court Facilities Act of 2002, which transferred the responsibility for court facilities from counties to the state. KCSC funding is derived from several sources, approximately ninety percent of which comes from three sources:

- Court Operations Revenue – Approx. 71% of KCSC annual budget (see Table 2); comprised primarily of base funding as calculated using the Workload Allocation & Funding Methodology ("WAFM") – allocation based on weighted average workloads in each of the state's 58 trial courts – and other state fines and fees.
- Trial Court Reimbursements – Approx. 14.5% of KCSC annual budget; comprised primarily of reimbursements for the services of interpreters, juvenile dependency court-appointed counsel, grant-funded operations, prison hearings, and jury services.
- Other State Revenue – Approx. 5.4% of KCSC annual budget; state funding to cover cost changes in benefits.

[6] **Table 2** – KCSC Funding for FY 2017-18 and 2018-19

Funding Source	FY 2017-18 ($)	FY 2017-18 (% of Total)	FY 2018-19 ($)	FY 2018-19 (% of Total)
Court Operations Revenue	$46,966,838	70.96%	$55,039,582	72.31%
Other State Revenue	$3,544,269	5.35%	$3,544,268	4.66%
Local Fee Revenue	$1,224,786	1.85%	$1,055,391	1.39%
Enhanced Collections	$3,516,098	5.31%	$3,732,177	4.90%
Local Non-Fee Revenue	$125,502	0.19%	$64,043	0.08%
Other Revenue	$1,004,466	1.52%	$986,173	1.30%
Interest Income	$190,067	0.29%	$372,898	0.49%

Trial Courts Reimbursements	$9,615,843	14.53%	$11,306,538	14.86%
Prior Year Revenue	$0	0.00%	$10,000	0.01%
Total	$66,187,868	100.00%	$76,111,070	100.00%

[7] The proposed FY 2020–21 budget for the state's trial courts includes $236.7 million in new funding from the General Fund and $34.3 million from other funds to support various trial court programs and operations, including expanded use statewide of an on-line ability-to-pay tool, and "backfill" for the anticipated loss of revenues from fines and penalties.

[8] **Table 3** - KCSC Case Filings (FY 2018-19)

	Metro	East	North	South	Kern County
Infractions (Traffic & Non-traffic)	49,517	16,158 Kern River: 998 Mojave: 11,342 Ridgecrest: 3,818	17,736 Delano: 3,522 Shafter: 14,214	28,919 Lamont: 28,603 Taft: 316	112,330
Misdemeanor	16,750	4,935 Mojave: 2,780 Ridgecrest: 2,155	3,639 Delano: 1,665 Shafter: 1,974	2,742 Lamont: 2,742	28,066
Felony	5,530	987 Mojave: 595 Ridgecrest: 392	1,582 Delano: 1,095 Shafter: 487	618 Lamont: 618	8,717
Civil	16,722	1,851 Kern River: 146 Mojave: 1,258 Ridgecrest: 47	1,621 Delano: 1,121 Shafter: 500	655 Lamont: 325 Taft: 330	20,849
Family Law	9,472	1,210 Mojave: 588 Ridgecrest: 622	698 Delano: 319 Shafter: 379		11,380
Probate	1,241				1,241
Juvenile	1,557				1,557
Habeas Corpus	344				344

Table 4 - Case Dispositions (FY 2018-19)

	Metro	East	North	South	Kern County
Infractions (Traffic & Non-traffic)	43,043	14,057 Kern River: 786 Mojave: 10,065 Ridgecrest: 3,206	16,603 Delano: 3,122 Shafter: 13,481	24,491 Lamont: 24,191 Taft: 300	98,194
Misdemeanor	13,978	3,958 Kern River: 4 Mojave: 2,355 Ridgecrest: 1,599	2,946 Delano: 1,535 Shafter: 1,411	2,046 Lamont: 2,041 Taft: 5	22,928
Felony	5,509	803 Kern River: 2 Mojave: 526 Ridgecrest: 275	1,348 Delano: 911 Shafter: 437	397 Lamont: 397	8,057
Civil	16,214	1,576 Kern River: 115 Mojave: 1,090 Ridgecrest: 371	1,474 Delano: 1,010 Shafter: 464	646 Lamont: 305 Taft: 341	19,910
Family Law	8,345	929 Mojave: 432 Ridgecrest: 487	512 Delano: 271 Shafter: 241	0	9,786

Probate	1,048	0	0	0	1,048
Juvenile	1,399	0	0	0	1,761
Habeas Corpus	281	0	0	0	281

[9] Kern County is home to more prisons, community correction facilities and state inmates than any other county in California. The total inmate population in Kern County is roughly equal to that of Kern's third largest city. Kern County has five California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation ("CDCR") prisons, and six Community Correctional Facilities:

CDCR prisons

- California City
- California Correctional Institution – Tehachapi
- Kern Valley State Prison
- North Kern State Prison
- Wasco State Prison

Community Correctional Facilities

- Central Valley Modified Community Correctional Facility
- Delano Modified Community Correctional Facility
- Female Community Reentry Facility
- Golden State Modified Community Correctional
- Shafter Modified Community Correctional Facility
- Taft Modified Community Correctional Facility

The KCSC Prison Court has been conducting video appearances with inmates housed in other prisons, outside the county, since 2017. According to CDCR statistics, the KCSC Prison Court saved taxpayers over $1 million by using the innovative video appearance system.

[10] The Governor's proposed FY 2020-21 budget emphasizes his administration's commitment to continuing reduction of the prison population, ending private prison contacts for male inmates, closing a state-operated prison within five years, and investing in restorative justice, community-based violence prevention, substance use disorder treatment, pretrial diversion, and implementing evidence-based reform of the probation system. Reform of the probation system will include reducing probation terms to a two-year maximum and increasing supervision for specified misdemeanors. Bail reform is pending. Although it is uncertain what the specific changes will entail, community-based solutions, increased supervision and bail reform are likely to mean greater court involvement.

[11] A variety of factors affect the court's workload, such as mental health issues, drug addiction, and homelessness. Staffing and policies within the offices of the District Attorney, Public Defender, and the Indigent Defense Program can affect how cases are managed, and thus determine what judicial resources are required to conclude a case. Natural disasters and other catastrophic events can bring courts to a standstill.

[12] There are many performance measures, some of which are:

- Case Filings: The number of new cases, by case type, filed in during a specified time frame. See Table 3.
- Clearance Rate: The number of outgoing cases as a percentage of the number of incoming cases. Compare Table 3 and Table 4.
- Time to Disposition: The percentage of cases disposed of or otherwise resolved within an established time frame.
- Age of Active Pending Caseload: The age of active pending cases before the court, measured as the number of days from filing until the time of measurement.
- Trial Date Certainty: The number of times cases disposed by trial are scheduled for trial.

- Effective Use of Jurors: Can be measured various ways, such as "juror yield" (number of citizens selected for duty who are qualified and report to serve, expressed as percentage of total prospective jurors available), or "juror utilization" (rate at which prospective jurors are used).
- Cost Per Case: Average cost of processing a single case, by case type.

Performance measures have limitations. For example, the number of "case filings" can provide useful information, but does not necessarily measure the workload that a particular case, or case type, may generate. A self-represented litigant who does not understand the process may create a higher-than-expected workload for a given case. Making resources and information available to that same litigant may reduce the number of hearings required to resolve that case.

[13] The "no-show" rate varies, averaging approximately 75% - 85%.