Missouri Courts:
A Brief Overview

Missouri Judicial Branch
Fiscal 2005 Annual Report

A Message From Your Chief Justice

Dear Fellow Citizens:

I am pleased to present to you the annual judicial report for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2005. In this brief publication, you will read about your court system and the values we follow in providing the people of Missouri with an exceptional justice system.

Through a wide variety of programs and tools, we seek not only to decide cases in a thoughtful, impartial and expeditious manner but also to promote society's commitment to justice for all people. Whether it is through specialized court dockets such as drug courts or mental health courts, through advanced technologies such as Case.net to keep the public better informed, or through outreach and education, your courts are committed to providing exceptional service to local communities and the state. Most importantly, we have continued to improve and become more efficient even in the face of the state's fiscal difficulties of the last several years.

One group of citizens is worthy of special recognition and thanks. In fiscal 2005, almost 91,700 citizens answered the call to serve as jurors. These people often do so at great personal sacrifice, placing plans on hold in anticipation of making a jury panel. Those who actually serve on our juries sacrifice even more, giving up time from family and jobs to participate in the justice process. Like the rest of the United States, Missouri has a justice system in which citizens assume this vital responsibility. Jurors from all walks of life work conscientiously to ensure that our laws are followed, that the injured are compensated appropriately, and that those convicted of crimes are held accountable. Their sacrifices and good citizenship deserve our greatest appreciation.

More detailed statistics concerning the work of your courts can be found at the Missouri Courts' Web site, www.courts.mo.gov, under the link for "Office of State Courts Administrator" and then for "Publications."

Sincerely,

Michael A. Wolff
Chief Justice

The Daily Work of Missouri Courts

Article 1, Section 14 of the Missouri constitution provides the daily mission of our state court system: "*The courts of justice shall be open to every person, and certain remedy afforded for every injury to person, property or character, and that right and justice shall be administered without sale, denial or delay.*"

Every day, Missouri's 395 judges and commissioners work hard to settle disputes among the state's citizens and businesses.

Between fiscal 1996 and fiscal 2005, total trial court case filings in Missouri increased by more than 23 percent. The largest increase – 38.5 percent – was for civil cases filed in the circuit courts' associate divisions. This jump was due largely to a 76.3-percent increase in breach of contract claims and other cases filed by businesses, as well as to a 34.3-percent increase in disputes between landlords and tenants. There also was a 23.6-percent increase in the circuit courts in criminal filings involving felonies, due largely to an increase in new drug crime laws.

In fiscal 2005, Missouri courts handled nearly 110,000 family and domestic relations cases. This reflected a 47-percent increase in filings for adult abuse and child protection orders. On a happier note, Missouri courts also approved more than 2,850 adoptions.

Where Justice Resides

Local Circuit Courts

Missouri has a unified court system organized into 45 judicial circuits. Each judicial circuit has a presiding judge and several other judges and clerks to help administer the business of the court. Many local courts also have drug court divisions and a variety of other specialized court divisions. There is a courthouse available to you in every county.

Appeals

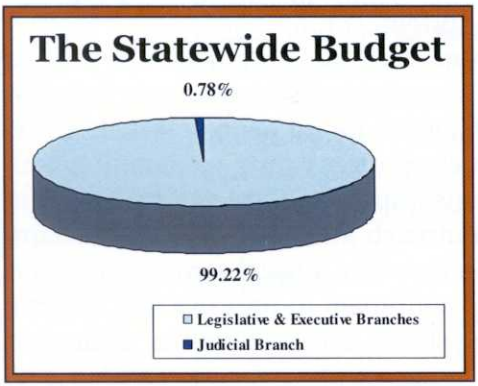
Missouri's Court of Appeals has three districts, where those cases can be heard in which the circuit court's decision is appealed. Some cases also are appealed to the Supreme Court of Missouri – the state's highest court – for a final decision by its seven judges.

Visiting Your Courts

Courthouses in Missouri provide a glimpse of our state history. Some local courts – as well as appeals courts and the Supreme Court – offer tours of their buildings and historical significance. Nearly 20,900 visitors toured the Supreme Court Building, which is nearly a century old, during fiscal 2005.

The best way to understand the court system is to observe it in action. We hope you will visit your local court sometime soon.

A small portion of the budget ... a big impact for Missouri



Supreme Court Total Case Filings	839
Appellate Court Total Case Filings	3,829
Circuit Court Total Case Filings	867,938
Municipal Court Total Case Filings	1,132,486
Fine Collection Center Total Filings	147,234
Total Statewide Court Filings	**2,152,326**

Circuit Court Case Type Breakdown	**Filings**
Criminal	485,203
Civil	337,422
Juvenile	31,471
Probate	13,842
Total Circuit Court Filings	**867,938**

The Judiciary spends more than 79 percent of its budget in its circuit courts, about 98 percent of which is for salaries for judges and local court personnel.

The Judiciary also brings money into Missouri. The courts typically receive more than $300 million as cost deposits, bonds, fines for local school districts, fees, surcharges, garnishments, restitution, court judgments, prosecutor and law enforcement training funds, and sheriff's fees. In fiscal 2005, approximately $36.8 million was paid back directly into the state's funds.

Technology

The Judiciary has invested a great deal of resources in court technology. This investment offers citizens the ability to track public case information via Case.net and to pay traffic tickets online. It also offers the state improved statistics and financial accountability, for instance, by collecting delinquent fines and fees due to the state. Technology also has enabled the courts to share critical information with state agencies and the federal government, helping to ensure public safety.

Civic Duty

One of the core components of the American justice system is the right to a trial by a jury of your peers. Jurors were called in for nearly 1,730 Missouri cases in fiscal 2005. For many, this is a unique experience with a court, and for some, it is the only court experience they ever may have.

One juror from Jasper County brought into Jackson County to serve on a sequestered jury later wrote in a letter to the court: "I just wanted to send a small thank you to you and your staff. Your instructions made an unknown and uncomfortable task bearable. All of the court clerks who shepherded us through the system did so with professionalism and enough humor to help us meld as a jury."

Fair and Impartial Justice

In 1940, frustrated with political corruption, Missouri's voters adopted a merit-based system for selecting certain judges. Now this nonpartisan court plan – known nationally as the Missouri Plan and modeled by more than 30 states, applies to judges in Missouri's largest metropolitan circuit courts as well as the court of appeals and the Supreme Court.

Under this system, a nonpartisan committee of lawyers and citizens selects nominees from whom the governor selects a judge. After a trial period of service, the people vote whether to retain that judge in office.

In Missouri's other 110 counties, where voters have the opportunity to get to know judicial candidates in their communities, judges are selected through partisan elections.

Missouri's judges are accountable to the law, both in their decisions and in their ethics. If you believe a judge has acted unethically, you should consider filing a complaint with the state's Commission on Retirement, Removal and Discipline, 2190 South Mason Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63131.