

Added money for Illinois court to benefit local governments

By Rebecca Anzel of Capitol News Illinois

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Illinois' judicial branch will use its first budget increase in six years in part to alleviate costs paid by local governments, court officials said. This is the first time in almost 30 years the state's courts were allocated the financial resources by the General Assembly to fully reimburse counties for salaries and probation services, an official said.

The Supreme Court, which has authority over all courts in Illinois, received an appropriation of just more than \$405 million from the state's main checking account. That is a bump of about \$60.5 million from each of the previous five years, in which the judiciary had a flat budget.

"While substantial, this long overdue increase is hardly a windfall," Chief Justice Lloyd Karmeier [wrote in a column](#) on the Supreme Court's Illinoiscourts.gov website. "Rather than fund new initiatives, it will be used primarily to catch up on existing financial responsibilities that have continued to rise even as our budget remained stagnant."

Statute mandates the Supreme Court reimburse counties for probation costs. Instead of being locked in a jail cell, a person on probation is allowed to "contribute to their communities," keep a job and maintain contact with their family, said Kara McCaffrey, assistant director of Administrative Services. It is a period of supervision different from parole, which is overseen and paid for by the Department of Corrections.

"Because of shortening the judicial branch of their requested amounts, those shortages were passed on through probation back to the communities simply because the court has very limited options in their budget," said Rich Adkins, assistant director of Probation Services.

He added the judiciary was able to reimburse counties at 62 percent of what the law mandates due to the level of funding it received. With the new allocation, the rate will be 100 percent.

"We are putting the increase that was approved by the governor and the Legislature straight back to the local counties to try and help the years of inadequate funding, even though it was statutorily mandated," McCaffrey said.

Services in some counties were diminished, depending on taxpayers' ability or local leaders' willingness to bear the financial burden. Those included the decreased supervision of adult and juvenile offenders and pretrial services.

Problem-solving courts, those specially designed to work with people who have substance abuse issues, mental health needs or who are veterans, were also impacted.

Adkins said some counties used a monthly fee collected from probation clients "to fill in the gap of the funding" for the reimbursement of probation officers' salaries. That fee is "targeted" for "a variety of services to improve the wellbeing of the probationer" — mental health and substance abuse treatment, for example.

The judiciary's flat budget was a result of a more than two-year budget impasse between the General Assembly and former Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner. Karmeier wrote that "conflict ... exacerbated the state's financial woes and sent the courts scrambling to find new strategies for meeting their obligations under the law."

He added, "Now, and throughout my tenure on the Illinois Supreme Court, [the judicial branch's] members have carried out their Constitutional responsibilities in a collegial, cooperative and completely professional way. If any dysfunction has plagued us, it has come from the other branches of government."

This is the last year of Karmeier's term as chief justice.