



SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA  
COUNTY OF ALAMEDA

# Strategic Plan 2020-2029



Effective January 1, 2020

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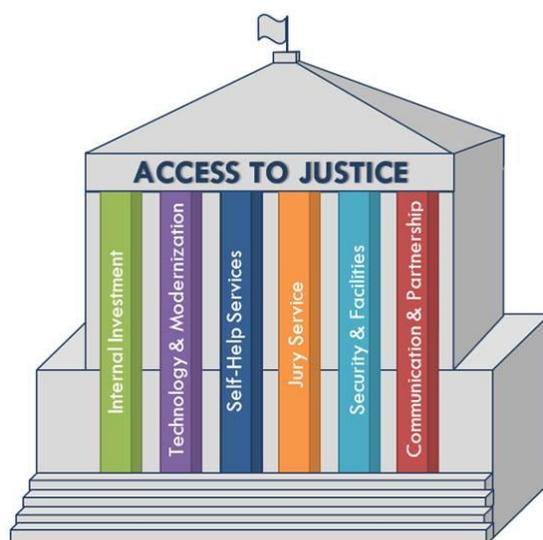
## I. INTRODUCTION & MISSION

This document is the 2020-2029 Strategic Plan for the Superior Court of California, County of Alameda (the “Court”). This Strategic Plan is the result of a ten-month coordinated outreach effort in which the Court’s Strategic Plan Committee<sup>1</sup> solicited extensive community input through internal and external electronic surveys and follow-up communications, bench officer and staff meetings, and a formal public comment period. The resulting Strategic Plan is driven by the Court’s fundamental mission to provide access to justice for all in a fair, accessible, effective, and efficient manner.

The Strategic Plan outlines the means by which the Court intends to fulfill its mission. The Court will use it to guide operational objectives and budgetary priorities over the next ten years, or until a revised strategic plan is implemented.

## II. STRATEGIC GOALS PROMOTING ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The Court is steadfastly committed to ensuring equal access to court services and inspiring public confidence in the court system through excellence in service, integrity, impartiality, competence, equity, and diversity. The Court must work to provide everyone – regardless of race, sex, gender identity, creed, national origin, physical ability, socio-economic status, or personal or political opinion – the opportunity to come to Court, access our services, and receive justice under the law. The objectives described in this Strategic Plan – Internal Investment; Technology & Modernization; Self Help Services; Jury Service; Security & Facilities; and Communication & Partnership – all overlap and complement each other. They all support and promote the Court’s overarching priority of access to justice.



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<sup>1</sup> Called together by presiding Judge Wynne Carvill, the 2019 Strategic Plan Committee includes Assistant Presiding Judge Tara Desautels, Chair, and Judges Arturo Castro, S. Raj Chatterjee, C. Don Clay, Kimberly Colwell, Lupe Garcia, Michael Markman, Thomas Nixon, and Tom Stevens. The Committee was assisted by Court Administrator Adam Byer and Executive Assistants Katherine Ogburn and Andrew Taylor.

## Internal Investment

### A. INTERNAL INVESTMENT

Our Court's efficacy depends on its people. Cases can only be heard after having been properly filed and processed. Judicial orders are difficult to enforce if the minutes are not accurately recorded. Transcripts cannot be used for further proceedings if court reporters are not available to accurately report court hearings. Without court interpreters, thousands of non-English speaking litigants would be unable to understand legal processes and their accompanying rights. Whether bench officer or staff employee, each member of our Court is dedicated to the Court's access to justice mission, and all need the proper tools to perform to their potential. These tools include appropriate staffing, consistent education and training, and refined business operations. Through this Strategic Plan objective, the Court commits to investing in our own people and operations, so that Court employees will be able to offer the highest level of service that access to justice demands.

#### 1. Recruitment & Retention

Through this objective, the Court will expand recruitment to secure sufficient staffing while also improving internal retention efforts for new recruits and seasoned employees.

Retaining talented and high-performing employees is a priority. The Court will work to improve opportunities for its existing, valued employees by offering organized trainings and career-advancement pathways. When changes in the law, business needs, or funding streams require operational adjustments, the Court will work to better communicate both the necessary adjustments and the related reasoning. Throughout, the Court will be mindful of the challenges associated with helping community members in their times of need and the tremendous dedication our staff demonstrates in meeting those challenges.

Our recruitment goals require the Court to make our community aware of the Court's staffing needs and available employment opportunities. Hiring areas include court administration, courtroom and office clerks, human resources, finance, information technology, and data analytics. The Court intends to publicize these opportunities in a variety of ways, including through social media, and hopes to further magnify its outreach through coordinated, intentional recruitment efforts at local schools and community colleges.

For example, in May 2019, the Court launched a first-of-its-kind "pathway to employment" partnership with the Peralta Community College District. This specialized certificate program enables community college students to apply for legal processing analyst and courtroom clerk positions without the need to take the standardized tests otherwise required. This partnership

recognizes the Court's role as educator, employer, and integral community member and will hopefully serve as a launch point for similar collaborative efforts in the future.

The Court also supplements its judicial ranks through the hiring of court commissioners and the use of judges *pro tem*. For Commissioner and *Pro Tem* positions, the Court will capitalize on existing partnerships with the Alameda County Bar Association ("ACBA") and other local and minority bar associations to recruit experienced attorneys with the temperament, dedication, and commitment necessary to join the Court's access to justice mission.

## **2. Education & Training**

The Court commits to prioritize training and continuing education at all levels and for all who work in the Court, whether as court personnel or bench officers.

### **a. Employees**

With over 700 employees supporting 10 different facilities county-wide, consistency in education and training is a challenge that is further complicated by staffing shortages, unexpected assignment coverage needs, and technological deficiencies. The Court commits to developing formalized training programs for each case type. To start, the Court will implement training plans for the civil, criminal, and family case types, building on the related efforts recently developed by the staff-led training committee established for that purpose. These formalized training plans will include, among other things, regularly scheduled group training sessions and related reference materials for employee use. In addition, the Court will explore cross-training opportunities within the scope of its labor Memoranda of Understanding, and will continue to refine and improve training resources across all Court operations.

In addition, the Court will continue to expand the training opportunities available to all staff—operations and administrative—in areas such as supervisory skills, implicit bias, and assignment-specifics designed to improve staff's ability to perform their jobs.

### **b. Bench Officers**

Continuing education is legally required for bench officers. But the education programs offered by statewide judicial organizations do not necessarily match the timing of new judicial appointments and elections; nor do they address case processes specific to our Court.

Led by its Judicial Education Committee, the Court will supplement statewide education and training programs by offering Alameda County-specific programs for all its bench officers, including added training in implicit bias and sensitivity. In addition, the Court will work to give our judges *pro tem* the legal and operational training necessary to provide the same high level of judicial service as more senior bench officers. To support this objective, the Court will encourage its more experienced judges to participate in creating and teaching these local training programs,

and also to collaborate with members of the Judicial Council of California (“JCC”) and the California Judges Association to offer additional, relevant training opportunities.

### **3. Administrative Infrastructure**

In order to best meet our Court-users’ needs, the Court needs a well-functioning administrative infrastructure that facilitates the work of our skilled Court staff. Currently, certain aspects of the Court’s infrastructure are outdated, and each of the Court’s 10 court locations offers a different level of services for different case types. The resulting internal inconsistencies and inefficiencies and can lead to public confusion and dissatisfaction.

To improve our internal administrative infrastructure, the Court is actively working to implement a new human resources information system that is expected to increase efficiency with improved functionality. Implementing the anticipated clerk-training programs and drafting related materials will also give the Court and its employees an opportunity to recognize and correct operational inconsistencies as facilities and related conditions permit. The Court is also working to develop and systemize numerous administrative, operational, and fiscal policies and procedures, which will be documented, housed, and organized on the Court’s newly upgraded intranet. These efforts will ensure that the Court’s operational guides will be searchable and easily accessible to all staff in order to encourage their consistent use and implementation.

Through its new Data Analytics Unit and Data Governance Team, the Court will work to track the efficacy of these administrative operations to ensure that they meet public and case-filing demands and will implement a related change control process to facilitate ongoing improvements. The Court will promote data-driven decision-making throughout the Court, with the goal of making it an operational norm. Together, these efforts will help the Court to continue to refine administrative operations and business processes to ensure that they are working well for both Court employees and Court users.

## **Technology & Modernization**

### **B. TECHNOLOGY & MODERNIZATION**

Historically, courts have been identified by the physical location of their courthouses; their work was memorialized in paper. But modern technologies have enabled newer, more efficient ways to provide access to justice both at physical court locations and remotely. Through this Strategic Plan objective, the Court commits to technology and modernization within Court operations – subject to the fiscal limitations imposed by state funding – with the ultimate goal of implementing comprehensive digital services for all Court users.

**1. Facilitate Mobile Access**

Many Court users do not have regular access to a personal computer; but almost all Court users have a smart phone, tablet, or other mobile device. The Court currently maintains a comprehensive website with extensive court-related information, including useful case information access links to the civil portal DomainWeb and the criminal Odyssey Portal. But these helpful links can be hard to find, as the Court website can be confusing, is difficult to search, has limited options for the visually impaired and non-English speakers, and is not mobile-friendly.

The Court commits to making its public-website more mobile-friendly in order to provide consistent access to court and case information, as the law permits. Where feasible, the Court will explore the use of emerging technologies to improve website access for all users, including through improved translation services, intelligent chat technologies, and non-English language and voice-user interfaces. The Court will also explore telephonic resources for those less comfortable navigating a smart device or engaging in an electronic chat.

**2. Implement Modern Electronic Case Management Systems**

In 2011, the Court implemented an electronic Traffic Case Management System, capable of managing traffic matters electronically. In 2016, the Court implemented the electronic Odyssey Case Management System (“Odyssey”) for criminal and juvenile case types. Odyssey includes an electronic portal providing public case information, as permitted by law, and also permits electronic filing (“e-filing”) of pleadings and other case-related documents.

But current civil operations, including family law and probate matters, are managed through Domain and DomainWeb. This civil case management system and its remote public interface were extremely advanced when first launched in 1997, but they are now out of date, are difficult to maintain and upgrade, and do not interface well with modern technologies. In addition, they do not enable the Court to efficiently or accurately track case-related metrics that could be used to improve our administrative infrastructure and Court operations.

The Court commits to implementing a new electronic case management system for all civil case types, including family law and probate matters. Such a system will improve the Court’s ability to relate and connect cases, provide enhanced public case access, track key filing and case metrics, and develop additional business efficiencies.

**3. Expand and Implement Electronic Filing Opportunities Across Case Types**

While the Court currently has electronic or e-filing capabilities in criminal and juvenile case types, they are not widely used. Most litigants continue to file pleadings and related materials in-person at local courthouses. In civil matters, remote filing is only possible through the Court’s dated fax-filing system; otherwise in-person filing is required. In traffic matters, the Court permits certain trials by letter declaration, consistent with the law, but otherwise requires in-person appearances; there are no fax or e-filing alternatives.

A comprehensive e-filing program would facilitate personal access to our Court by users across all case-types, where permitted by law. It would decrease the number of in-person courthouse visits for attorneys and litigants. And it would enable the related refinement of business processes and resource efficiencies, leading to faster case processing times and potentially an expansion of current resource-thin Court operations. To this end, the Court commits to (1) promoting increased e-filing opportunities for practitioners and parties in criminal and juvenile matters; (2) implementing e-filing in civil case types as soon as practicable after the implementation of a new civil electronic case management system; and (3) exploring other e-filing opportunities in traffic matters.

#### **4. Standardize the Modern Courtroom**

The technological capabilities of Alameda County courtrooms vary widely among our ten courthouses. Technological deficiencies can lead to inefficient operations, unnecessary court appearances, delay, and, most significantly, miscarriage of justice if these technological gaps affect a trier of facts' ability to hear a case and review evidence.

The Court commits to modernizing its courtrooms by updating technology to enable consistent, technologically-friendly operations, including opportunities for the electronic display of evidence; consistent services for the hearing and visually impaired; and possibly, remote appearances including by video, if appropriate and permitted by law. Utilizing improved internal and community-facing Court systems can improve access to the Court, Court information, and, ultimately, justice.

## Self-Help Services

### **C. SELF-HELP SERVICES**

Alameda County has long been a provider of critical services to self-represented litigants and others who need assistance with court operations.<sup>2</sup> Because the Court cannot give legal advice and must treat all litigants equally, self-help services allow the Court to ensure access to justice by guiding self-represented litigants through the litigation process – helping litigants help themselves. But from 2016 to March of 2019, the Court operated a single self-help center for all Alameda County residents. Fortunately, increased funding enabled the Court to re-open a North County Self-Help Center, providing additional services and resources to complement those already provided in our larger center at the Hayward Hall of Justice. To support this new center, the Court is also looking to re-open its North County Children's Waiting Room. If feasible, these additional services would ease the childcare burden associated with a courthouse visit, giving

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://newsroom.courts.ca.gov/news/helping-court-users-help-themselves>.

litigants more time to seek assistance from Self-Help, visit a clerk's window, or attend a required court appearance.

The Court is committed to improving and expanding these meaningful self-help services in order to match user-demand with resource availability. By using advances in data analytics, we hope to be able to better tailor self-help services to the expressed needs of Alameda County litigants, including in family law and unlawful detainer matters. Ideally, these services would include language and disability-related assistance whenever possible. In addition, the Court is exploring electronic workshop-calendaring systems with text reminders to enable last minute vacancies to be filled by interested litigants.

These improvements to our Self-Help Centers would complement the Court's other informational services for litigants, such as our in-person volunteer information desks and the new digital information kiosk located at our East County Hall of Justice. In addition, partnership efforts with the ACBA, its Legal Access Alameda, and other community based organizations are already underway to provide those with limited means additional opportunities to secure legal services outside of Court.

## Jury Service

### **D. JURY SERVICE**

Jurors are essential to serving justice. The jury trial system only works with the willing participation of county residents from all walks of life who, despite inconvenience or associated burdens, believe in their civic duty to serve as jurors and are dedicated to keeping an open mind, avoiding bias or prejudice, and following the law in deciding the case presented to them. With that fundamental principle in mind, the Court commits to working actively to improve juror appearance rates and the juror experience, within the scope of current law.

#### **1. Reduce Summons Frequency**

The law does not permit courts to summon prospective jurors to serve more frequently than once in every twelve-month period. Alameda County currently summons prospective jurors as frequently as the law permits: every twelve to thirteen months. Not surprisingly, one of the most common complaints of prospective jurors relates to this nearly annual summons-system.

The Court commits to work to address this concern in at least four ways. First, the Court will engage in community outreach efforts designed to promote juror participation, which should reduce the number of summons necessary for the Court to issue. Second, the Court will explore technological resources and analytics opportunities to better track the number of jurors needed to

match our jury trial demands. Third, the Court will investigate on-line or telephone standby opportunities that would reduce the need to summon separate jury pools on a daily basis. Fourth, the Court will consider a centralized juror-assignment system in order to further reduce the number of jurors who must be summoned on a given day or week.

## **2. Improve Remote and Electronic Access to Jury Information**

When summoned, jurors often have questions about the summons and jury selection process. The Court's current website provides some answers to the more common questions and the opportunity for jurors to register for text notification if directed to appear at a courthouse, but these services could be more helpful. The Court commits to augmenting the content and form of this electronic information to satisfy expressed juror needs, including by providing information in languages other than English, as well as investigating notification and response options for the visually impaired.

## **3. Address Transportation, Parking, and Juror Support Issues**

In a county as large as Alameda, getting to the necessary and possibly unfamiliar courthouse on time can be challenging. Public transportation takes time, traffic-filled freeways are unpredictable, and parking is at a premium at many court locations. The Court recognizes these issues and greatly appreciates the commitment to service of all jurors and prospective jurors who timely respond to their summons, regardless. The Court is committed to continue working with local officials and community leaders to ease the burden on the residents of Alameda County called to jury service. The current pilot program offering free shuttle service for jurors from BART to the Hayward Hall of Justice is a positive step demonstrating that local cooperation, but its hours could be expanded. At a minimum, the Court aims to provide clear and consistent reporting, public transportation, and parking information that would benefit all court-users, not just jurors.

## **4. Meet the Needs of Seated Jurors**

Former jurors are frequently among the most vocal advocates on behalf of the courts. They have seen the judicial system in action and are proud of their role at the core of that system. When they are at a courthouse, however, the juror experience can be stressful and inconvenient. The Court is committed to treating prospective and seated jurors with respect by communicating with them clearly about their service and related scheduling, maintaining juror privacy, and providing accommodations and offering assistance when legally permissible.

## Security & Facilities

### **E. SECURITY & FACILITIES**

The Court currently operates across ten different court locations throughout the County: the Berkeley Hall of Justice; the George E. McDonald Courthouse in Alameda; the Wiley W. Manuel Courthouse, the Rene C. Davidson Courthouse, and the County Administration Building in Oakland; the Hayward and Fremont Halls of Justice; the Juvenile Justice Center and John George Psychiatric Pavilion in San Leandro; and the East County Hall of Justice in Dublin. All but two of these courts are located in decaying structures with serious seismic and ADA deficiencies that require substantial physical facilities and technological infrastructure improvements to be able to function in even limited capacities. With most of our court locations on or near major fault lines, we must have reliable, secure, emergency preparedness plans in place. Court security also requires data and technical security. Official court records and confidential case and personal information must be safe from intentional and accidental cyber-hazards. The Court cannot compromise on any form of safety and security for those who work within or rely on the courts – neither its employees, staff, commissioners, judges, nor any of the users it is driven to serve.

The Court will take immediate steps to address these issues. Focusing first on physical security, the Court will continue to work with justice partners, government representatives, and local officials and legislators to support safe and secure Court operations. This means appropriate security levels must be adequately funded in order to ensure safe, open courtrooms. The Court will communicate regularly with the Alameda County Sheriff's Office to provide the maximum Court services possible within known security constraints.

Second, the Court will continue to develop and improve its technical security as well as its emergency preparedness plan and Continuity of Operations Plan. This will require ongoing coordination with local emergency responders and regular internal response training for all court personnel. These plans will also include procedures for remote, secure electronic court operations and will require the Court's Office of Information Technology to implement ongoing data security protocols that will remain in place during an emergency or when otherwise operating at a remote location.

Third, the Court will work to remedy its ailing facilities and address physical security needs to the extent financial resources and related legislation permit. The Court will seek opportunities to make substantial and long-term facilities-related improvements, including pursuing all available opportunities to realize the goal of obtaining a new, centralized, technologically-sophisticated, secure Community Justice Center that would directly advance the Court's Strategic Plan objectives and obviate the need for changes to historic and other buildings that simply are not possible. In the interim, the Court will triage its facilities' needs, making improvements where feasible and adjusting court operations where necessary.

## Communication & Partnership

### F. COMMUNICATION & PARTNERSHIP

Only by communicating with community members to understand their needs will the Court be able to most effectively provide the access to justice central to this Strategic Plan. Community members and court partners want to know how the Court works. They are eager to learn about court operations, legal processes, and court-related employment opportunities. They would like to support our Court in its mission to provide access to justice.

Serving community interests requires court operations and business practices that promote efficiency, reliability, and a positive user experience, even in unfamiliar and stressful circumstances. Increased communication and partnership will help the Court better understand the community's needs and the community better understand the legal and economic imperatives faced by the Court.

#### 1. Communication

The majority of Court communications to the public are conveyed through the Alameda County Superior Court website. Technological modernization will improve the accessibility and utility of that information, but the Court must communicate better in all of its operations to truly improve the public user experience. To that end, the Court will work to regularly communicate significant court operational changes to the public beyond the website – through public notices, press releases, and increased social media use. For those who rely on the in-person services offered by our courthouse volunteers, the Court will implement protocols to ensure that those volunteers are given the same, up-to-date operational and logistical information actually in use and available electronically in order to ensure consistency across all court locations.

The Court has begun improving wayfinding directions at court locations – also making them electronically accessible – and will continue these efforts. To the extent funding allows and facilities-restrictions permit, the Court will improve signage visibility and translate verbiage into additional languages. These wayfinding efforts will also include parking and public transportation information.

The Court remains committed to using its stakeholder meetings – including but not limited to Bench/Bar meetings, Justice Partner meetings, and “brown-bag” lunches in different case types – to further communication and collaboration efforts. The Presiding Judge, Assistant Presiding Judge, Court Executive Officer, and Assistant Executive Officer welcome further cooperative opportunities with local officials and community groups to the extent permitted by law.

## 2. Partnership

Closely related to communication is partnership. The Court currently partners with dozens of local bar associations, government officials, legal and community-based organizations, service providers, and other stakeholders in order to provide more comprehensive services and ensure access to justice. For example, volunteer mediators regularly staff our small claims and civil harassment calendars, substantially multiplying the day-of-court settlements mutually beneficial to both parties. Local attorney mediators serve in our Court Mediation Program, helping to resolve disputes in a wide variety of other civil cases. Multiple community based organizations regularly appear and offer counseling and domestic violence-related services in our Domestic Violence Restraining Order department. In the criminal context, prosecutors and defense attorneys work together with Probation, Behavioral Health Care Services, and other community partners in our Collaborative Court division, implementing innovative, restorative, and rehabilitative programs such as drug court, early intervention court, mentor diversion, veterans' court, homeless court, and mental health court.

Outside the courtroom, the Court and its members are encouraged to volunteer their services as mock trial judges and community presenters. The Court also participates in the in-school Civic Learning Initiative sponsored by the Chief Justice and the JCC, where bench officers visit schools to explain the role of the judiciary, sometimes conducting mock trials. Inside our courthouses, the Court offers educational opportunities to interested groups, regularly hosting students from local schools, introducing them to the law in action.

These are just some of the partnerships essential to the Court's continued operations across case types. We respect and appreciate the time, energy, and funds expended by volunteers and service providers in aid of access to justice, and will work to deploy these resources to best serve the Court's mission.

## III. IMPLEMENTATION

In order to ensure that this Strategic Plan motivates positive change, the Court will review and modify its Local Rules and Policies of Judicial Administration if necessary. The Court also commits to the following implementation and review protocols:

- The Court's Executive Team and Supervising Judges will regularly assess, revise, and monitor Court operations consistent with the Strategic Plan objectives.
- Consistent with California Rules of Court, Rule 10.503(c)(7), the Presiding Judge will create judicial committees geared toward achieving the Strategic Plan objectives. Each committee will set an annual agenda linked to the Strategic Plan, and committee chairs will report their progress and accomplishments to the Presiding Judge.
- Division Directors will provide periodic updates to the Court Executive Officer, detailing their progress and challenges in implementing Strategic Plan objectives. These updates

and any related recommendations will be conveyed to the Presiding Judge to enable further action as may be appropriate.

- Fiscal decisions by the Court will be analyzed in terms of whether and to what extent the requested spending supports Strategic Plan objectives.
- The Court will periodically announce progress toward Strategic Plan objectives that affect the public's ability to access court resources and information.

The Presiding Judge, Assistant Presiding Judge, Court Executive Officer, and Assistant Executive Officer will be responsible for monitoring and assessing implementation of the Strategic Plan. The Presiding Judge will be responsible for appointing a new *ad hoc* strategic plan committee to review and revise the Strategic Plan whenever the operational or budgetary needs of the Court dictate. But if, at any point, legislative, legal, or governance requirements change, rendering the Strategic Plan objectives moot or inconsistent with the law, the Presiding Judge shall have the authority to modify this Strategic Plan.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The members of the Alameda County Superior Court – its judges, commissioners, employees, and volunteers – are dedicated to upholding the Constitutions of the United States and the State of California. In doing so, we aspire to serve the members of the Alameda County community legally, ethically, respectfully, and effectively. We thank all involved for their contributions to the Court's mission to provide access to justice for all and look forward to continuing to serve you.