HOUSE BILL REPORT
HB 1909

As Reported by House Committee On:
Civil Rights & Judiciary
Appropriations

Title: An act relating to establishing the court unification task force.

Brief Description: Establishing the court unification task force.

Sponsors: Representatives Taylor, Goodman, Hill, Bernbaum, Farivar, Simmons, Peterson, Macri, Ortiz-Self, Walen, Ramel, Ryu, Thomas, Salahuddin, Duerr, Reed, Zahn, Entenman, Fey, Wylie, Richards, Cortes, Berry, Tharinger, Parshley, Berg, Santos, Ormsby, Pollet and Davis.

Brief History:
Committee Activity:
Civil Rights & Judiciary: 2/12/25, 2/18/25 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/26/25, 2/7/26 [DP2S].

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Establishes the Court Unification Task Force to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Washington court system and to identify areas where a more centralized approach to court operations may improve uniformity in the delivery of court services and consistency in outcomes for those who use the court system.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS & JUDICIARY

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Taylor, Chair; Farivar, Vice Chair; Entenman, Goodman, Peterson, Salahuddin, Thai and Walen.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 5 members: Representatives

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

Walsh, Ranking Minority Member; Abell, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Burnett, Graham and Jacobsen.

Staff: Eric Lopez (786-7290) and Yelena Baker (786-7301).

Background:

Unified Courts Generally.
While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the term, a "unified court system" is generally thought to have several components, including: (1) a simplified state trial court structure; (2) rulemaking authority in the state Supreme Court or judicial council; (3) governance responsibility in the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, aided by a professional administrator and staff; and (4) state funding of all or most of the judicial system.

Court unification may also be divided into structural and administrative unification. Structural unification is related to trial court consolidation and simplification, and administrative unification relates to statewide judicial system management authority and responsibility.

Approximately half of the states define or describe themselves as "unified," either in their state constitution, state statutes, or court opinions. However, not all states adopt both structural and administrative unification, so given the lack of a uniform definition, one state's "unified judicial system" may look and function differently from another state's "unified court system" or "one court of justice."

Washington Court System.
Washington has a nonunified court system and comprises four levels of courts: the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals, the superior courts, and courts of limited jurisdiction (district and municipal courts).

Funds to support Washington's courts come from state and local sources. Court operations funded directly by the state include those of the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals, and half of the salaries and benefits of superior court judges. District and municipal courts are funded and administered locally by each county or city.

The Supreme Court is the final rulemaking authority for all of the state's courts. Though local courts make their own rules of procedure, these rules must conform to, or not conflict with, those established by the Supreme Court. In addition, the Supreme Court has administrative responsibility for the operation of the state court system.

Administrative Office of the Courts.
The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) provides support for Washington's nonunified courts by providing various services to the judicial branch, including developing operational budgets, evaluating judicial system functionality, compiling statewide court

statistics, and providing continuing education for judges. The AOC operates under the direction of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and is managed by the State Court Administrator.

Board for Judicial Administration.
The Board for Judicial Administration (BJA) provides leadership to state courts and develops policies to enhance the administration of state courts. The BJA is chaired by the Chief Justice of the Washington Supreme Court and consists of the judges from all levels of court and other stakeholders.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

Creation of the Court Unification Task Force.
A task force is created to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current state court system, including the review of inefficiencies and inequities resulting from disparate local court rules, technology adoption, and funding levels. The task force must identify areas where a more unified or centralized approach to court operations may improve efficiency and uniformity in the delivery of court and judicial services, as well as consistency in outcomes and ease of access for those who use the court system, including victims, defendants, litigants, and counsel.

Membership of the Court Unification Task Force.
The task force must include:

- one member from each of the two largest caucuses of the House of Representatives and Senate;
- one member representing the Governor's office;
- one member representing the Attorney General's office;
- three members representing municipalities of various population sizes;
- one member who is an elected county councilmember representing counties;
- one member representing court clerks;
- 12 members from the judicial branch appointed by the Chief Justice with input from various judicial agencies;
- one member representing the Tribal State Consortium; and
- 12 members representing civil legal aid attorneys, prosecutors, public defense attorneys, paralegals, law enforcement, survivors of gender based violence, people with lived experience as a litigant in civil court, formerly incarcerated people, and several other agencies and associations.

The task force has two cochairs. One cochair must be the chair of the Civil Rights and Judiciary committee of the House of Representatives and the other cochair must be the Chief Justice of the Washington Supreme Court. The cochairs set the agenda and provide leadership and direction for the task force.

Powers of the Court Unification Task Force.
The task force may form issue-specific subcommittees focused on a variety of topics including, but not limited to, information technology in courts, court capacity and funding, and small and rural courts. The task force must define the scope and focus of each subcommittee.

The voting members of each subcommittee are selected from the task force by majority vote. Nonvoting members may be invited to participate as needed.

Consistent with funds appropriated specifically for this purpose, the task force may hire staff or contract for professional assistance.

Timeline and Reporting.
The task force must hold its first meeting by October 1, 2025 and must complete its work by December 31, 2028. There must be at least two full task force meetings per year.

A final report that includes specific solutions for efficient resource use, recommendations to harmonize conflicting court policies, practices and procedures, and a long-term strategic plan for implementing proposed solutions must be submitted by June 30, 2027.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill increases the number of members representing municipalities on the task force from one to three and requires that these members represent municipalities of various population sizes.

The substitute bill also provides that instead of the review of the structure, policies, practices, and procedures of the state courts, the task force must, as part of its comprehensive analysis of the Washington court system, review the inefficiencies and inequities resulting from disparate local court rules, technology adoption, and funding levels.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Courts in different counties have different rules, and this creates delays and unnecessary barriers. The vast majority of time attorneys spend on cases is spent on

researching court rules and filing procedures, speaking with clerks, and understanding the court's preferred forms and preferences. This is a frustrating use of time that limits the ability to represent people and disincentivizes people from accessing legal relief.

There is a gap in representation for poor people, which leaves them with few options to address legal issues. It is confusing for people when they are moved from one court to another. The task force includes the voices of those most impacted and will allow the community to provide feedback to the judicial branch.

Court resources, including technology, are disparate throughout the state. While there are mixed opinions on court unification, this bill opens the discussion regarding court capacity and the need for more resources. Other states with uniform court systems provide an opportunity to take what works from other states and incorporate it into our own.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Jamila Taylor, prime sponsor; Brittany Gregory, Administrative Office of the Courts; Esperanza Borboa; and Laura Del Villar, Civil Survival.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass. Signed by 18 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Berg, Bergquist, Callan, Cortes, Doglio, Fitzgibbon, Leavitt, Lekanoff, Peterson, Pollet, Ryu, Springer, Stonier, Street and Thai.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Penner, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Schmick, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Corry, Dye, Keaton, Manjarrez and Marshall.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Couture, Ranking Minority Member; Connors, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Burnett.

Staff: Yvonne Walker (786-7841).

Summary of Recommendation of Committee On Appropriations Compared to Recommendation of Committee On Civil Rights & Judiciary:

The second substitute bill:

- permits, rather than requires, the Office of the Governor and the Office of the

Attorney General to appoint representatives to the Court Unification Task Force (Task Force) as nonvoting members;
- adds a representative of the Office of Administrative Hearings as a voting member of the Task Force;
- strikes provisions authorizing the Task Force to hire staff and instead requires that the cochairs request the Washington State Bar Association to provide staff support to the Task Force; and
- extends by one year the deadlines for Task Force meetings.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

See Committee Records from the 2025 Legislative Session.

Persons Testifying: See Committee Records from the 2025 Legislative Session.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: See Committee Records from the 2025 Legislative Session.