SENATE BILL REPORT
2SHB 1909

As Passed Senate - Amended, March 6, 2026

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

Brief Description: Establishing the court unification task force.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by 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: Passed House: 2/16/26, 56-36.
Committee Activity: Law & Justice: 2/23/26, 2/24/26 [DPA, DNP, w/oRec].
Floor Activity: Passed Senate - Amended: 3/6/26, 30-18.

Brief Summary of Bill
(As Amended by Senate)

- Creates a court unification task force to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current Washington State court system to identify areas where a unified approach to court operations may improve efficiency in the delivery of court and judicial services.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LAW & JUSTICE

Majority Report: Do pass as amended.
Signed by Senators Dhingra, Chair; Trudeau, Vice Chair; Holy, Ranking Member; Lovick, Salomon and Valdez.

Minority Report: Do not pass.
Signed by Senator Torres.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

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.

Signed by Senators Fortunato and Wagoner.

Staff: Tim Ford (786-7414)

Background: Unified Court System. The general concept of a unified court system is where the state and local courts operate as a single integrated and centralized structure under a unified administrative oversight, and primarily funded by the state.

Approximately half of the states describe themselves as unified, either in their state constitution, state statutes, or court opinions. There is not a single definition of a unified court system, and among states with a self described unified court system there are wide varieties.

Washington Courts. Washington State does not have a unified court system. Washington courts have different jurisdictions, funding sources, and administrative powers. The Washington supreme court adopts court rules and local courts must conform with those rules established by the supreme court. Local court rules may vary between counties for rules of procedure. Each county superior court has a presiding judge. There is no central administrative oversight, there is no structural unity and the budgets are not paid from a single source.

Court Funding. *State Sources.* Court operations funded directly by the state include those of the Supreme Court—including the Supreme Court Clerk's Office, the Reporter of Decisions, the State Law Library, and the Administrative Office of the Courts—the Court of Appeals, half of the salaries and benefits of superior court judges, and a smaller portion of salaries of district court judges.

Local Sources. Local funds support the cost of court administration, juries, local law libraries, court facilities, civil process services and witness expenses. District and municipal courts are funded and administered locally by each county or city.

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 Amended 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;
- three members representing cities of various population sizes;
- one member who is an elected county councilmember representing counties;
- one member representing court clerks;
- members from the judicial branch appointed by the chief justice with input from various judicial agencies including three members of the WA Superior Court Judges Association, and three members of the district and municipal courts association;
- one member representing the Tribal State Consortium;
- one member representing the Office of Administrative Hearings;
- one person who has lived experience as a formerly incarcerated person; 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, a person with lived experience as a formerly incarcerated person, and several other agencies and associations.

The task force may include the following members:

- one person appointed by the Governor within existing resources to represent the Governor's Office as a nonvoting member of the task force; and
- one person appointed by the attorney general within existing resources to represent the Office of the Attorney General as a nonvoting member of the task force.

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. The cochairs must request the Washington State Bar Association to provide staff support to the task force.

Timeline and Reporting. The task force must hold its first meeting by October 1, 2026, and must complete its work by December 31, 2029. 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, 2028.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: Yes.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Second Substitute House Bill: *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: This bill has been decades in progress trying to solve access to justice concerns. Thurston County court has an online only filing requirement which is difficult if you don't have a computer or access to the internet. We want this to be a blue ribbon commission, and the WSBA will assist with it and the cost. The superior courts and DCMJ want additional representatives on the task force.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Jamila Taylor, Prime Sponsor; Sugam Soni, Civil Survival.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.