

Washington Citizens' Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials



AUGUST 5, 2024

Members of the Washington Citizens' Commission on Salaries for Elected Officials:

On behalf of the Washington Supreme Court justices and the Washington Court of Appeals, Superior and District Court judges, thank you for your work in setting appropriate salaries for elected officials in our state and for your consideration of this judicial salary report.

For Washington's courts to continue playing their vital role in society, we must attract and retain professionals who reflect the diversity of our communities, possess a broad range of skills, and have the requisite legal expertise to deal with the increasingly complex range of cases that come before the courts.

In 2022, the Salary Commission recognized that judicial salaries have fallen behind, and you took important initial steps to restore some of the lost ground and move salaries in the right direction. We urge you to continue that work in the current cycle, in order to offset the lingering impact of high inflation in recent years alongside the cumulative impact of judges receiving no salary increases in five of the last 15 years. Only by continuing to adjust salaries steadily each cycle will it be possible to stem the growing compensation gap between Washington's judges and our peers on the federal bench and in other legal positions. We appreciate your commitment to the Commission's stated objective of setting appropriate salaries in order to recruit and retain highly qualified judges.

This year, we ask that you consider a two-part compensation increase over the coming biennium. First, we believe judicial salaries should be adjusted to reflect the same inflationary cost-of-living increases provided to other state employees. Second, we respectfully request a base salary adjustment of 6.75 percent in recognition of the ground lost during the pandemic and to continue closing the compensation gap between Washington judges and comparable legal professionals.

We are proud of the work Washington's judges do every day to meet the changing needs of our society and ensure access to justice. The job is more complex and demanding today than ever before — courts are at the forefront of technology innovations and the expansion of services to assist unrepresented litigants. Judges often preside over therapeutic courts, working collaboratively with social and medical professionals to address addiction and mental health issues. While changes in the justice system benefit the public, many place additional burdens on judges who already manage multiple responsibilities and heavy caseloads.

Unfortunately, the increasing demands of judicial office, together with the cumulative impact of lagging compensation and rising costs, continue to negatively impact Washington's ability to recruit and retain judges. Judicial openings that once attracted a range of candidates with diverse legal experiences now sometimes attract only a single candidate. Fewer attorneys choose to run for election, and the Governor's office is finding it harder to identify qualified nominees for judicial appointments. Additionally, we are seeing more judicial resignations than ever before, particularly in parts of the state with the highest cost of living.

The Salary Commission's work in setting compensation levels for the next two years is essential to Washington state's ability to recruit and retain individuals with the required legal expertise and commitment to serve as effective judges. This, in turn, will ensure that Washington courts continue to reform and improve court operations to meet the changing needs of society and administer justice in a way that faithfully serves all segments of our community.

We look forward to sharing our perspective with the Commission and answering any questions you may have as you deliberate on judicial salaries.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Debra L. Stephens
ASSOCIATE JUSTICE,
WASHINGTON SUPREME COURT

Bill A. Bowman
DIVISION I JUDGE,
WASHINGTON COURT OF APPEALS

Kristin Ferrera
CHELAN COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT JUDGE;
PRESIDENT, SUPERIOR COURT JUDGES' ASSOCIATION

Karl Williams
PIERCE COUNTY DISTRICT COURT JUDGE;
PRESIDENT, DISTRICT AND MUNICIPAL JUDGES' ASSOCIATION

Contents

1	Executive Summary	4
2	Overview of the Washington Judiciary and the Duties of Judges	6
3	Where Salaries Stand Today	7
4	Comparing Washington Judicial Salaries	9
5	Court Innovation and the Changing Role of Judges.....	14
6	Increasing Vacancies and Turnover in the Judiciary	17
7	Concluding Remarks.....	19
8	Appendices	
A	Private Sector Salary Data	20
B	Public Sector Salary Data	21

Executive Summary

To meet the rapidly changing needs of their communities, Washington’s courts must attract and retain legal talent in a highly competitive market. Compensation plays an important role in that process and, unfortunately, Washington judicial salaries are falling behind those of our peers in the federal court system and other legal professionals in both the public and private sectors. We recommend that the Salary Commission take another important step toward salary parity with federal judges in 2025, after which future increases could be limited to cost-of-living adjustments.

Washington’s judges are asking for the Commission’s continued help to enable us to maintain and enhance the quality of the state’s judiciary at a time when the population we serve is becoming more diverse, the issues we deal with are becoming more complex, and the demands of the job are becoming more challenging. Doing so will require building on the initial steps taken by the Commission in 2022 to help address the ground that has been lost to inflation and the competitive gaps in judicial salaries. This report provides data to aid the Commission in its deliberations.

State court judges resolve legal disputes that impact the lives of individual citizens and the health of the entire community. We decide criminal cases that can result in someone facing years of incarceration. We increasingly are responsible for overseeing therapeutic courts that are vitally important in addressing the devastating impacts of the fentanyl and mental health crises. We carefully consider decisions that impact families, placing children in foster care, reunifying families, and restoring or terminating parental rights. And we decide everything from disputes between neighbors to billion-dollar settlements that impact thousands of employees and customers across the state.

In addition to this wide range of potentially life-changing issues that come before us, our workloads continue to grow as the Legislature annually introduces new laws and mandates new efforts to increase access to justice. Successfully implementing these changes places new responsibilities on, and demands new skill sets from, Washington judges. At the same time, judges are increasingly becoming the targets of threats and violence from those who come before them.

“I became a judge to help keep the promise that we are all entitled to justice.”

CHIEF JUSTICE STEVEN GONZÁLEZ
WASHINGTON SUPREME COURT



It is imperative that the judicial branch has the most diverse set of backgrounds and legal expertise possible to resolve disputes so that the people of our state trust the work done and the decisions made. Unfortunately, as this report will show, state judicial compensation is not adequately supporting that goal. Washington’s courts compete with both the private and public sector for legal talent, and Washington judges’ salaries lag in relation to other judges and other lawyers with similar levels of education and expertise. Nearly all state judges earn the same or less than first-year or second-year associate attorneys at large law firms. Some public defenders and deputy prosecutors make more than state court judges. These gaps limit who can afford to pursue service as a state court judge and compromise the ability to attract and retain the judicial talent that our communities deserve.

Improving the compensation of Washington’s judges will help ensure that the courts are able to recruit and retain highly qualified judges who represent the diversity of Washington and are qualified to address the complex needs of our rapidly changing communities.



“The reason I wanted to be an appellate court judge, and what I like about it, is being able to give a party who lost in the trial court a meaningful opportunity to be heard about why they think the trial court decision is wrong. Sometimes that means reversing the trial court. When we do not reverse the trial court, though, my goal is to explain as clearly as possible, and without oversimplifying, why the trial court decision should stand. An appellant is entitled to that.”

JUDGE LAUREL SIDDOWNAY, RETIRED
COURT OF APPEALS, DIVISION III

Overview of the Washington Judiciary and the Duties of Judges

Judges at each court level play critical and distinct roles in the administration of justice in our state. A judge's duties extend beyond the courtroom — judges routinely participate on statewide task forces and commissions, provide input to legislators and other government officials on court operations, and spearhead community initiatives to increase equity and access in the courts.



Supreme Court

9 JUSTICES ELECTED TO SIX-YEAR TERMS

- Appeals from the Court of Appeals.
- Direct appeals when action of state officers is involved, the constitutionality of a statute is questioned, there are conflicting statutes or rules of law, or when the issue is of broad public interest.
- Final rule making body for other state courts.
- Administers state court system.
- Supervises attorney discipline statewide.



Court of Appeals

22 JUDGES ELECTED TO SIX-YEAR TERMS
(DIVISION I: SEATTLE (10 JUDGES);
DIVISION II: TACOMA (7 JUDGES);
DIVISION III: SPOKANE (5 JUDGES))

- Appeals from the lower courts except those in jurisdiction of the Supreme Court.
- Direct review of certain administrative agency decisions.
- Original jurisdiction over Personal Restraint Petitions



Superior Courts

201 JUDGES ELECTED TO FOUR-YEAR TERMS
IN 32 JUDICIAL DISTRICTS, EACH COMPOSED
OF ONE OR MORE COUNTIES

ORIGINAL JURISDICTION

- Civil actions involving more than \$100,000.
- Title or possession of real property; legality of a tax, assessment or toll; probate and domestic matters.
- Criminal cases amounting to felony.
- Criminal cases when jurisdiction is not otherwise provided for by law.
- All juvenile matters.
- Orders for protection from domestic violence.
- Appeals from the courts of limited jurisdiction heard *de novo* or appealed on the record for error of law.

CONCURRENT JURISDICTION WITH COURTS OF LIMITED JURISDICTION

- Civil actions involving \$100,000 or less.



Courts of Limited Jurisdiction

231 JUDGES; 204 ATTORNEYS AND 1 NON-ATTORNEY
(119 DISTRICT COURT JUDGES, 86 MUNICIPAL COURT
JUDGES, 14 MUNICIPAL COURT MAGISTRATES, 16
PART-TIME MUNICIPAL COURT JUDGES, 14 DISTRICT
COURT COMMISSIONERS)

ORIGINAL JURISDICTION

- Small claims up to \$10,000.
- All matters involving traffic, non-traffic, and parking infractions.
- Certain civil anti-harassment matters.
- Preliminary hearings of felonies.
- Temporary and full Ex Parte Orders for protection from domestic violence.
- Orders for change of names in non-domestic violence cases.

CONCURRENT JURISDICTION WITH SUPERIOR COURTS

- Civil actions involving \$100,000 or less.
- Misdemeanor and gross misdemeanor actions with maximum fine of \$5,000 or less and/or jail sentence of 364 days or less in violation of state law, county, or municipal ordinance violations.

Where Salaries Stand Today

The Commission’s stated objective, in regard to the judiciary, has been to provide adequate salaries to attract and retain high quality judges.

While salaries for Washington’s state court judges have increased over the last three years, those increases must be viewed in the context of longer-term trends. Over the last two decades, inflation has outpaced the salary increases of Washington judges, substantially reducing their effective buying power. We must continue working together to ensure that judicial compensation supports the recruitment and retention of qualified judges in a highly competitive market.

One indicator of inflation, the housing affordability index, has declined to historic lows in Washington since 2021.¹ According to the University of Washington’s Runstad Department of Real Estate, statewide median home prices increased 141% during the past 10 years, while the Puget Sound Regional Council reports a 98% increase in typical metro-area home values since 2015 and a 50% increase in rent. While inflation impacts all Washingtonians, the effects of inflation are more profound in the Puget Sound area, where the majority of judicial officers reside and serve.² The Puget Sound region continues to be ranked among the highest-priced housing areas in the nation.

When income does not increase with inflation, real income — the ability of consumers to purchase goods and services — decreases. Table 1 uses superior court judges’ salary data to demonstrate where state salaries stand when adjusted for inflation and pension deduction rate increases over time. In five of the past 15 years, judges received no salary increase. So despite the recent general wage adjustments in 2023 and 2024, judges have lost over \$8,000 in real salary purchasing power dropping from a 2020 high of \$140,107, in 2004 dollars, to \$132,033, in 2004 dollars, by 2024. Continued inflation will further reduce the real purchasing power of salaries.

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- 1 The WA State All-Buyer Housing Affordability Index is calculated by the WA Center for Real Estate Research and the University of Washington. This index measures the affordability of housing for homebuyers. If the index is 100, that means that someone with the median income in the area would be paying 25% of their income for their home (assuming a 20% down payment and 30-year loan.) When the index is below 100, that buyer must pay more than 25% of their income for the house, and the home is less affordable. Between 2021 and 2024 the index fell 40 points to 63.1, a major drop in housing affordability reflecting the state’s high housing costs relative to income.
 - 2 Of the 201 superior court judges, 55% serve in the following counties: King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and Thurston, while fully 27% serve in King county alone. Similarly, nearly 50% of district court judges serve in these Puget Sound counties and 22% serve in King County alone. 77% (17) of judges in the Court of Appeals serve either in Seattle or Tacoma, while the Supreme Court is in Olympia.

Table 1: Impact of Inflation on Judicial Salaries and Take-Home Pay

YEAR	SUPERIOR COURT JUDGE SALARY AT YEAR END	SALARY COMMISSION INCREASE	INFLATION ³	REAL DOLLAR VALUE OF SALARY ⁴	PERS DEDUCTION RATE	SUPERIOR COURT SALARY TAKE-HOME PAY ⁵	REAL DOLLAR VALUE OF TAKE-HOME PAY ⁶
2004	\$124,411	2.00%	2.33%	\$124,411	1.18%	\$122,943	\$122,943
2005	\$128,143	3.00%	3.06%	\$124,342	2.25%	\$125,260	\$121,544
2006	\$131,988	3.00%	3.42%	\$123,839	3.50%	\$127,368	\$119,505
2007	\$140,979	6.81%	3.17%	\$128,205	6.25%	\$132,168	\$120,192
2008	\$148,832	5.57%	3.49%	\$130,777	7.88%	\$137,104	\$120,471
2009	\$148,832	0.00%	-0.38%	\$131,269	11.13%	\$132,267	\$116,659
2010	\$148,832	0.00%	1.09%	\$129,856	7.25%	\$138,042	\$120,442
2011	\$148,832	0.00%	2.84%	\$126,270	7.25%	\$138,042	\$117,116
2012	\$148,832	0.00%	2.15%	\$123,612	9.10%	\$135,288	\$112,364
2013	\$151,718	1.94%	1.48%	\$124,167	9.10%	\$137,912	\$112,868
2014	\$156,363	3.06%	1.86%	\$125,629	9.80%	\$141,039	\$113,318
2015	\$162,618	4.00%	1.17%	\$129,150	12.80%	\$141,803	\$112,618
2016	\$165,870	2.00%	1.93%	\$129,238	12.80%	\$144,639	\$112,696
2017	\$169,187	2.00%	2.84%	\$128,183	15.95%	\$142,202	\$107,738
2018	\$172,571	2.00%	3.35%	\$126,513	15.95%	\$145,046	\$106,334
2019	\$190,985	10.67%	2.69%	\$136,342	16.62%	\$159,243	\$113,682
2020	\$199,675	4.55%	1.74%	\$140,107	17.25%	\$165,231	\$115,938
2021	\$199,675	0.00%	4.52%	\$134,045	15.49%	\$168,754	\$113,288
2022	\$203,169	1.75%	8.01%	\$126,282	13.40%	\$175,944	\$109,360
2023	\$217,391	7.00%	4.29%	\$129,562	13.40%	\$188,261	\$112,200
2024	\$228,261	5.00%	3.03% ⁷	\$132,033	13.40%	\$197,674	\$114,341

The highlighted section of Table 1 shows the decline in real purchasing power for judicial salaries due to inflation from 2020-present.

3 Inflation is measured as the percentage change in the annual CPI-U West Region, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

4 Real or constant dollars are adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) benchmarked to 2004. The formula may be found in the BLS Fact Sheet Math Calculations to Better Utilize CPI Data at www.bls.gov/cpi/factsheets/cpi-math-calculations.pdf.

5 Take-home pay is measured as Salary minus PERS Plan 2 deduction.

6 See Footnote 4.

7 The annual inflation rate for 2024 is estimated using the CPI-U, 12 months ending June 2024, West Region, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Comparing Washington Judicial Salaries

As judges’ real salaries have declined, impacted by inflation, the gap between state and federal court judges’ actual salaries has only slightly decreased due to lower state cost-of-living adjustments. For example, in 2022 the salary gap between federal district court judges and state superior court judges was \$20,231 as shown in Table 2 below. In July 2022, the salary gap decreased slightly to \$15,209. Federal judges receive an automatic annual salary adjustment based on the Employment Cost Index. The next salary increase for federal judges, of 5.4%, took effect in January 2024. The 2024 increase authorized by the Commission resulted in decreasing the salary gap by \$179 between state superior court and federal district court judges. The salary gap between Washington state and federal judges will continue to stall unless the Commission takes action.

Table 2: State/Federal Judicial Salary Gap

	FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT	FED % CHG	STATE SUPERIOR COURT	STATE % CHG
2024	\$243,300	5.40%	\$228,261	5.00%
2023	\$232,600	4.96%	\$217,391	7.00%
2022	\$223,400	2.20%	\$203,169	1.75%

The Commission’s first mandate is to base salaries of elected officials on realistic standards. In 2004, a study prepared by Owen-Pottier Human Resource Consultants for the Commission addressed the issue:

A reasonable course of action for the Commission to follow is to move toward a degree of parity with the federal bench over time. Such action can be justified in part by the fact that federal judges perform substantially similar work as our state judges but have significantly more job security since they are appointed for life, while state judges must run for reelection.

The U.S. Supreme Court and appellate courts are similar in function to the Washington Supreme Court and Court of Appeals. The federal district courts are similar to Washington superior courts. These federal positions draw from the same pool of attorneys as state judicial offices. There are federal courts in several locations in Washington including Seattle, Tacoma, Bellingham, Vancouver, Spokane, Yakima, and Richland.

The American Bar Association (ABA) has adopted the following policy on the issue:

Be it resolved that the American Bar Association recommends that salaries of justices of the highest courts of the states should be substantially equal to the salaries paid to judges of the United States court of appeals, and the salaries of the state trial judges of courts of general jurisdiction should substantially equal the salaries paid to judges of the United States district courts.

The comparison to federal judicial salaries is not without its limitations. The ABA has also recognized that state court judges are called on to decide many more disputes than the judges of the federal courts. State court judges also have to work with fewer resources. A significant number of Washington judges have no administrative support, while all federal district court judges have a staff of three people, usually two law clerks and a secretary.

In Washington, judges participate in the Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS), which requires a significant contribution from our annual salaries. Judges also typically come onto the bench later in their careers, limiting the number of years these benefits actually accrue. Members of the Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, and superior courts currently have 13.4% of their income deducted from their paychecks for their pension, while district and municipal court judges currently have 15.9% deducted. Federal judges, on the other hand, do not contribute any portion of their salary toward their own retirement. Accordingly, a straight comparison of gross salaries does not convey an accurate story.

“I became an attorney to help people get justice. I became a judge to bring justice to the community. What I love about being a judge in district court, is that we have an opportunity to truly help people with underlying trauma, addiction, or mental instability. We can connect people to the services they need to turn their lives around. District court is the “People’s Court” and our court is where most people interact with the court system. It is my honor to be a part of a court that offers solutions to the underlying problems as a part of the accountability of the individual.”



JUDGE KARL WILLIAMS
PIERCE COUNTY DISTRICT COURT

Another problem with the comparison is the lack of federal equivalent for Washington district court judges. In the past, the Commission has utilized federal magistrates to evaluate salaries for district court judges, but federal magistrates have a more limited scope. Federal magistrates primarily conduct preliminary proceedings, such as initial appearances and arraignments, whereas Washington district court judges preside over the entirety of civil and criminal cases under their jurisdiction.

Even with these limitations, we feel that federal judge salaries are still a good evaluation tool for the Commission. However, instead of comparing Washington district court judges to federal magistrates, **we recommend the Commission set Washington district court judges' salaries at 95% of Washington superior court judges' salaries.** Table 3 on page 12 provides an overview of how Washington judges' responsibilities and salaries compare to their federal counterparts. Figure 1 on page 13 shows salary comparisons.

“I became a judge and subsequently a Justice on the State Supreme Court because I believe my unique life experience as a woman of color from a working class background needed to be at the table where decisions about justice are made.”



JUSTICE MARY YU
WASHINGTON SUPREME COURT

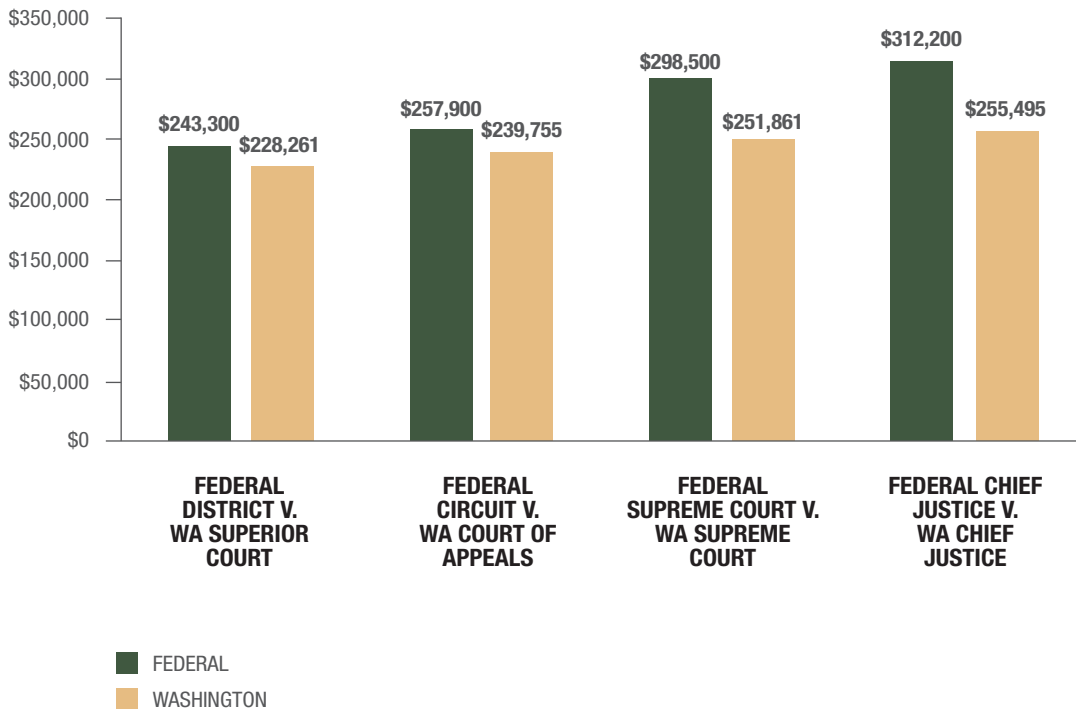
**Table 3: Federal and State Courts –
Comparable Judicial Roles & Responsibilities**

Washington State Courts	Federal Court Equivalents
<p>SUPREME COURT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highest court in the WA state judiciary • Jurisdiction over appeals from WA Court of Appeals, direct appeals from superior courts, and certified questions from federal courts; original jurisdiction over actions against state officers, personal restraint petitions, and certain other matters • Oversees administration of the WA court system and judicial branch commissions and offices • Oversees attorney admission and discipline • Elected statewide to 6-year terms 	<p>U.S. SUPREME COURT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highest court in the U.S. federal judiciary • Appellate jurisdiction over all U.S. federal cases and state court cases that involve an issue of federal law • Original jurisdiction over a narrow range of cases affecting ambassadors, ministers, and consuls, and in which a state is a party • Lifetime tenure
<p>COURT OF APPEALS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdiction over appeals from final judgments of the superior court, other orders that end litigation at the trial court level and administrative agency decisions; original jurisdiction over personal restraint petitions • Three divisions divided by geography to distribute appeals from WA superior courts • Elected to 6-year terms 	<p>FEDERAL COURT OF APPEALS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdiction over appeals taken from U.S. District Courts in each circuit’s multi-state area • Ten Courts of Appeal hear cases from the multi-state area assigned to that circuit (i.e., the Ninth Circuit, geographically the largest circuit, includes AK, AZ, CA, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, WA, and No. Mariana Is.) • Lifetime tenure
<p>SUPERIOR COURT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superior courts are trial courts of general jurisdiction. They have jurisdiction over civil matters exceeding \$100,000, criminal felony cases, estate and probate, guardianship, family law (including divorce and child custody), mental health commitment, child dependency and parental termination, and juvenile offender proceedings • Hears appeals of cases from district and municipal courts • Elected to 4-year terms 	<p>FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal district courts are courts of law, equity, and admiralty hearing specific civil and criminal cases • Unlike state courts, federal district courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, able only to hear cases that involve disputes between residents of different states where the amount in controversy exceeds \$75,000, issues of federal law, and federal crimes • Federal district courts have discretion to hear issues of civil state law if the claim is supplemental to a claim that confers federal jurisdiction • Lifetime tenure
<p>DISTRICT COURT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District courts are trial courts of limited jurisdiction that hear traffic citations, misdemeanors and gross misdemeanors, civil cases with an amount in controversy less than \$100,000, small claim suits, and traffic infractions • Elected to 4-year terms 	<p>NO FEDERAL EQUIVALENT</p>

In addition to competing with the federal bench for legal talent, state courts must also compete with the private sector. Talented associates at the largest U.S. law firms with judicial clerkship experience (in other words, the attorneys most qualified to become the next generation of judges) already earn a wage comparable to a Washington state judge’s salary. See Appendix A.

Paying state employees competitive salaries ensures that Washingtonians receive high quality services from competent professionals. Hundreds of state employees in professional positions that require levels of education and experience similar to judges, are paid competitive salaries. See state salary information in Appendix B. We realize the Salary Commission has not considered private sector salaries in their previous deliberations. However, in order for the state to recruit and retain legal talent needed to effectively serve an increasingly diverse and complex community, the state must offer a competitive wage commensurate with the skill and experience necessary to carry out the work of a judicial officer.

Figure 1: Comparison Between Federal and Washington State Court Judge Annual Salaries (2024)



Court Innovation and the Changing Roles of Judges

Another reason that recruiting highly qualified individuals to the courts is so important is because the work of being a judge is becoming harder every year. Judges must constantly educate themselves about changing laws and legislative mandates, respond to massive societal changes, and master new technology to continually improve their service to those coming before the court and to the community as a whole.

Today's judges do much more than just prepare for cases, hear arguments, and make decisions. More and more, they are challenged to improve access to justice for the increasing numbers of unrepresented litigants coming before them, and coordinate with social service partners to find effective alternatives to incarceration, when allowed by law.

For example, judges have played an integral role in establishing therapeutic court programs, which have grown substantially in the last several years, from approximately 24 programs prior to 2022 to nearly 80 today, an increase of more than 300 percent. Judges oversee the proceedings in these courts and help establish best practices and guidelines for the service



“Judges are leaders in establishing therapeutic courts and ensuring that they succeed. Therapeutic courts help reduce recidivism — benefiting the local community — while also recognizing the humanity of persons charged with crimes and helping them to address their underlying behavioral health issues. We are proud of the innovative courts established throughout the State of Washington that do this important work.”

JUDGE JENNIFER FORBES
KITSAP COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT

providers working with individuals with mental health issues, behavioral challenges and substance use disorders. With drug possession cases now being heard in district courts, non-traffic misdemeanor case filings are up nearly 10 percent since 2022.

Judges now routinely make use of remote technology to conduct court proceedings. This is an important change, because it has broadened access to justice for our increasingly diverse community: parents and families, people with disabilities, working adults, attorneys and other court staff. But, at the same time, it has placed an even greater administrative burden on Washington judges.

Other changes, such as mandatory notifications to domestic violence victims, updates to civil protection orders, new case management systems, and enhanced security requirements have also placed new and more complex requirements on judges.

Other sectors of the legal community are recognizing and responding to the increasing demands on the profession. Many cities and counties in Washington are struggling to hire and retain public attorneys. In response, new caseload standards for public defenders have been proposed that would lower caseload maximums per attorney. There are no analogous adjustments to judges' caseloads in recognition of the greater administrative and technological burdens they now bear.



“I see people on a daily basis who are experiencing trauma, having the worst day of their lives. I became a judge to help people navigate the justice system, solve their problems and receive justice.”

JUDGE KRISTIN FERRERA
CHELAN COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT

Additionally, societal changes have shifted the court work environment. Increased security issues — both in and out of the courthouse — have real implications for judges and their families. Distrust and disrespect of the judiciary is at an all-time high. Thus, quality of life is no longer a motivator — and can sometimes be an impediment — for those considering service to their community as a judge.

Today, those with the requisite skills and experience to be a good judge have many career options. In addition to commanding higher salaries in the private sector, some prosecuting attorneys and public defenders are earning more than the judges they appear before.⁸ And mediation and arbitration positions have increasingly become a more common and attractive alternative for many attorneys approaching the end of their careers, as these positions often offer both a less demanding workload and significantly higher pay than judges receive. Serving as a judge has become a career unto itself, rather than a career path capstone, and pay must remain competitive to attract qualified attorneys in their peak earning years.

Running for office is another potential hurdle for those considering the bench. While many races are uncontested, any campaign for public office now endures intense personal scrutiny and risks the potential for damaging proliferation of misleading or false information via social media. For those in contested elections, campaigns are significantly more expensive than they have been in the past, and limitations on judicial fundraising means judges can accrue substantial personal expense or debt.

Judicial compensation must continue to move forward to help mitigate these challenges and attract highly qualified candidates who are weighing their career options and wish to serve their community, to consider serving as a judge.

⁸ For example, the top nine attorney positions in the King County Prosecutor's Office all command a higher annual salary than superior court judges, with 2024 salaries ranging from \$225,241 to \$241,873.

6

Increasing Vacancies and Turnover in the Judiciary

Since the last increase to judicial salaries, the judiciary has continued to experience significant turnover, especially in the superior courts. Over half of the superior court judges have been on the bench five years or less, and a quarter of superior court judges have been on the bench less than three years. Table 4 shows judicial vacancies since 2021.

Table 4: Judicial Vacancies

	2021	2022	2023
Supreme Court	0	0	0
Court of Appeals	2	4	2
Superior Court	16	18	14
District Court	18	5	6

As the state population ages, so too do our judges. More than half of all judges in Washington are nearing retirement (55 years old or older). There will continue to be vacancies in the judiciary, making recruitment and retention all the more important. The tables on page 18 show key age and turnover data for each level of court.



“Being a judge has been a great professional experience but as rewarding is the opportunity to contribute to the community off the bench. Teaching civics, educating kids about what judges do and volunteering as a mentor has been some of the most gratifying work.”

JUDGE BILL BOWMAN
COURT OF APPEALS, DIVISION I

Tables 5–8: Key Age and Turnover Data by Court
SUPREME COURT

Total Justices	9
Average Age	65
Median Age	67
Average Years on Court	16
% Greater than 10 Years on Court	67%
% Greater than 15 Years on Court	44%
New Justices Since 1/1/16	2

COURT OF APPEALS

Total Judges	22
Average Age	56
Median Age	57
Average Years on Court	6
% Greater than 10 Years on Court	23%
% Greater than 15 Years on Court	5%
New Judges Since 1/1/16	17

SUPERIOR COURTS

Total Judges	201
Average Age	56
Median Age	55
Average Years on Court	7
% Greater than 10 Years on Court	21%
% Greater than 15 Years on Court	7%
New Judges Since 1/1/16	144

DISTRICT COURTS

Total Judges	119
Average Age	56
Median Age	57
Average Years on Court	8
% Greater than 10 Years on Court	33%
% Greater than 15 Years on Court	13%
New Judges Since 1/1/16	82

Concluding Remarks

We deeply appreciate the time and effort that is spent setting the salaries of elected officials. We hope that with the information in this report, you will continue to endorse parity with federal judge salaries as an important and appropriate goal of the Commission.

Given the state's current economic growth, ongoing inflation concerns, and the need to recruit and retain top legal talent, **we respectfully request a 6.75% salary increase for all elected judges in 2025**, in addition to any cost-of-living adjustments made when you set the salaries for all of Washington's elected officials. This will maintain the gains toward parity with the federal bench. If you have questions or need additional information please contact:

Brittany Gregory

Associate Director, Office of Judicial and Legislative Relations

Administrative Office of the Courts

Brittany.Gregory@courts.wa.gov

360-522-2911

Thank you for consideration of this request.



“Being a judge is the hardest job I’ve ever had, but it’s absolutely the most rewarding. I think most judges I know would say the same. We have the opportunity every day to put the rule of law into practice — not only in the way we explain the law and our decisions but, most importantly, in the way we treat people with respect and compassion.”

JUSTICE DEBRA STEPHENS
WASHINGTON SUPREME COURT

Appendices

APPENDIX A Private Sector Salary Data

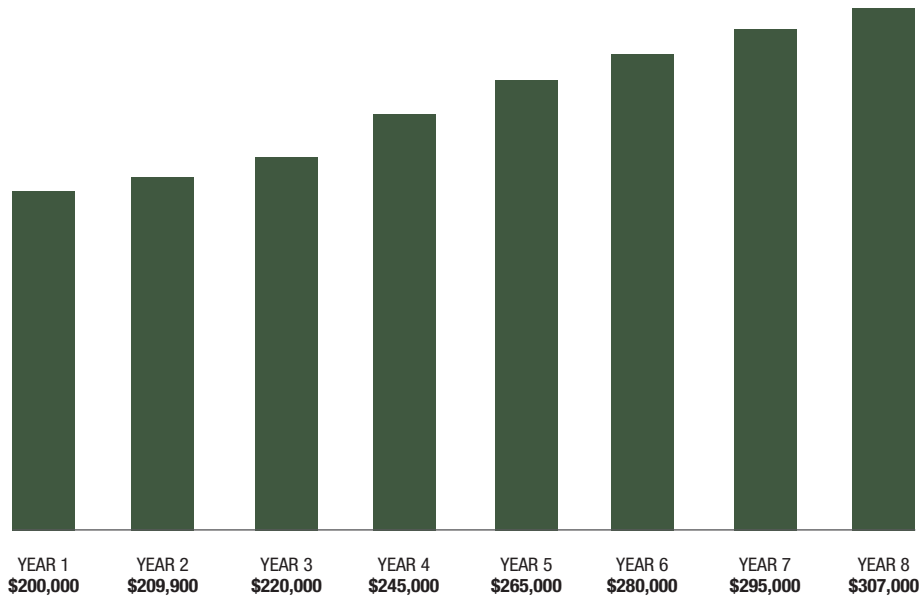
Currently, salaries for judges, who have decades of substantive legal experience, are similar to salaries of third-year associates (attorneys) in large private law firms.

The 2023 National Association for Law Placement Salary Survey shows that the overall median first-year associate base salary as of January 1, 2023 was \$200,000, up \$35,000 (21%) from 2021 with large firms reporting a median starting salary of \$215,000.

The chart below shows median base salaries for associates from all sizes of law firms by year. With an average first-year associate starting salary of \$200,000, associates will receive approximately \$28,000 less than a Washington superior court judge. By year four, that associate will be receiving a larger annual salary than a Washington superior court judge.

Median Base Salaries by Associate Year

Average \$ per year as of January 1, 2023



Source: National Association for Law Placement (NALP) 2023 Salary Survey

APPENDIX B

Public Sector Salary Data

A review of 2022 salary data for Washington state employees shows hundreds of Washington state professional positions that require similar levels of education, specialized expertise, and/or licensure requirements to judges are paid competitive salaries; judges are not. This includes university professors, scientists, investment officers, and doctors. The table below provides some examples.

Snapshot of Actual 2022 State Salaries Paid to Professionals⁹

ACADEMIC

Professor, University of Washington	up to \$904,700
Dean, University of Washington	up to \$639,100
Associate Vice President, University of Washington	up to \$558,100
Research Scientist/Engineer, University of Washington	up to \$292,300

FINANCE/BUSINESS

Senior Investment Officer, State Investment Board	up to \$513,800
VP of Finance, Washington State University	up to \$402,900
State Actuary, State Actuary	up to \$292,700
VP of Public Relations & Marketing, Western Washington University	up to \$253,200

LEGAL/LEGISLATIVE

Senate Secretary, Senate	up to \$208,800
Chief Clerk, House of Representatives	up to \$215,900

MEDICAL

Physician, Social and Health Services	up to \$526,400
Hospital Administrator, University of Washington	up to \$342,900
Registered Nurse 2, University of Washington	up to \$362,200
Diagnostic Medical Sonographer, University of Washington	up to \$250,900

TECHNOLOGY

Chief Information Officer, Washington State University	up to \$333,100
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⁹ County salaries may also be higher. For example, the top nine attorney positions in the King County Prosecutor's Office all command a higher annual salary than superior court judges, with 2024 salaries ranging from \$225,241 to \$241,873.

PUBLISHED BY THE

**Washington Citizens' Commission on
Salaries for Elected Officials**



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