



## Washington State Bar Association

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### Justice Is in Jeopardy in Washington State

*Seattle Washington, December 15, 2004* — “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Martin Luther King Jr., April 16, 1963) — so begins the 78-page “Justice in Jeopardy” report issued today by the Board for Judicial Administration Court Funding Task Force. This historic report, the culmination of two years’ work by more than 100 individuals, points out serious deficiencies in the funding of Washington’s trial courts, and reveals that for Washington state residents, justice is indeed in jeopardy.

The report found that the root of the crisis is due not only to current budget hardships, but an imbalanced funding structure. Washington state pays just 10.6 percent of total judicial and legal service costs, with counties and cities bearing the rest of the financial burden. Compare this to the national state average of 40 percent.

Washington State Bar Association President and Task Force Member **Ronald R. Ward** stated: “Equal access to justice for all is a cornerstone of our democracy. Without adequate, stable, and long-term funding of our courts, we fail our citizens. Frankly, the statistics in our state are appalling. Washington currently ranks 50th out of the 50 states in providing funding for trial courts, prosecution, and indigent defense. Less than three-tenths of one percent (.3%) of our state’s budget goes towards funding our courts. In a state that prides itself on the progressive nature of its society, this is not something Washington can be proud of.”

Ward continued: “The crisis in our courts can produce heartbreaking results. The report calls attention to several, including the death of three-year-old Zy’Nyia Nobles, which may have been prevented if a courtroom had been available to hear her parental-termination proceeding; and crowded court calendars which delayed the trial of a violent felon who was released from prison, raped a young mother, and then crashed into a motorist and killed a bystander.”

Washington's more than 400 trial-court judges adjudicate more than 2.3 million cases each year. Millions of lives are directly affected by court rulings on civil, criminal, and family-law cases, and, as President Ward stated in his column in the December 2004 issue of *Washington State Bar News*: "The courts maintain societal rationality, stability, and order. In a state, national, and global society increasingly devoid of all three, it is abundantly clear that we need to rethink and reorder both our priorities and our values vis-à-vis the justice system."

The Task Force was chaired by former Washington State Bar Association President **M. Wayne Blair**. Work Group co-chairs were **Cheryl Bleakney**, of the League of Women Voters of Washington; King County Bar Association President **John Cary**; Snohomish County Superior Court Judge **Stephen Dwyer**; King County Superior Court Judge **Deborah Fleck**; University of Washington School of Law Dean Emeritus **Roland Hjorth**; Seattle attorney **J. Kirkham Johns**; Washington State Bar Association Executive Director **M. Janice Michels**; Judge **Ann Schindler**, of Division I of the Court of Appeals; Washington State Bar Association President **Ronald Ward**; and Chelan County District Court Judge **Thomas Warren**.

An implementation committee led by Washington State Supreme Court Chief Justice **Gerry Alexander**, King County Superior Court Judge **Deborah Fleck**, and Task Force Chair **Wayne Blair** will work with state and local leaders during the upcoming legislative session, in an effort to begin reform of the court funding system addressing what the Task Force found to be the three most critical needs in the justice system: funding of Washington's trial courts, indigent defense management and funding, and provision of adequate civil legal-aid services.

The full report is available on the Courts' website at [www.courts.wa.gov](http://www.courts.wa.gov), and there is also a link on the Washington State Bar Association's website at [www.wsba.org](http://www.wsba.org).

The Washington State Bar Association is a private, nonprofit organization authorized by the Washington State Supreme Court to license the state's 28,400 lawyers. The WSBA both regulates lawyers under the authority of the Court and serves its members as a professional association — all without public funding. As a regulatory agency, it administers the bar exam, provides record-keeping and licensing functions, and administers the lawyer discipline program. As a professional association, the WSBA provides continuing legal education for attorneys, in addition to numerous other educational and member-service activities.