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Ernie Chambers says he will no longer block funding for extra juvenile judge in Douglas County

By Joe Duggan / World-Herald Bureau Jan 19, 2017 Updated 9 hrs ago



JAMES R. BURNETT/

State Sen. Ernie Chambers

LINCOLN — Douglas County finally may get another juvenile court judge, long a top priority of a state judicial commission.

In fact, the county might even get two new judges.

State Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha announced Wednesday that he will drop his longtime opposition to funding for a sixth judge for the state's most overworked juvenile court. Chambers blocked previous bills to pressure court officials to remove Judge Elizabeth Crnkovich, who the senator said has generated multiple complaints of rude, demeaning and threatening behavior during her more than 20 years as a judge.

Chambers said Wednesday it would be irrational to allow his objections to one judge continue to increase caseloads and lengthen pretrial detention for children waiting to appear in court.

"We have to do what can be done, because we cannot always do what we think ought to be done," he said.

A message left for the judge late Wednesday afternoon was not immediately returned.

In a past interview, she said she's the target of a personal vendetta. She acknowledged being stern and demanding and holding children accountable, which she suggested makes her unpopular.

Chambers said he has reported Crnkovich's behavior to the Nebraska Supreme Court, which has the authority to remove a judge. The court has taken no public action against her.

Crnkovich also has received among the lowest rankings in a judicial evaluation survey conducted once every two years by the Nebraska State Bar Association. In 2014, more than half of the attorneys who responded said she should not be retained in office.

Nonetheless, 63 percent of voters cast ballots in favor of retaining Crnkovich in the November election.

The controversy came up Wednesday in the Legislature's Judiciary Committee, which held a public hearing on a bill that would provide funding for a juvenile court judge. Legislative Bill 10 was introduced by Sen. Bob Krist of Omaha.

Among those to testify in support of the bill was Joy Suder, an Omaha lawyer who practices juvenile law and represented the Nebraska State Bar Association. She said in 2016, Douglas County juvenile judges handled 426 filings each, compared with 307 per judge in Sarpy County and 266 in Lancaster.

The higher caseloads lead to hearing delays that can drag out for weeks, she said. She said a review found 10 cases of children who were held in detention for days or weeks only to be released when they finally were seen by a judge.

"These delays have real-life consequences for children and families," she said.

Vaughn Crowell of Omaha testified against the bill, mostly on the basis of cost. He urged senators to seek other ways to lighten the caseloads other than adding another judge.

The fiscal note attached to the bill estimated the state's cost at \$290,000 starting in fiscal year 2019, which includes salaries and benefits for a judge and court reporter.

Douglas County officials have not provided yet their own cost estimate to the Legislature. Last year, however, the county estimated it would cost \$1.9 million over two years to add a judge. The figure included salaries for support staff, an additional prosecutor and public defender and a minimum of \$850,000 in remodeling expenses for more court space.

Chambers said based on the caseload statistics, he thinks the county needs two additional judges. He will attempt to amend Krist's bill to add the second judge.

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MORE INFORMATION

LB10 (/legislature/bills/LB10): Increase number of judges of the separate juvenile court as prescribed

Introduced by Sen. Bob Krist (/legislature/senators/bob-krist) on Jan. 5, 2017

Status: Referral

Learn more about this bill » (/legislature/bills/LB10)

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