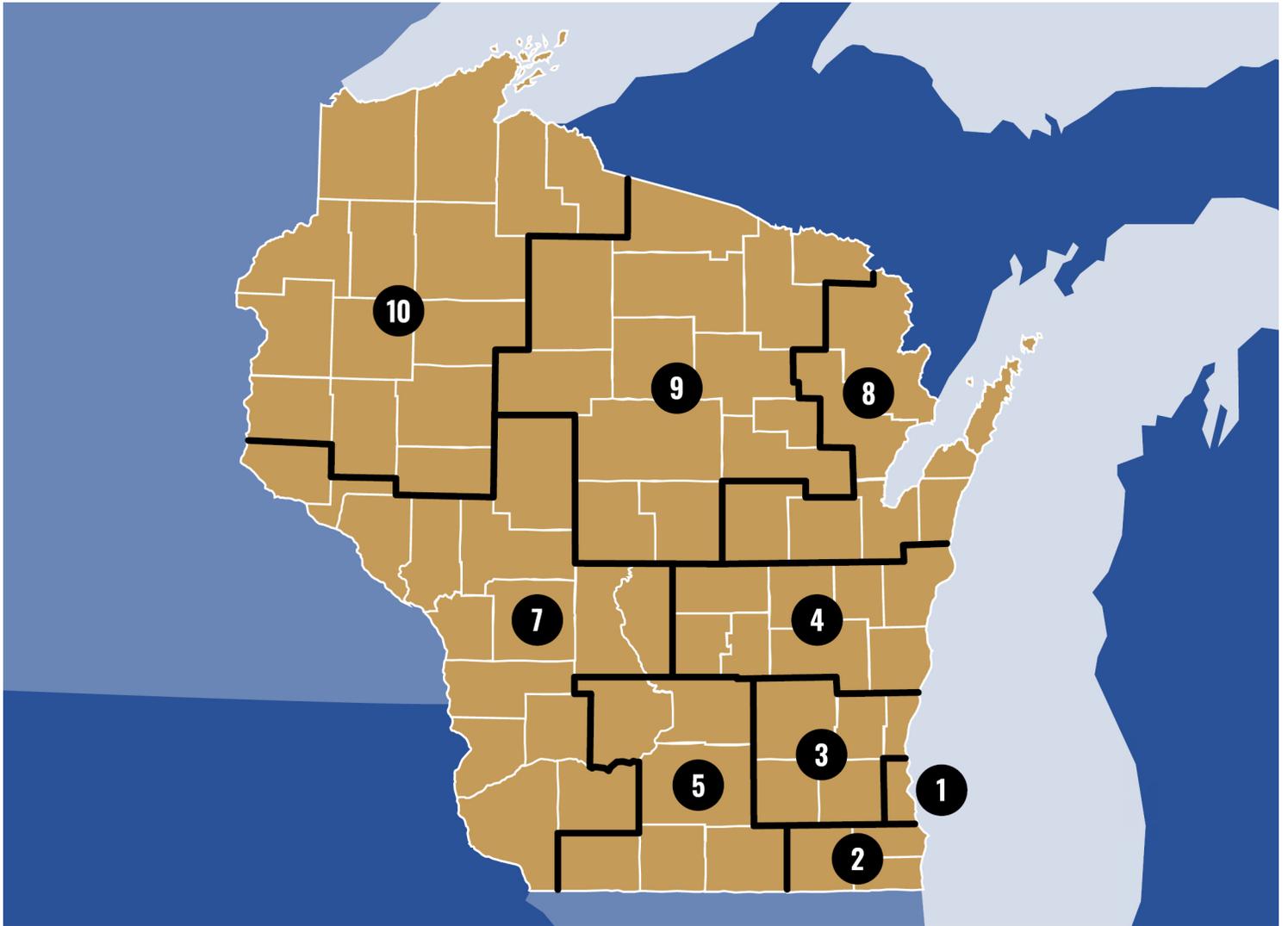


# CIRCUIT COURTS



## WISCONSIN COURT SYSTEM

*Article VII of the Wisconsin Constitution, as amended in April 1977, creates the circuit court as a single-level, unified trial court with original jurisdiction in all civil and criminal matters within the state.*

As of August 1st, 2025, Wisconsin had 261 circuit court judges. Under the state constitution, circuits are to be as compact and convenient as practicable and bound by county lines. With the exception of six counties that

are paired together, each county constitutes one circuit, comprised of one or more branches. The six paired counties are Buffalo and Pepin; Florence and Forest; and Shawano and Menominee. The first two pairs are each staffed by a single judge who travels between the courthouses, while both judges for Shawano and Menominee County are located in Shawano. Of the remaining circuits, 23 have a single judge, and the largest circuit is Milwaukee County with 47 judges.

Circuit court judges are elected to six-year terms in nonpartisan spring elections. Vacancies are filled by gubernatorial appointment, and the appointee is required to stand for election to a full six-year term the following spring.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE CIRCUIT COURTS INTO DISTRICTS**

The state's 72 counties are grouped into 9 judicial administrative districts. Districts range in size and geography from District One, consisting of only Milwaukee County, to District Ten, consisting of 14 counties covering 12,633 square miles. In each district, there is a chief judge appointed by the Supreme Court. The chief judge, who may serve up to three consecutive two-year terms, supervises and directs the administration of the district. In carrying out these duties, the chief judge is charged by Supreme Court Rule to cooperate with the Director of State Courts.

Each chief judge appoints a deputy chief judge to act in the event of their absence or unavailability. A professional district court administrator and a court management assistant — both employees of the Director of State Courts and permanently located in the district — assist the chief judge. The chief judges meet about nine times a year as a committee — as do the district court administrators.

Clerks of circuit court are independently elected constitutional officers who work in close cooperation with the chief judges, district court administrators, and central staff of the Director of State Courts Office. The clerks provide management and administrative leadership in each circuit and are indispensable to the effective functioning of Wisconsin's circuit courts.

## **FUNDING FOR THE CIRCUIT COURTS**

Wisconsin's circuit courts are funded with a combination of state and county money. State funds are used to pay the salaries and fringe benefits of judges; official and district court reporters; and reserve judges (former judges who are assigned to hear cases when the need arises). The state also funds travel and training for judges. By law, counties are responsible for all other operating costs.

The Director of State Courts makes state payments to counties for circuit court costs.

For the 2025-26 fiscal year, the court system budget is \$185.1 million annually, of which \$165.5 million is tax dollars. Funding for the state court system accounts for

less than one percent of the total tax dollars spent on state government.

## **CIRCUIT COURTS CASE FILINGS**

In 2024, there were 723,647 cases filed in Wisconsin's circuit courts. In terms of court workload statewide, it is estimated that criminal matters take 51 percent of available circuit court time; civil matters, including family and small claims, take 34 percent; and the remaining 15 percent covers traffic, juvenile, and probate cases.

## **COURT SYSTEM MANAGEMENT**

The Wisconsin State Constitution designates the Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court as the administrative head of the judicial system. The Chief Justice exercises their administrative authority pursuant to procedures adopted by the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court established the Director of State Courts Office. The Director is hired by and serves at the pleasure of the Supreme Court, under the direction of the Chief Justice. The Director, as the chief non-judicial officer of the court system, has responsibility for the overall management of the judicial system.

The Director and central staff work with the chief judges, district court administrators, clerks of court, registers in probate, juvenile court clerks, and others to continually assess the management of the trial courts; relay and implement Supreme Court policies; and assist in policy development.

Chief judges and district court administrators, with the participation of central staff where appropriate or needed, meet regularly with circuit court judges, clerks of circuit court, and others at district meetings to identify issues, resolve problems, and suggest initiatives for the improvement of the Wisconsin Court System.