



WISCONSIN COURT SYSTEM

CIRCUIT COURTS OF WISCONSIN

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 1, 2023, 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 & Pepin, Florence & Forest, and Shawano & Menominee. The first two pairs are each staffed by a single judge who travels between the courthouses. Both judges for 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 non-partisan spring elections. Vacancies are filled by gubernatorial appointment, and the appointee is required to stand for election to a full six-year term the next spring.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CIRCUIT COURTS INTO DISTRICTS

The state's 92 counties are grouped into nine 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

The circuit courts are funded with a combination of state and county money. State funds are used to pay the salaries and fringe benefits of the 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, the counties are responsible for all other operating costs.

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

In fiscal year 2023-24, the Wisconsin State Court system spent \$172.8 million. Almost 88.8% of that comes from tax dollars, and most of the remainder is from fees and assessments. 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 2023, there were 703,253 cases opened in Wisconsin's circuit courts. In terms of court workload statewide, it is estimated that

criminal matters take 50% of available circuit court time; civil matters, including family and small claims, take 34%; and the remaining 16% covers traffic, juvenile and probate cases.

COURT SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

The 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 has established the Director of State Courts Office. The Director is hired by and serves at the pleasure of the Supreme Court. 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.

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