



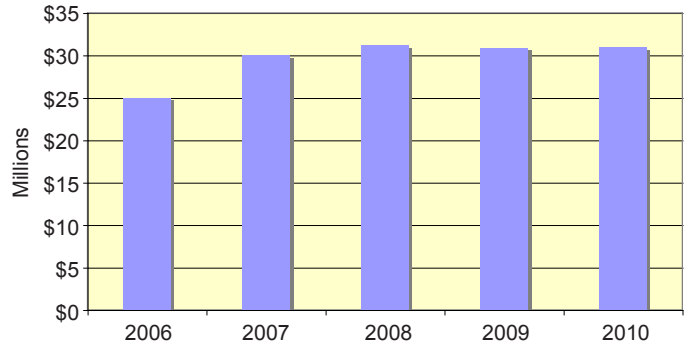
Cracks in the Public Structures

Vermont Judiciary

The Judicial Branch (courts) of state government was established under the Constitution to protect individual rights and to ensure everyone their day in court. In addition to providing Vermonters with a place to resolve legal disputes, the Judiciary helps to provide balance of state powers as one of the three co-equal branches of state government: Vermont’s Courts, Governor, and Legislature.

The Judiciary has been subject to budget cuts in recent years like the rest of state government in response to the economic recession and reduced state revenues. **Figure 1** shows the general fund budget for the Judiciary for the five most recent fiscal years. After reaching a peak in fiscal 2008, funding has dropped and then leveled off.

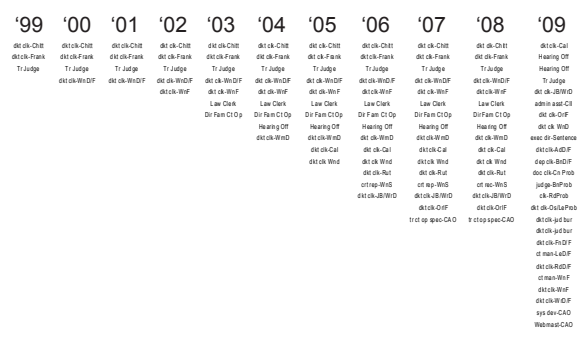
Figure 1. Judiciary’s General Fund Budget, FY06 - FY10



While level funding may seem like a reasonable position in the current economic climate, in fact, level funding results in cuts in services that the Judiciary is able to deliver. Over the years, the Judiciary has faced cost increases from:

- general inflation,
- pay increases for staff,
- new initiatives by the other two branches of government,
- changes in accounting practices that put costs on the Judiciary, such as fee for state-owned space, that were previously not in the Judiciary budget.

Figure 2. Vacancies by Fiscal Year



As a result, the Judiciary has had to leave staff positions vacant over the past decade. **Figure 2** shows the number of vacant positions for each fiscal year (each column is a series of abbreviated job titles). In fiscal 2009 there were 25 vacant positions, more than eight times the number a decade earlier. The Judiciary is using less expensive and less experienced temporary employees to help fill the gap.

Some of the consequences to Vermonters from these cuts:

- The courts are closed 2.5 days each month
- District (criminal) and Family Court cases are getting resolved more slowly
- Cases requiring longer hearings are being scheduled farther into the future
- Judges particularly report inadequate time for cases involving juveniles
- Courts are not open when people need access to them

Source: Court Administrator