Wisconsin Court System

Judicial System Overview

Supreme Court
- 7 justices
- Justices elected statewide to ten-year non-partisan terms
- Court of last resort with appellate jurisdiction over all Wisconsin courts
- During the 2021-22 term, the Court reviewed 567 petitions for review, of which 49 were granted

Court of Appeals
- Intermediate appellate court created in 1978; designed to handle 1,200 cases per year
- Four districts handle appeals of rulings from the lower courts in a county or group of counties
- Composed of 16 judges in four locations: Madison (5), Milwaukee (4), Waukesha (4), and Wausau (3)
- Judges are elected to six-year terms in district wide non-partisan elections
- In 2021, the Court of Appeals handled 2,206 cases

Circuit Courts
- Single-level trial (circuit) court since 1978
- 257 circuit court judges in 72 counties
- Judges elected for six-year non-partisan terms in spring elections
- Milwaukee County is the largest jurisdiction with 47 judges
- 25 counties have one judge
- 6 counties are paired together, with one circuit comprised of one or two branches shared by two counties

Tribal Courts
- 11 tribal courts (10 with appellate process)
- Generally have jurisdiction over civil and tribal law matters
- State courts have jurisdiction over criminal matters

Municipal Courts
- 227 municipal courts in Wisconsin
- 229 municipal court judges
- Milwaukee has the largest number of municipal courts with three full-time judges
- Madison has the only other full-time municipal court, created in 1992

Administrative/Management Structure

Article VII, section 4 (3) of the Wisconsin Constitution provides that the chief justice of the Supreme Court shall be the administrative head of the judicial system and shall exercise this administrative authority pursuant to procedures adopted by the Supreme Court.

Wisconsin State Statute (758.19) and Supreme Court Rule (SCR Chapter 70) provide for the Director of State Courts Office. SCR 70.01 makes the director the chief non-judicial officer in the court system.

The relationship created is analogous to a corporation with a chairman of the board (the chief justice), a board of directors (the Supreme Court), and a chief operating officer (the director of state courts).

For administrative purposes, the circuit courts are divided into nine judicial administrative districts. The districts range in size from one county (Milwaukee) in District 1, to 13 counties in District 10, which encompasses the northwestern part of the state.

The Supreme Court selects a chief judge in each district to supervise court administration in each district. A chief judge may serve up to three, two-year terms, or more at the pleasure of the Court. Each district also has a district court administrator who is a permanent employee of the Director of State Courts Office. The district court administrator is assisted by a district court administrative assistant, and the office is generally located in the largest city in the judicial district.

Employees

As of August 2022, the state court system had 843.35 full-time equivalent positions including all 280 judges and justices.

Budget

In the 2020-21 state fiscal year, the Wisconsin court system spent $151 million, $130.8 million of which came from tax dollars.