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 2018-2019 term, the Court reviewed 609 petitions for review, of which 53 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 2019, the Court of Appeals handled 2,252 cases

Circuit Courts
- ❑ Single-level trial (circuit) court since 1978
- ❑ 249 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
- ❑ 30 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
- ❑ 230 municipal courts in Wisconsin
- ❑ 232 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 November 2020, the state court system had 838.75 full-time equivalent positions including all 272 judges and justices.

Budget

In the 2018-2019 state fiscal year, the Wisconsin court system spent $143.6 million, $126.9 million of which came from tax dollars.