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**JUSTICE INITIATIVES STATEMENT ON THE NORTH CAROLINA BUDGET AS IT PERTAINS TO THE COURTS:**

Public confidence in our courts depends on giving those courts the resources they need to efficiently, effectively and fairly dispose of the cases brought before them. These resources include well maintained infrastructure, modern technology, and a well-educated and compensated work force. We are pleased that the new North Carolina budget heeds in part the words of Chief Justice Mark Martin in his State of the Judiciary speech delivered to the General Assembly on March 4, 2015. In that speech, Chief Justice Martin remarked on the hardships faced in the third branch of North Carolina's government after years of budget cuts. Importantly, Chief Justice Martin urged lawmakers that "If we are to right this ship, the Judicial Branch will need sufficient investment from this General Assembly to ensure that we adequately **fund the basic operations** of the court system, provide **modest pay increases** for our personnel, and move forward with critical **technology infrastructure** to support the rapidly-increasing demands on our county courthouses across the State."

The budget as it now stands does take on these calls for action.

First, on basic operations, and as the Chief Justice noted, the court operations budget was "under tremendous stress," and that the judiciary had to rely on dollars saved from leaving positions vacant in order to cover "basic functions such as payments to jurors, court reporters, and expert witnesses." Fortunately, the new budget does appropriate funds to pay for jurors, expert witnesses and interpreters, and hopefully this will allow the courts to move forward with some new restored staffing now that vacancies need not be unnecessarily prolonged to pay for other critical court needs.

Second, on the issue of modest pay increases, there was some positive movement for pay increases for magistrates and clerk's office personnel. This is a great start, but the General Assembly needs to understand that the justice system has many other employees who are also suffering under years of stagnant salaries and increased workloads due to chronic understaffing. In fact, on the issue of understaffing, there is no significant movement in the budget. As Chief Justice Martin pointed out in his State of the Judiciary speech, the NC Judicial branch has eliminated so many positions in past years that there is currently a workforce deficit in courthouses across our State of over 500 employees. The new budget, regrettably, does not allow for dealing with that understaffing in any significant way.

Finally, on the issue of technology, Chief Justice Martin noted that the judiciary was creating a "strategic action plan outlining how to implement e-filing and virtual courtroom technology in all 100 county courthouses." The current

budget does provide some funds for further development of the technological strategic plan. We are pleased that the General Assembly appreciates the tremendous impact that technology will have in the long run in ensuring more efficient case processing and case management and we look forward to a sustained commitment in the future to implement the judiciary's technology plan.

All in all, while the budget is a significant step in addressing the dire situation in the North Carolina court system, Justice Initiatives is committed to advocating for continued restoration of judicial funding. As Chief Justice Martin noted in his March 4<sup>th</sup> speech, "even before the start of the Great Recession, in 2007, North Carolina ranked 49th out of 50 states in terms of per capita spending on the judicial branch. Five years later, in 2012, we ranked 45th out of the 50 states." Our goal is to continue our efforts to educate the public and justice system stakeholders about the needs of the North Carolina court system. Our vision is a justice system that is fair, efficient and respected, and one that works for everyone. That vision requires reversing what was a race to the bottom in court funding to a meaningful plan to reinvigorate North Carolina's courts and maintain public confidence in justice for all.

### **About Justice Initiatives**

Justice Initiatives, Inc. was formed in 2004 by a group of civic leaders, lawyers, business owners and concerned citizens in North Carolina who understand the rule of law is the bedrock of our civilized society, that a healthy court system is critical to safeguarding this foundation and that the effective and efficient administration of justice is essential to a strong, prosperous and vibrant community.

We develop programming to address the deficits in the public's understanding and appreciation for the rule of law and the role of courts in our republican form of government. We demonstrate the interconnectedness between each individual's quality of life and the courts' ability to fairly adjudicate legal rights. We seek to ensure that the judicial branch receives the funding it needs to provide timely access to justice for all and defend against policies that undermine the independence, fairness, or integrity of the courts. We raise money to use as seed funding to initiate smarter and innovative judicial programs and services that build public trust and confidence in our courts and we study new ideas about justice and our courts with our academic partners.

To learn more please visit [www.justiceinitiatives.org](http://www.justiceinitiatives.org) or email [administration@justiceinitiatives.org](mailto:administration@justiceinitiatives.org).