

## **Governing Alaska**

### **The Court System**

In some states, judges are elected by the voters. The framers of Alaska's constitution considered a system like that, but rejected it. They felt prevailing sentiment was that judges who had to run for office would not necessarily be the best qualified people to serve.

Instead of running for office, judges are selected through an appointment process. An impartial group reviews candidates and submits names to the governor, who makes the final decision.

Judges have to stand for election in one sense. Periodically their names are placed on a ballot and the voters decide if they should be kept or not. Most of the time, the voters choose to retain judges.

Unlike many other jobs in state government, there is mandatory retirement at age 70 for judges. Judges may continue past 70 for temporary assignments and they often do.

The Alaska judiciary is a unified system, where in which all the courts operate under the same rules and are funded by the legislature. Alaska does not have municipal or city courts. There are four levels in the state court system. The district court handles relatively minor criminal cases and civil cases where less than \$50,000 is at stake. There are 17 district judges across the state - two in Southeast, three in Fairbanks and twelve in Southcentral Alaska.

The next level up is the superior court, which handles more serious criminal matters and civil disputes over totals greater than \$50,000. There are 34 superior court judges - five in Southeast, three in the Northwest, 19 in Southcentral and seven in the Interior.

Decisions from the lower courts may be appealed to the three-judge Court of Appeals set up by the legislature in 1980. The highest court is the Alaska Supreme Court, which has five judges and is responsible for hearing appeals from the lower courts.

About once a month the Supreme Court hears cases in Anchorage. It

travels to Fairbanks and Juneau about four times a year and to other locations when there is a need..

The Alaska Supreme Court and superior court were written into the Constitution while the legislature added the district court and appeals court. The chief justice of the Supreme Court is the chief officer of the court system. A professional administrator handles the operational details of the court system.

Links:

Introduction to the court system  
How do people become judges?  
What is a court case?  
Legal research