

Judicial Branch Courtroom Safety and Security Budget Proposal – FY2024/2025

The Judicial Branch, after hearing concerns from judges, staff, and attorneys, created a security task force with representation from the state, local and private sectors. The Committee organized its work along the 10 elements for court security planning established by the National Center for State Courts.

This is the second statewide review of courthouse and courtroom security. The original work in 2006 resulted in a set of implemented recommendations and one-time-only funding upgrades to county security infrastructure.

A 2021 judicial survey demonstrated in sharp focus a significant need for improved equipment and vigilance in court security. Respondents unanimously believed improvements were needed for both the protection of the public and court staff and officials. Similar results were captured in a survey of attorneys conducted by the State Bar of Montana.

The Committee received assistance from Randy Middlebrook, CPD, a protective security advisor with Homeland Security. Mr. Middlebrook was gracious enough to conduct five high-level security assessments in county courthouses of various sizes to provide an overview of needs throughout Montana. The assessments helped to conceptualize a path forward. Many outstanding issues exist in courthouses throughout Montana including a need for extensive emergency planning, training, and appropriate equipment in appropriate locations.

Long-term discussions around courthouse security and a minimum level of effort are also necessary, but beyond the scope of this budget proposal. The security committee must continue those discussions.

The budget proposal is based on the final committee report and options provided via the Homeland Security reviews. This proposal is necessary to make Montana's courts a safe place for the public, court employees, and elected officials.

Courts, law enforcement and county officials are also being asked to implement immediately the no-cost recommendations. While extra attention and low-cost measures will help improve security, it will not happen in full without funding.

In 2007, the Legislature provided funding for security and equipment for county courthouses. The funding provided necessary infrastructure, but this proposal suggests a different approach to ensure more long-term solutions to an increasingly complex problem.

Proposal Details:

1. \$300,000¹ for an in-depth statewide security and safety review of courthouses:
 - a. 56 District Court courthouses in Montana
 - b. Assumes an average cost of \$5,000 per courthouse for a comprehensive review, which would include specific recommendations for personnel and equipment.
 - c. Each security assessment must include the county sheriff, the county disaster and emergency coordinator, and judges or designees.

2. \$200,000 to purchase equipment or fund building/parking lot modifications as outlined by the professional security review. (It is likely additional resources would be needed in future sessions.) Purchasing equipment without a security review will result in equipment that doesn't make sense, is not a long-term solution, or doesn't address the greatest need. Thus, purchases or building modifications would happen after the professional security assessment. This assumes shared responsibility with counties.

3. \$75,000 to procure training for all court staff including local government employees, who work with the court system. Training would focus on de-escalation and response to security threats. The standardized training would supplement local training offered by law enforcement.

Total (OTO): \$575,000 over the biennium

¹ Funding remaining from this item would rollover into item 2 – courthouse security purchases.