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## NEWS RELEASE

### **Budget Shortfall Forces Hiring Freeze and Operational Changes at Hennepin County Courts**

***For Immediate Release***

**Minneapolis (November 28, 2007)** –The Fourth Judicial District, serving Hennepin County, today announced an immediate hiring freeze along with changes in court hours and operations in response to an anticipated budget shortfall. The Court projects a \$1.4 million budget deficit for its current fiscal year which ends in June 2008.

“Hennepin County Courts have placed a high focus on access and public service,” said Lucy Wieland, Chief Judge, Fourth Judicial District- Hennepin County District Court. “Unfortunately, budget realities won’t allow us to continue that level of service. We don’t like it, but, we don’t have a choice.”

The hiring freeze will result in staff shortages throughout the court, requiring a reduction in services.

Here are some of the changes that will impact the public:

- Walk-in counter and telephone services will be curtailed Wednesday afternoons, 1:30-4:30 pm, beginning January 2, 2008. For example, citizens will no longer be able to pay traffic tickets in person, request copies of court files, or receive updates on the status of cases via telephone on Wednesday afternoons at all locations. Court hearings and trials will not be affected and will continue as usual.
- Conciliation Court calendars will be reduced by one-third, resulting in some delay in scheduling hearings.
- A program that provides supervised visitation services to non-custodial parents and their children in Family Court will be halted. Last year, 110 families utilized the program. Such families will now need to privately contract for such services.

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- The court will no longer provide arbitrators for Alternative Dispute Resolution in Civil Court. When Hennepin County Courts began this program these services were not readily available in the marketplace. Today they are, and the Fourth Judicial District is the only district in the state that provides such a program.
- The court will no longer conduct criminal record checks for the public; they will be referred to the public access website where this information is available.

“Our options in responding to this projected shortfall are rather limited,” noted Judge Wieland. “Costs associated with staff salaries and benefits account for eighty-five percent of our budget, and most of our programs are legislatively mandated.” Additional changes in operations include restrictions on travel, training, and reduction or elimination of contracts with outside vendors. These changes are estimated to save \$675,000 by next June. The hiring freeze on administrative positions will save another projected \$725,000.

Several factors are contributing to the anticipated shortfall. The Hennepin County Court received \$900,000 less than its budget required to cover salary and fringe benefit increases and funding for positions required by a new information system. Some of the new money that was appropriated to the state’s trial courts for the Fiscal Year 2008-2009 biennium was earmarked for special purposes, making it unavailable to cover increases in basic operating costs like employee salaries and insurance. The District had hoped to rely on vacancy savings to help cover its shortfall. However, year-to-date vacancy rates have been much lower than expected.

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The State of Minnesota’s Fourth Judicial District serves only Hennepin County and is the state’s largest trial court with more than 750,000 cases received annually. The mission of the Fourth Judicial District is to provide a system of justice that assures equal access for the fair and timely resolution of cases and controversies. For more information, visit the website at [www.mncourts.gov/district/4/](http://www.mncourts.gov/district/4/).