



**Hon. Lawrence P. Riff**  
SUPERVISING JUDGE OF THE CIVIL DIVISION



**Hon. Yvette Verastegui**  
SUPERVISING JUDGE OF THE CRIMINAL DIVISION

## Presiding Judge Sergio C. Tapia II

### THE NEW PRESIDING JUDGE'S VISION FOR LA COUNTY'S CIVIL AND CRIMINAL COURTS

On January 1, 2025, Judge Sergio C. Tapia II became the first Presiding Judge (PJ) of the Superior Court of Los Angeles County (Court) of Latino heritage to have been elected by a majority of the judges of the consolidated Superior Court since court unification in 2000. He assumes the job after serving as Assistant Presiding Judge for the preceding two years and, before that, as a Supervising Judge of the Criminal Division, the Court's largest.

The PJ's job touches and concerns all aspects of the Court's enormous mandate and footprint. The statistics are well-known but warrant repeating here. The Court is the largest consolidated trial court in the U.S.; has 582 authorized judicial officer positions, a little more than 30% of all judicial officers in California; serves more than 10 million residents of LA County; operates out of 36 courthouses spread over 4,000 square miles; employs more than 4,600 non-judicial officer employees; and has an annual budget in excess of one billion dollars. In the last fiscal year, the Court had 1.251 million new court filings; summoned 2.4 million jurors; held 2,407 jury trials; and conducted 157,000 instances of service for self-represented litigants.

California Rule of Court 10.603 uniquely reposes in the PJs of the 58 counties important duties and responsibilities. The PJ's day is characterized by encountering a broad spectrum of ideas, opportunities and problems from which the PJ must make dozens of decisions. Judge Tapia's leadership style is informed by his years as a former public defender, adjunct professor of law, legal services attorney, and criminal judge. But in addition to a leadership style, a PJ must have a set of guiding principles to coherently lead in these circumstances. Judge Tapia identified six.

#### 1. Enhancing public confidence

First, to enhance the public's confidence in the court, our system of



justice and the rule of law: "Our public institutions are suffering from the public's eroding trust, and that is a real threat to our democracy," Judge Tapia said. "Everything we do – in the judicial departments, in the clerk's offices, in Self-Help Centers, with our interpreters, in the hallways of our courthouses – adds to or detracts from this public confidence. My vision is that we must be bolstering that confidence constantly with no backsliding. This is job one. A people confident in their system of justice and the rule of law enjoys a high degree of freedom and liberty. But when that confidence dwindles, doubt and insecurity take root with the associated risks of self-help and even violence."

#### 2. Providing equal access to justice

Second, to live up to the Court's creed as expressed in its mission statement: "The Court is dedicated to serving our community by providing equal access to justice through the fair, timely and efficient resolution of all cases." Judge Tapia noted, "This mission statement is simple, clear, and profound. When we meet its demands and aspirations, we go a long way to building and sustaining public confidence in our court and the rule of law. Our mission

statement is posted in many courthouse hallways; I hope we all – judicial officers, court employees, attorneys and the public – read it and reflect on it often."

#### 3. Operating in a people-centric mode

Third, to operate in a people-centric mode, Judge Tapia observed, "People-centric leadership' focuses on putting people at the center of an organization's priorities and strategies. This recognizes the value of our judicial officers and employees as the Court's most important assets and permits collaboration as the best method of process improvement."

#### 4. Embracing transformative innovation

Fourth, to embrace transformative innovation: In 2025, Judge Tapia noted, the Court faces unprecedented challenges for which the Court has unprecedented tools, principally in terms of data analytics, to bring to bear. The question, Judge Tapia said, is whether we have the will for continuous innovation. "For many years, the Court operated in a mode of institutional inertia, often defaulting to 'that's the way we've always done it.' COVID was a wake-up call and a shock because we had no choice but to undertake transformative innovation. We did, we saw that we can, and we are today far better for it. Our court's leadership team is courageous in its embrace of change. They have my support," he added.

#### 5. Making data-informed decisions

Fifth, and speaking of data, to make data-informed decisions: Leaders have intuitions and gut-feels which are often worthy of careful consideration. But in an institution as large and with functions as varied as in the Court, Judge Tapia believes court leaders can often see trends and truths in data streams that are otherwise invisible to them in their day-to-day lives. He thinks that it is important to ask the right questions both of our guts

and of our data sets. Judge Tapia said, “The Court has data scientists in its employ, and we are consulting with other such scientists at the RAND Corporation and Stanford University. We have vast amounts of data available to help us make good decisions. For example, given the scarce resources we must carefully marshal, where and when should we – and why should we – open a new courtroom in a given discipline? But ‘data-informed’ is not ‘data-obsessed.’ Data and their interpretation provide us important tools which we can meld with our people-centric decision-making approach.”

### 6. Valuing transparency and requiring accountability

Sixth, to value transparency and to require accountability: Judge Tapia believes that transparency and accountability, as relates to court leadership, are two sides of the same coin. Transparency equates to fairness, and fairness promotes confidence and esprit d’corps. Accountability means owning decisions made and their outcomes. “I’ve asked my administration’s leadership team to hold me to my promises of transparency and accountability, and I’ve told them I will be expecting the same from them,” Judge Tapia said.

### The Civil Division

The Civil Division of the Court has more than 150 judicial officers handling disputes ranging from simple, straightforward small claims to the most complex, sophisticated business disputes and mass torts in California. “And each dispute, no matter its size or complexity, is important to the litigants, each of whom is deserving of our best efforts,” Judge Tapia observed. He added, “I invite the public to come to any of our small claims departments. They will see self-represented litigants, often of modest economic circumstances and many speaking languages other than English, who are ardently seeking justice for a perceived wrong – and they are there because they believe there is the possibility of justice in our courts.

They are right and we cannot, and will not, let them down.”

In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the Court had 260,000 new civil filings, including significant increases in unlawful detainer and unlimited civil actions. “In just one year, civil filings increased by 20%,” Judge Tapia noted. He added, “That places a strain on our existing structures and operations in that division. We cannot meet the challenge without significant innovation and new modes of thinking.” Judge Tapia has appointed Judge Lawrence Riff as Supervising Judge and Judge Virginia Keeny as Assistant Supervising Judge of the Civil Division as of January 1, 2025. Both were veteran civil practitioners and trial lawyers in the LA legal community before their appointments to the bench. Since becoming judges, both have long service in the Civil Division (Judge Riff in small claims, civil trial court, Independent Calendar (I/C) court, Asbestos Court and Complex Civil; Judge Keeny in a civil trial court and an I/C court), and in court leadership.

Judge Tapia said, “The goal posts are clearly marked as set out in our mission statement: equal access to justice, and fair, timely and efficient resolution of cases. That’s how we will be measuring success in our Civil Division and elsewhere.” Key metrics include the proportion of civil case types meeting Judicial Council of California disposition time standards; the duration between the filing of a motion and the hearing of that motion in the trial departments; the number of hearings and “judicial touches” between a case filing and its disposition; and the ability of self-represented litigants to access assistance in the Court’s Self-Help centers or otherwise, and those litigants’ overall facility in meaningfully participating in their cases. On this latter point, Judge Tapia observed, “This is an example of our court’s commitment to ‘meeting people where they are.’ This means making sure our procedures are comprehensible for self-represented litigants, and our collaborating with justice partners and other stakeholders to support more innovative ways of accessing justice.”

“There’s much more we can do and nothing is off the table for examination,” Judge Tapia said. For example, he noted, for the more than 72,000 unlimited cases resolved in 2023, the average number of hearings was 9.4. While some 9,000 had only one hearing, 290 had more than 100 hearings. “A court hearing is a valuable and scarce resource,” Judge Tapia observed. “We should understand better why some cases have few and some have so many, and see what process engineering and case management improvements might bring to bear. Imagine if we could reduce by, say, only two hearings per resolved case on average what that would mean – tens of thousands of additional hearings slots per year,” he added.

Judge Tapia also pointed to an example of the kind of change coming in the Court’s recent “Pathways” pilot program for personal injury cases involving motor vehicle accidents now operating in the Court’s East and Northwest Districts. This program provides a predictable and transparent litigation schedule, including a trial date, from the outset of the case; establishes key milestones and reasonable deadlines to achieve them; sets expectations concerning discovery practice; directs cases into Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a matter of course; and provides a roadmap for the level and type of judicial interventions. “But it’s still about individual justice in an individual case,” he added. “It’s likely we will be seeing an expansion of a Pathways approach in other kinds of civil litigation and more broadly throughout the county,” he said.

### *Winding down the PI Hub courts*

An ongoing project in the Civil Division is the winding down of the Personal Injury (PI) Hub courts. These courts were established in 2013 in response to an unprecedented Court budget cut and operated on a model of reduced judicial case management. Beginning in 2022, the Court began the process of returning personal-injury cases to a community-based, not centralized, model and to more conventional case management techniques in I/C courts.

“Over the past year, we have reduced the number of PI Hub courts from six to three. The inventory of PI cases in our three PI Hub courts is continuing to decline and we foresee closing the remaining PI Hub courts in 2025. We know that the redistribution of some PI Hub cases to I/C courts has increased the caseloads in many I/C courts, a situation we are watching closely and addressing by opening additional I/C courts where warranted and looking at other process changes. The ending of our PI Hub court initiative will be a positive for the litigants, the bar and our court. I ask for everyone’s patience as we continue our progress,” Judge Tapia said.

On the topic of case disposition, Judge Tapia commented that about 98% of civil cases ultimately settle. “A real trial date settles cases – everybody knows that. A real trial date in conjunction with meaningful ADR can focus the parties on their, and our, ultimate goal – the conclusion of the case.” The Court recently significantly expanded its ADR resources for civil litigation. “We maintain a civil mediation resource list and operate a mediation volunteer panel, and have established ADR programs with the Mediation Center of Los Angeles and Resolve Law LA,” Judge Tapia said. He added, “Judge Riff and I share the vision for our civil division to get cases trial ready and to get trial-ready cases to trial, predictably and promptly. And for the parties to have had a meaningful ADR opportunity.” Judge Tapia summed up, “We are excited for the future of our Civil Division.”

### The Criminal Division

Turning to the Criminal Division, Judge Tapia returned to the theme of innovation. As the largest court division, the Criminal Division has implemented significant changes to improve efficiency, address challenges, and uphold its mission of justice for all, even amid resource constraints. “Despite reductions in courtrooms and resources, the Court remains steadfast in its commitment to justice. Our data-informed approach led to the consolidation of approximately 15 courtrooms due to a decline in criminal

filings. This challenge spurred an opportunity to optimize operations and maintain service quality through innovative solutions,” Judge Tapia said.

Judge Tapia has appointed Judge Yvette Verastegui as the Supervising Judge of the Criminal Division following her service for the past two years as the Division’s Assistant Supervising Judge. The new Assistant Supervising Judge of that Division is Judge Olivia Rosales. Both judges had careers as criminal attorneys – one as a defense attorney and the other as a prosecution attorney – before their appointments to the bench. Since becoming judges, they have both had extensive experience in the Criminal Division, presiding over both misdemeanor and felony calendar courts, as well as trial courts. In addition, they have held leadership roles within the court system: Judge Verastegui served as Assistant Supervising Judge of Criminal and Site Judge at the Airport Court, while Judge Rosales held positions as Supervising Judge and Assistant Supervising Judge of the Southeast District. “This is a strong leadership team,” Judge Tapia said.

#### *Transporting 1,500 in-custody defendants a day*

Resource constraints have had a ripple effect on various court operations, including logistical processes like the transportation of in-custody defendants. This challenge underscores the importance of finding innovative solutions to maintain efficiency and accessibility despite limited resources. “One pressing issue is the transportation of in-custody defendants, with approximately 1,500 individuals requiring daily transport by the Sheriff’s Department. A shortage of operational buses has hindered this process, prompting the court to explore alternatives,” Judge Tapia said. Those initiatives include advocating for additional buses, promoting Penal Code section 977 appearances (allowing counsel to appear without the defendant), and developing in-custody video arraignment capabilities – a promising and ongoing effort.

To reduce transportation demands, the Early Disposition Program (EDP)

court at the Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center (Dept. 50) has been relocated to the Central Arraignment Court (CAC). The CAC is across the street from Men’s Central Jail, providing easier transport of in-custody defendants. “By situating the EDP court in closer proximity to the jail, the court addresses a significant logistical hurdle that has delayed proceedings and hindered access to justice for in-custody defendants,” Judge Tapia noted.

#### *Wakeup call at 3:00 am*

A related issue is the challenge of transporting hundreds of in-custody defendants to court daily with limited transportation resources and “inmate refusals,” which occur when in-custody defendants miss the 3:00 a.m. wakeup call for court transport. Often, in-custody defendants call their attorneys at 8:30 a.m. and ask to be brought to court. “This situation has created logistical challenges that impact court schedules and proceedings. The Court recognizes the importance of addressing this issue to maintain the integrity and efficiency of its operations,” Judge Tapia said. To address this, the Court, in collaboration with the Sheriff’s Department, intends to implement video documentation of refusals, enhancing accuracy and accountability in the process. This initiative demonstrates the Court’s proactive engagement in identifying and resolving barriers to justice, ensuring that all defendants have the opportunity to participate in their proceedings while streamlining court operations.

Judge Tapia noted that staffing shortages in probation services have strained supervision efforts. “Many officers have been reassigned to juvenile services, leaving adult supervision under-resourced. For example, Ascot operates with only 27 officers instead of the usual 60. The Court is working closely with probation to streamline reporting processes, ensuring defendants receive necessary supervision and services despite these limitations,” he said.

On a different topic, Judge Tapia observed the potential impacts of a newly elected District Attorney on Court operations. While it is impossible to

predict these changes with certainty, it is clear that they will influence court proceedings. Historical trends suggest that felony filings will remain stable, though they may be more complex, while misdemeanor filings are expected to significantly increase. “While the Court has reallocated resources it is prepared to pivot as necessary to accommodate these changes,” he added.

On the topic of community collaborative courts and mental health diversion, Judge Tapia observed that he and Criminal Division leadership recognize the intersection of criminal behavior, mental health, and substance abuse. For this reason, the Court actively supports and promotes its Community Collaborative Courts; Sentence Offender Drug Courts; Co-Occurring Disorders Courts; Second Chance Women’s Re-Entry Court; Veterans Court; and Office of Diversion and Re-Entry. Each Community Collaborative Court is tailored to address the underlying issues that contribute to criminal behavior. “These courts aim to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes by incorporating a problem-solving approach that involves collaboration between the judiciary, justice partners, community organizations, and other stakeholders,” Judge Tapia said. Likewise, mental health diversion (under Penal Code section 1001.36), “reflects a shift toward recognizing the role of mental health in criminal behavior and aims to provide appropriate care while maintaining public safety. It aligns with broader efforts to decriminalize mental illness and reduce the strain on the criminal justice system,” he added. Since its inception, the Court has placed 2,300 eligible defendants on Mental Health Diversion, redirecting them from incarceration to mental health services.

Returning to an earlier theme, Judge Tapia spoke of the Community Outreach Court, located at the Skid Row Community ReFresh Spot. It is one of several Community Courts that meet court users where they are. “It allows those who are unhoused that have misdemeanor matters to appear remotely,

preserving their dignity and improving access to justice,” he said.

### Guiding principles

In closing, Judge Tapia returned to his bedrock principles:

**Fostering public trust:** Public trust is the cornerstone of an effective judicial system. “So far as I know, the courthouse is the only place on earth where the vicious and the virtuous may contend upon perfectly equal terms, receive the same patient and impartial hearing, and have their respective dues, whatever they may be, meted out in the decision. It is this characteristic, more than any other, which entitles the courthouse to be called a temple of justice,” said Judge Tapia, quoting Justice Yegan in the case *Morrow v. Superior Court* 30 Cal.App.4th 1252, 1261.

**Transparency:** “Transparency initiatives aim to demystify court processes and provide the public with clear and accessible information. Open court proceedings allow community members to hear and see justice imposed in each case. The court is also committed to maintaining timely and accurate communication through its website and public information channels, offering resources that help individuals navigate the legal system with confidence,” he said.

**Community engagement:** “Programs like Community Collaborative Courts and outreach initiatives demonstrate the court’s dedication to addressing the root causes of criminal behavior while prioritizing fairness, rehabilitation, and safety. Participating in community events, legal workshops, and collaborations with community organizations provide opportunities for dialogue, ensuring the court remains attuned to the public’s needs and concerns,” Judge Tapia said.

**Accountability measures:** Judge Tapia noted that the Court is committed to reinforce its commitment to impartiality and justice. This means maintaining the highest level of professionalism, respect for the law, and ethical standards in providing access to justice to all those that come before the court. By ensuring that judges and court staff operate with the highest integrity, the Court seeks to

maintain the public’s confidence in its ability to administer justice fairly and effectively.

**Access to justice:** “Accessibility is central to building trust. The court prioritizes initiatives that reduce barriers for marginalized communities, such as Community Outreach Court and remote hearings when available,” Judge Tapia said. He also noted that by meeting people where they are – both physically and metaphorically – the Court demonstrates a commitment to ensuring equitable access to justice for all individuals, regardless of their circumstances.

**Commitment to excellence:** “Nothing short of excellence will meet our expectations. This is why nearly 600 judicial officers and 5,000 court employees come to work each day. I am honored to serve as the Presiding Judge,” Judge Tapia concluded.

*Hon. Lawrence P. Riff is the Supervising Judge of the Civil Division for the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. Judge Riff previously served as Supervising Judge of the Family Law Division. He is a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates, the Judicial Council of California Family and Juvenile Law Advisory Committee and the Data Analytics Advisory Committee. He is a two-term elected member of the Court’s Executive Committee, an adjunct professor of civil trial practice at Loyola Law School and a recipient of the 2023 University of Oregon School of Law Distinguished Alumni Award.*

*Hon. Yvette Verastegui is the Supervising Judge of the Criminal Division for the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. Prior to Judge Verastegui’s appointment by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2010, she was a Deputy Alternate Public Defender with the Los Angeles County Alternate Public Defender’s Office. Previously, she was a Deputy Public Defender with the Orange County Public Defender’s Office and the Los Angeles County Public Defender’s Office. Judge Verastegui earned her Juris Doctorate degree from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Irvine.*