

How the Colorado Judicial Branch Works

Lesson from the *Courts in the Community* curriculum
Find out more about [this program](#) and discover [additional lesson plans about how state courts operate](#).

Objective: Students will be able to explain the structure of the Colorado judicial courts and what cases they handle to deepen their understanding of state government.

Inquiry Questions:

- How are the roles of the different courts similar and different?
- What types of cases do each level of courts handle?
- How do the structures of the state governments impact democratic decision making?
- What are the benefits of having three tiers of courts in Colorado?

Colorado Academic Standards

- **SS.HS.4.2.EOf.** Evaluate the role of the judicial system in protecting life, liberty, and property for all persons in the United States

Activities: Teacher lecture (background material, lecture outline, and overhead slide provided); class participation activity (worksheet/answers provided); and homework assignment.

Grade Level: High School

Anticipated classroom time: 45-60 minutes

Teacher background information

Introduction

by former Colorado Court of Appeals Judge James S. Casebolt

The Colorado Judicial Branch works by providing multi-level forums to resolve disputes among its citizens. Each court has a special function or purpose.

Almost all court matters originate in a Trial Court or agency. There, judges and juries listen to witnesses, resolve issues of fact, and apply the law to the facts they have found. This results in a decision in favor of one party and against the other.

An unhappy trial participant then has the right to have an appellate court review what the judge and jury did. This first-level appellate court must hear every appeal properly presented to it, ensuring that a litigant's case is reviewed at least once. In most instances, the district court acts as the appellate court for county and municipal trial courts. The Court of Appeals is the reviewing court for district court cases and matters originating from administrative agencies.

Appellate courts correct errors that the trial judge may have made, such as by incorrectly allowing certain evidence to be introduced. Appellate courts do not hear witnesses and do not decide facts. Instead, they review transcripts of the proceedings, research the law, and decide how the law should apply to the facts the trial judge, jury, or agency determined to be true. Appellate courts may require the Trial Court or the agency to hold a new trial when errors have substantially affected the fairness of the first trial.

Following a decision from the first-level appellate court, a party can request review by the Supreme Court. This court, which primarily hears matters of great public importance or those that may have universal application to the dispute-resolution system as a whole, has discretion in determining which cases it wants to hear, with some exceptions. As with other appellate courts, the Supreme Court



reviews transcripts of the trial proceedings and then determines what the law is or should be for that particular matter. It typically renders far-reaching opinions that serve as guides for the Court of Appeals and Trial Courts.

The multiple levels of our court system ensure that a litigant has his or her day in court, protected by the rule of law. Because the system functions fairly and impartially, the people accept and abide by its decisions. Knowledge of how it functions and protects the rights of everyone enhances citizen acceptance of its work.

Judicial Branch Organization

The [Colorado Supreme Court](#) is the state's court of last resort. Requests to review decisions of the Colorado Court of Appeals constitute a majority of the Supreme Court's filings.

The [Colorado Court of Appeals](#) is the state's intermediate appellate court. The Court of Appeals has jurisdiction, with exceptions, over appeals from the Colorado District Courts.

There are [23 Judicial Districts](#) within Colorado. The last major revision was in Jan. 2025 when the current 18th Judicial District, comprising Arapahoe, Douglas, Elbert and Lincoln counties, split into two judicial districts. Douglas, Elbert and Lincoln counties became part of the newly created 23rd Judicial District, and Arapahoe County remained in the 18th District. It was the first time since 1963 that a new judicial district was added. Changes in district boundaries require a two-thirds vote of each house of the Legislature.

District Court is a court of general jurisdiction, handling criminal, civil, domestic relations, juvenile, probate, and mental health cases.

[County Court](#) is a court of limited jurisdiction, handling misdemeanors, criminal traffic violations, civil traffic infractions, small claims, felony complaints (which may be sent to District Court), and civil cases of under \$25,000.

There are seven [water courts](#), one in each of the major river basins (South Platte, Arkansas, Rio Grande, Gunnison, Colorado, White, San Juan rivers). They are the district court divisions in that basin.

[Probation](#) is also the Colorado Judicial Branch's responsibility. Managed by the chief probation officer in each judicial district, probation employees prepare assessments and pre-sentence information for the courts, supervise offenders sentenced to community programs, give notification and support services to victims, and provide special program services. As of July 1, 2024, there were 66,552 adults and juveniles on probation. In addition, 8,658 adults were on private probation or DUI monitoring.

Personnel

The head of the Colorado Judicial Branch is the chief justice of the Supreme Court, who is elected to the position by Supreme Court justices. The justices select a state court administrator to oversee the branch's daily administration.

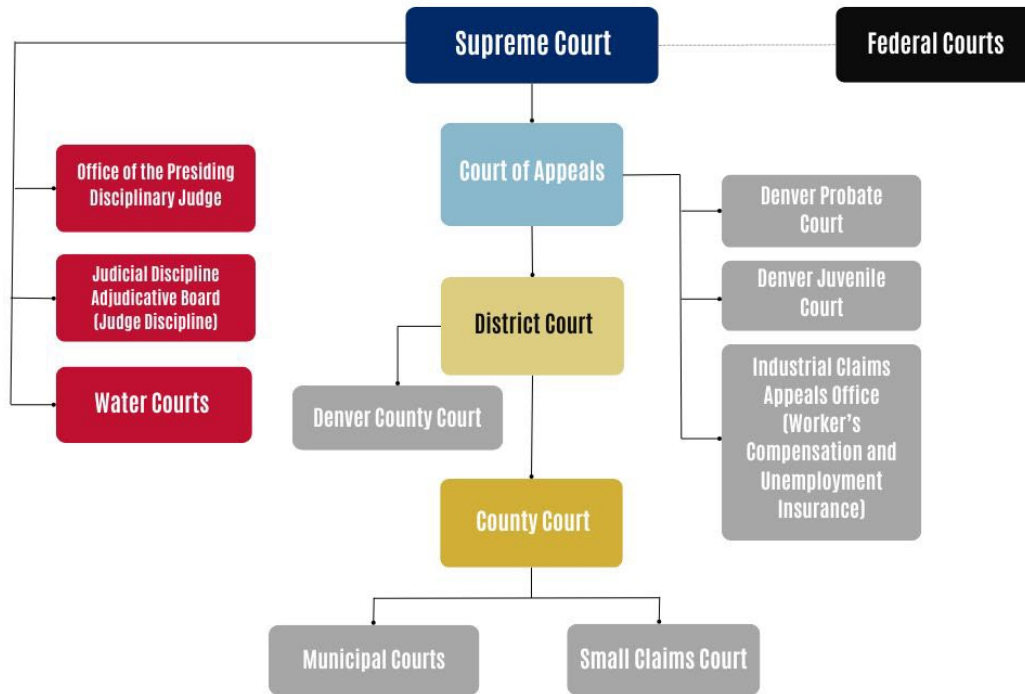
As of July 1, 2024, the Colorado Judicial Branch has 378 authorized positions for justices and judges: seven Supreme Court justices, 22 Court of Appeals judges, 210 District Court judges and 139 County Court judges. The Branch also had 93 positions for full-time & part-time magistrates and 40 senior judges. There are 19 Denver County Court judges, who are appointed by Denver's mayor.

Courts funded by the state's General Fund include: Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, District Courts, and County Courts. Municipal and Denver County courts are funded by their local governments.

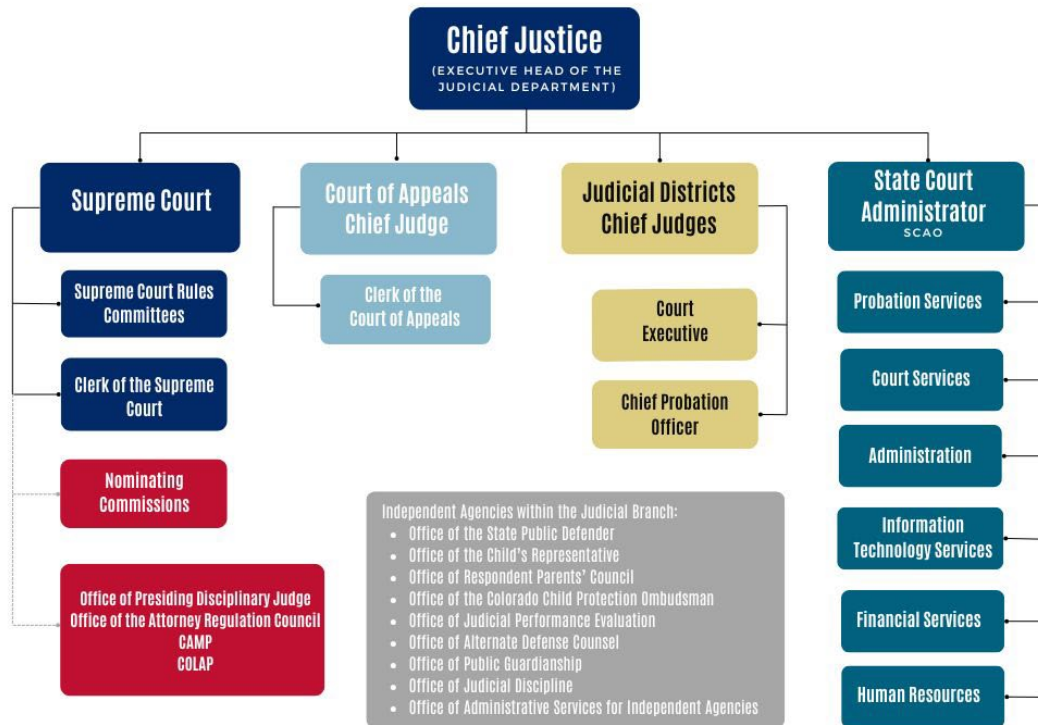


Organizational Charts

COLORADO JUDICIAL CASE FLOW AND JURISDICTION



JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE



Colorado Supreme Court

The Colorado Supreme Court is composed of seven justices serving ten-year terms and is the Colorado court system's court of last resort. The Chief Justice is selected by the justices from the membership of the Supreme Court. Pursuant to Article VI, Section 5(2) of the Colorado Constitution, the Chief Justice serves as the executive head of the Colorado Judicial System and is the ex-officio chair of the Supreme Court Nominating Commission. The Chief Justice also appoints the Chief Judge for the Court of Appeals and for each judicial district.

Requests to review decisions of the Colorado Court of Appeals constitute a majority of the Supreme Court's filings. The Supreme Court has direct appellate jurisdiction over cases involving decisions of the Public Utilities Commission, writs of habeas corpus (a judicial directive to a prison official ordering that the prisoner be brought to court to determine if he or she is being lawfully held), cases involving adjudication (affirmation) of water rights, and prosecutorial appeals concerning search and seizure questions in pending criminal proceedings. All of these appeals are filed directly with the Supreme Court, bypassing the Court of Appeals. The Supreme Court also has exclusive jurisdiction to promulgate rules governing practice and procedure in civil and criminal actions.

The Supreme Court also licenses and disciplines Colorado attorneys. The court's attorney regulation system, funded by attorney registration fees, polices the profession. In addition, the court oversees the State Court Administrator, Board of Continuing Legal Education, Board of Law Examiners, Commission on Judicial Discipline, and Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee.

WORKLOAD	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Pending July 1	426	329	372	474	522
New Filings	1474	1503	1502	1451	1340
Caseload	1900	1832	1874	1925	1862
Terminations	1571	1460	1400	1403	1373

Colorado Court of Appeals

The Colorado Court of Appeals, consisting of 22 judges who are retained by the public to serve eight-year terms, is the state's intermediate appellate court. The Court sits in three-member divisions to decide cases. The Chief Judge, appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, assigns judges to the divisions and rotates their assignments. The mission of the Court of Appeals is to provide the citizens of Colorado with clear, impartial, and timely resolutions of appealed orders and judgments as provided by law. The Court of Appeals was created by statute; accordingly, jurisdiction is limited to the areas specified by state statute, together with the inherent powers granted to all courts.

Established under Section 1 of Article VI of the Colorado Constitution and Section 13-4-101, et seq., C.R.S. (Colorado Revised Statutes), the Court of Appeals has initial jurisdiction, with exceptions, over appeals from the Colorado District Courts, Denver Probate Court, and Denver Juvenile Court. In addition, the Court of Appeals has specific appellate jurisdiction over decisions originating from a number of state administrative boards and agencies, including the Industrial Claim Appeals Office. Reviews of the Court of Appeals' decisions are directed to the Colorado Supreme Court.



WORKLOAD	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
New Filings	2022	2240	2304	2305
Dispositions	2386	2405	2587	2320

Colorado Trial Courts

Established pursuant to Article VI of the Colorado Constitution, Colorado's state trial courts consist of county courts, district courts, and water courts (municipal courts are not part of the state court system). Colorado's district courts serve citizens of each county in the state. There are currently 196 district judges serving Colorado's 22 judicial districts. District judges preside over felony criminal matters, civil claims in any amount, juvenile matters (including adoption, dependency and neglect matters, juvenile delinquency, and paternity actions), probate, mental health, divorce proceedings, and water cases. Additionally, district judges handle appeals from Colorado municipal and county courts, and review decisions of some administrative boards and agencies.

Colorado's county courts serve the citizens of each county in the state as well. County judges handle cases involving serious public safety issues such as misdemeanor cases, felony advisements, setting bonds, and preliminary hearings. There are 114 county court judges. County judges also issue restraining orders in cases involving domestic violence arrest, issue search warrants, and preside over traffic cases and civil actions involving no more than \$25,000.

The Water Right Determination and Administration Act of 1969 created seven water divisions according to drainage patterns of various rivers in Colorado. Each water division is staffed with a division engineer, appointed by the state engineer; a water judge, appointed by the Supreme Court; a water referee, appointed by the water judge; and a water clerk, assigned by the district court. Water judges are district judges appointed by the Supreme Court and have jurisdiction in the determination of water rights, the use and administration of water, and all other water matters within the jurisdiction of the water divisions.

WORKLOAD	FY 2022			FY 2023			FY 2024		
	District	County	Water	District	County	Water	District	County	Water
New Filings	199840	344006	997	173568	355416	770	205927	381856	799
Terminations	198484	354841	NA	180750	364264	NA	205821	357744	NA

* County court case terminations do not include felony complaints.

* County court filings and terminations do not include cases from Denver County Court.



Class outline

General Structure of the Courts

The Colorado judicial system is modeled after the U.S. judicial system.

- Trial courts
- Court of Appeals
- Supreme Court

1) There are three main kinds of trial courts in Colorado: county courts, district courts, and water courts

A. County courts are courts of limited jurisdiction. In FY 2024, 381,856 cases were filed in Colorado's county courts (excluding Denver County Court). The county courts handle cases involving:

- misdemeanors
- traffic infractions
- small claims
- felony complaints (which may be sent to the district court)
- civil cases under \$25,000

B. District courts are courts of general jurisdiction. In FY 2024, 205,927 cases were filed in Colorado's district courts. There are 23 judicial districts in Colorado, composed of one to seven counties. These courts handle cases involving:

- felony criminal offenses
- civil cases in any amount
- domestic relations
- juvenile issues, including adoption, dependency and neglect, juvenile delinquency, and paternity actions
- probate issues
- mental health
- water cases

C. Colorado's seven water courts were established to have jurisdiction over water issues in the state's seven different river basins (South Platte, Arkansas, Rio Grande, Gunnison, Colorado, White, and San Juan). In FY 2024, 709 cases were filed in Colorado's water courts. Case issues include:

- water rights
- the use and administration of water
- all other water matters within the jurisdiction of water divisions

2) Court of Appeals

The Colorado Court of Appeals is the state's intermediate appellate court. Altogether there are 22 judges serving in this court, and they sit in panels of three to hear cases. The chief judge assigns these panels and regularly rotates them. These judges serve terms of eight years.

The Court of Appeals was created by statute, so its jurisdiction is limited to specifically defined areas. It has initial jurisdiction over appeals from Colorado District Courts, Denver Probate Court, and Denver Juvenile Court. Some types of cases skip the Court of Appeals and go directly to the Colorado Supreme Court for their first appeal.

In FY 2024, 2,305 new cases were sent to the Court of Appeals.



3) Supreme Court

The Colorado Supreme Court is Colorado's court of last resort. There are seven justices that make up the Supreme Court, and all of them hear every case, with limited exceptions; this is referred to as sitting en banc. These justices serve terms of 10 years.

The Supreme Court has the authority to accept or refuse cases on appeal from decisions in the Court of Appeals. It also is the court of first appeal in some circumstances, thereby skipping the Court of Appeals. These circumstances include cases involving:

- capital punishment
- water rights
- decisions of the Public Utilities Commission
- writs of habeas corpus
- summary proceedings initiated under Election Code
- search and seizure questions in pending criminal proceedings

Decisions made in the Colorado Supreme Court can only be further appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, and then generally only when there is a question of constitutionality with regard to the federal constitution.

In FY 2024, 1,340 new cases were sent to the Supreme Court. Annual Statistical Reports dating back to Fiscal Year 2002 are available online at <https://www.coloradojudicial.gov/court-services/research-and-data>

Class activity

- Discuss and explain the different levels of Colorado's court system. An organization chart of the Judicial Branch has been included, which could be reproduced as a handout. This diagram can also be a valuable reference during the lesson.
- Complete the included worksheet (individual or in groups).
- Hold a class discussion stemming from the following questions: What are some current cases that you have heard about on TV or read about in the newspaper? Why are they in the court where they are currently being held?

Homework assignment

Note that answers to these questions can be found in the class outline.

1. Compare county courts to district courts. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? Some areas to consider include the types of cases they handle, their jurisdiction, and placement in Colorado's judicial structure.
2. Compare trial courts (including both county and district) to the appellate courts (Court of Appeals and Supreme Court). What are their different functions? How does each type handle cases?

