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## **Digging Into Dockets: Finding Hidden Gems in California Superior Court Dockets and Documents**

by Sara R. Paul, Reference Librarian, Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP.

Case dockets and documents supply a crucial component to legal research. A simple docket search can reveal a judge's ruling patterns, opposing counsel's recent cases, or a company's litigation history. More complex research can answer questions such as how many times a judge has certified a class action in the last three years or whether an expert witness has testified in a specific court. Furthermore, pleadings from similar cases can be invaluable time savers.

Researchers have come to depend on the government's PACER sites and commercial vendors for federal docket searching, but California state court dockets and documents have become accessible only recently.

For California Superior Courts, there are four main sources for searching and retrieving electronic dockets and, in some cases, the underlying documents: court websites, CourtLink, WestDockets, and Courthouse News.

### Court Websites

California Superior Courts are slowly creating online databases for public access. However, there is great variation among the 58 counties. Coverage ranges from full dockets with underlying documents to absolutely no information at all. Cost also varies; some courts provide free access and others charge per search and per document downloaded.

Most superior courts do not offer true full-text search functionality. Because dockets can only be retrieved by number or party name, the websites are only helpful when you already know which docket you want to view. However, check each court's website for unique search options. For example, Santa Clara allows an attorney name search, creating the perfect opportunity to research opposing counsel.

The most advanced systems, Alameda, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Riverside, provide users with document images. The Los Angeles Superior Court database is attractive and easy to use, but at a price. Retrieving a docket by docket number is free, but a party-name search costs \$4.75 and the fee to download a document is \$7.50. San Francisco, Alameda, and Riverside all offer their dockets and documents for free; search by party name or docket number. The docket links directly to the available documents.

While court websites can be excellent, cost-effective tools, researchers are severely limited by the lack of functionality of most sites. However, commercial vendors are rapidly expanding their state trial court offerings.

### LexisNexis Courtlink

Courtlink currently offers case information from 11 California Superior Courts: Alameda, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Joaquin, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Ventura.

Party-name searches can be conducted within a single court or by combining multiple courts (date restriction available). However, to search by judge, attorney, or nature of suit, you must access each court individually (and not all fields are available for all courts). Indeed, most of the search functionality and added features that are available on Courtlink for federal courts are not currently available for California state courts. The inability to conduct a full-text search of the dockets in any of the California Superior Courts is a major drawback that basically rules out the power to locate expert witnesses or a specific type of pleading. Also, none of the underlying documents are available.

On the plus side, one of Courtlink's best features, Strategic Profiles, is available for some California Superior Courts. Strategic Profiles are statistical reports on a litigant, judge, nature of suit, attorney/law firm, or court.

### WestDockets

Westlaw currently offers case information from 18 California Superior Courts. Dockets are available for Alameda, Butte, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Joaquin, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Ventura. Indices are available for Kern, Marin, Orange, Sacramento, San Diego, and Santa Barbara.

To cast the widest net, use the California Dockets State Courts Combined file (DOCK-CA-STCTS), which contains the California Superior Courts that have full docket information.

Each of these courts can be searched individually, as well as the courts where only indices are available. Regardless of the particular court, you can search via Terms and Connectors or the Field Template. The ability to create a true Boolean full-text search adds numerous entry points into the data.

Westlaw introduced State Trial Court Filings earlier this year, which offers new access to work product filed in civil cases. Selected motions, memoranda, pleadings, and other filings from Alameda, Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Francisco are available from 2000 to date.

Along with limited documents from other California state courts, all court documents can be searched in the California Filings database (CA-FILINGS). The interface defaults to a Field Template search, but you can easily click on the Terms and Connectors tab to search the full text. Endless tidbits of intelligence can be gathered in this database, such as cases a judge has cited in her rulings.

### Courthouse News Service

Though not a docket database, Courthouse News is an invaluable tool for timely case information. The service provides subscribers with newly filed complaints in civil cases.

While only a percentage of cases make it into Courthouse News (breadth of coverage varies by court), it is the only place where a search can be run across all 58 California Superior Courts. Even if you are seeking a complaint per se, you can search the database in an effort to discover cases that match your criteria. Searches can be limited by date range or court, and fields include case number, judge, plaintiff, defendant, lawyer, firm, or key word. Complaints can be downloaded for a cost of \$35 plus per-page fees.

### Putting It Into Practice

Given the varying functionality and coverage provided by each of the above options, frequent docket searchers must be familiar with all the alternatives. Unlike federal courts, even if a California Superior Court has a digital presence, the same data will not necessarily be aggregated through a commercial service. For example, Los Angeles has documents on its court website, but none of the documents are on Courtlink and only a selection of pleadings is available on Westlaw.

By harnessing the power of multiple sources, researchers can construct sophisticated and cost-effective searches that truly mine the intelligence contained within California Superior Court dockets and documents.

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