

SC courts crippled by sick-out

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A "sick-out" by employees at the County Governmental Center appeared to be well under way this morning with the Municipal Court completely shut-down and the Superior Court limping along, manned by senior officials and law clerks.

Also reporting heavy levels of absenteeism today were the agricultural commissioner's office, the veterans' office, the environmental health and mental health offices, and the district attorney's criminal division support staff.

Kenni Lopes, chief of the Superior Courts Clerk's Office, estimated that about 16 clerks called in sick this mornig. Lopes said that County Clerk Richard Bedal was filling in at one of the superior courts and that upstairs, Chief Probation Officer Lynn Miller was staffing a juvenile court.

The sick-out also affected the environmental health and mental health departments. Diane Evans, head of environmental health, and her boss, Elinor Hall, head of the Health Services Agency, asked that people who do not need immediate assistance to wait until tomorrow.

Hall said people are being asked to reschedule their appointments with mental health workers when possible.

Lopes said courts were oper-

ating on an emergency basis, handling only those cases with statutes of limitations that expire shortly. Other cases are simply being stamped, and delayed for another time.

Around the Municipal Court signs were posted saying courts are closed by their own order and will re-open within a week.

A "sick-out" was discussed by members of the Service Employees International Union last week as a tactic to put pressure on county administrative officers after negotiations for a new contract stalled last week.

County officials and union negotiators were unable to come to terms on issues regarding salary, retirement benefits for certain "high-risk" employees and the right for binding arbitration.

By mutual agreement, the union and county negotiators agreed to call in a state mediator, who is expected to arrive this Wednesday.

For the record, union representatives have said they will wait until the state mediator arrives before taking any moves against the county.

This morning County Geologist David Leslie, president of SEIU Chapter 415, denied that a "sick-out" was under way at the county building or that any other moves were planned by the union beyond employees wearing blue buttons attesting to their union membership.