



The State of the Judiciary 2024

Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson



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The State of the Judiciary 2024

Welcome

On behalf of the Unified Court System, I welcome you to the 2024 State of the Judiciary. Seated on the bench are my colleagues on the New York Court of Appeals: Senior Associate Judge Jenny Rivera and Associate Judges Michael Garcia, Madeline Singas, Anthony Cannataro, Shirley Troutman, and Caitlin Halligan. Alongside me are the Chief Administrative Judge of the Unified Court System, the Honorable Joseph Zayas, and the Presiding Justices of the four Appellate Division departments: the Honorable Dianne Renwick, the Honorable Hector LaSalle, the Honorable Elizabeth Garry and the Honorable Gerald Whelan.

From here forward, everything about this year's State of the Judiciary will be unorthodox. To begin with, everyone in the room deserves to be personally recognized. But there's no time, so we won't. Those of us who work within the court system know each other or have plenty of chances to become acquainted. We do have a few special visitors, though, whose presence I must acknowledge: our Governor, the Honorable Kathy Hochul; Secretary to the Governor, Karen Persichilli Keogh; Counsel to the Governor, Elizabeth Fine; our Attorney General, the Honorable Letitia James; our Solicitor General, the Honorable Barbara Underwood; and Senate Judiciary Chair Brad Hoylman-Sigal. I also want to specially thank Ann Byer, who cares for everything and everyone in the Court of Appeals; Jay Kemprowski, who has been instrumental in coordinating all of the technological aspects of this event; and my Chief of Staff, Kelsey Ruescher-Enkeboll, who worked exhaustively to identify and assist our many speakers and who, as always, puts words in my mouth.

In another bit of unorthodoxy, I have asked Governor Hochul if she would interrupt her impossibly jam-packed schedule to make brief remarks today. Governor Hochul has been an unparalleled supporter of the judiciary. As I noted at my investiture, it is my objective to work jointly with the Executive and Legislative branches for the betterment of all New Yorkers. We are all part of the same government with the same overriding objective, and we can work together toward that goal without the slightest compromise of our judicial independence or intrusion into each other's spheres of authority. Today, Governor Hochul's presence, the presence of others from the Executive branch, and the presence of some of our legislative leaders, help emphasize the collaborative approach to which I believe we are all committed. I am delighted to present to you our Governor, the Honorable Kathy Hochul.

Opening Remarks

Remarks of Governor Kathy Hochul

This is indeed a privilege to be invited to address you on this really spectacular occasion to hear the priorities of our fairly new Chief Judge. I will note the special emphasis, maybe I'm the only one who picked up on it, but when he said brief remarks I will accommodate the Judge for sure.

But I want to congratulate Chief Judge Wilson for truly being the history making public servant that we've come to see him execute his duties with such dignity and pride of office, and I treasure our opportunities to work together. I will not go through the long list either, but also Honorable Joseph Zayas, our Chief Administrative Judge, I want to thank you for helping us rethink the possibilities with the judiciary because I want to go big. This is what we agreed on when we had our initial conversations, how we can transform the judiciary and make it more responsive to the people we're all here to serve. Also Tish James, I have to acknowledge you as well, because she's an extraordinary leader – my partner in government, statewide government, and I want to honor you today for your incredible service and what you go through every single day, the challenges that you have to endure. And I think about the days since Benjamin Cardozo and the era of the wonderful Judith Kaye, and now Chief Judge Rowan Wilson.

Our courts have always been held in the highest regard, that goes without saying, this is New York. And today, with the United States Supreme Court – that was once held with high esteem – now, in my opinion, abandoning its responsibility as the defender of our constitutional rights, the role our state courts play is more important than ever. And I recognize that they must step into this significant judicial void.

And that's why with leaders like Chief Judge Wilson at the helm, and the judges that I've had the privilege to appoint, and those who've served with such dignity under other appointments, it's crystal clear to me that our judiciary understands the weight of that responsibility. They truly do. And I've made it a top priority to work with all of them and to strengthen our courts. And I have staunchly defended the independence of our courts and vetoed legislation that in my view would have interfered with the courts' self-governance and I will continue to do that.

I have appointed over 70 judges: extraordinary individuals to the Court of Appeals, the Appellate Divisions, Supreme Courts, the Court of Claims, Family Court, and I'm really proud of the diversity working with my team here, these individuals who understand that we need to have judges who've lived the same life experiences and look the way the people

that come before them do. It adds credibility to our esteemed judiciary. Many judges, African American, Latinx, Asian American, Native American, LGBTQ, first male-transgender judge in the country, and our state's first little person on the Court of Claims. We are making sure that everyone feels that they are welcome to serve on our bench.

I've also added, understanding the huge backlogs, I've added 40 new positions across the state to address the backlogs, to make the lives of people who come before the court seeking justice a little bit easier. And I've worked with OCA to reduce the backlogs because people deserve speedy access.

And also, I want to reimagine our Family Courts, and this is something we talked about – such an important role that they play, but they have not been properly funded, staffed, organized, there's so much more we can do listening to the voices of so many who bring their ideas forward. And I want to make sure, because they often serve the most underrepresented New Yorkers.

I've also worked to elevate the stature of the courts, and by the way, make sure judges are properly compensated once and for all. So we're going to continue to improve this system and I know on this great partnership we have here with these two individuals I will stand here and also reaffirm my pledge to offer the hands of partnership, friendship and understanding the common objectives we all share today is to make sure that this court system, this judiciary continues with the preeminence that has always been associated with the State of New York. So thank you for what you've done. I look forward to hearing your priorities and making sure that they are implemented.

Thank you very much.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Twenty-six years ago, Chief Judge Judith Kaye delivered the first annual State of the Judiciary address. Before that, the Chief Judge's annual State of the Judiciary message was a written report. When Chief Judge Kaye changed that, she wondered aloud to that first audience: "Does anyone actually read it?" Since then, the Chief Judge has given a speech highlighting the Unified Court System's accomplishments, usually by presenting data showing how well the courts are doing and how much improvement there has been in the past year. Not today; if you want that data, get a copy of the report that no one reads.

In another bit of unorthodoxy, instead of telling you about our court modernization efforts, we've posted on the court website a 5-minute video, narrated by a computer-generated voice, to show you what our brand-new Division of Court Modernization, led by Sheng Guo, accomplished in 2023 and is planning for 2024.

More important than the mere change in form, though, is the unorthodox vision I'm going to present to you today. That vision is: we should cease thinking about courts as places where a judge merely decides which party is right and which is wrong. Instead, we should think of the courts as similar to our other branches of government: institutions that attempt to make decisions that will improve the lives of those we serve. Leaving aside the Court of Appeals, which much like the other branches of government makes decisions that consider and affect public policy broadly, the overwhelming number of decisions by our courts center on a specific problem that the parties before the court have brought to it. Instead of merely asking "which party is right," our courts should consider "what result is best" for the parties involved. Let's think of courts as problem solvers, not solely as adjudicators of which party is right.

If that sounds unorthodox, it isn't exactly. In the great majority of commercial and tort cases, sophisticated counsel, often aided by mediators or other neutral facilitators, arrive at settlements in which right and wrong are not adjudicated, and the parties walk away with something to which they both have agreed. The courts, and society generally, devote a lot of resources to achieving those results when the monetary stakes are high. But in areas that do not involve big companies, large tort claims, or large sums of money—that is, the vast body of interpersonal problems that wind up in our Family Courts, Criminal Courts, Housing Courts, and Civil Courts, we are still stuck in the traditional framework of deciding who's right and who's wrong.

However, the Unified Court System has been experimenting with unorthodox approaches, in what we sometimes call specialty courts, treatment courts, alternative to incarceration courts, community courts and community justice centers, among other things. Today you'll hear about some of the results from those courts firsthand. The results of those unorthodox approaches have been spectacularly impressive. It is time to expand that approach—in which courts, parties and other participants work to achieve results superior to those that can be obtained by merely deciding who is right or applying a stock response to problems that superficially seem identical. When one takes enough time and care to understand the human beings enmeshed in those problems, we see that each case is different and calls for a highly tailored, careful and compassionate response. If that seems heretical, so be it: as Helen Keller observed, "The heresy of one age becomes the orthodoxy of the next."

The best way to elaborate on that unorthodox approach is for me to step aside and let seven special people speak. They come from all walks of life and hail from across New York State. They have one important thing in common: each person has a story to tell about the Unified Court System. Their stories have happy endings, about how their interactions with

the Unified Court System altered their lives for the better, and put them on the paths they're on today. In addition, each story highlights a topic that dovetails with issues my leadership team and I have identified as some of the Unified Court System's highest priorities.

But the court system has unhappy stories too. People often are in court to litigate the worst, most challenging moments of their lives. Many parties in our courts are scared and under enormous mental, physical and financial strain. Many will have their lives altered by what our courts decide: whether they keep their liberty, home, job, or custody of their children. Many won't even have lawyers. Our objective is to move as many of the unhappy stories as possible over to the happy side. The stories you will hear today illuminate not what is typical, but what is possible, what we should strive for, what we must accomplish. Every minute we delay is a lost chance to avert a sad ending.

As we look to the future, I hope the new format of today's event reflects a substantive point that has been the central tenet for me and my leadership team since we started our work ten months ago: the focus of the judiciary must be on the people we serve.

So, let's get started.

Program

I'll begin with an area that is not about unorthodox approaches in court, but rather an unorthodox view of the importance of the judiciary outside of court proceedings: civics education and civic involvement. Many judges, clerks, court officers and others in our courts have been engaged for decades in a variety of efforts to involve and educate the public—especially young people—about civics. The precipitous drop off in civics education over the past few decades is well documented, and the rancor that has infected political discourse has been linked to that drop off, as has distrust in government, including in the courts. We are determined to combat that, and the courts, because we are apolitical, are perhaps the branch of government best suited to do so. It would take too long to list all the civics education and events we have conducted in the past year, so you will find a link to a document on the landing page for the State of the Judiciary featuring some of our recent efforts. But allow me to highlight two examples.

Last summer, for the first time ever, the Unified Court System funded 100 paid internships for recent high school graduates. Our interns worked in courts throughout the State, and they developed hands-on understandings of the role of the courts and the numerous jobs through which they could have a career with the courts. I thank Judge Tamiko Amaker for spearheading that initiative, which we will continue and improve in summers to come.

Second, one of our longest-running civics programs is the Scales of Justice Academy, a pre-college legal education program, which is marking its fifteenth year. Here to tell you a little bit about it, and to introduce one of the program's graduates, is its founder and leader: the Honorable La Tia Martin.

Introduction by Hon. La Tia Martin

Good afternoon. I am honored to be here today to share and recognize the success of the Scales of Justice Academy. For the past 15 years I have had the pleasure to lead the Academy with the assistance of Attorney Dafina Cobbinah-Pinckney and many of my colleagues in the Judiciary.

The Scales of Justice Academy is a pre-college legal education program for promising, underserved female high school students. It's an unfortunate reality that many young women from diverse backgrounds simply do not receive the training and support they need to make it through the "pipeline" to law school. I was inspired to create the Scales of Justice

Academy because I saw that a different approach was necessary, one that reached back into the pipeline and provide young women with the skills necessary to succeed in life and, should their interest continue, in law school.

We recruit students from New York City and Westchester County high schools. Each summer, we accept approximately 40 student participants in the program. Thanks to the generous support of our host venues of the Elisabeth Haub School of Law at Pace University and Fordham University School of Law, and the funding we receive from the NYSBA and other local bar associations, the program is completely free for our students, with food, transportation and supplies being provided.

During the intensive three-week program, students are introduced to the law through lectures, experiential learning, and field trips. The topics covered include criminal law, immigration law, matrimonial law, legal writing, and constitutional law. Our esteemed volunteer faculty members are practitioners, law school deans, professors, and judges from all levels of state and federal courts. The students observe proceedings in local criminal courts and tour college campuses. The Academy session culminates in a trip to Washington, D.C., where we visit the United States Supreme Court and the United States Capitol.

It is with enormous pride that I inform you that since 2009 over 600 female high school students have successfully completed the Scales of Justice Academy. Many of our graduates are now enrolled in undergraduate colleges and law schools throughout the nation or are members of the legal profession.

I am delighted to introduce and salute one such Academy graduate: Ms. Ashley Qamar.

Remarks of Ashley Qamar, Esq.

My name is Ashley Qamar. I tell you with great pride that, as of last month, I am an attorney licensed to practice in New York State. My professional journey has been years in the making, and it began at the Scales of Justice Academy. Today, I'm excited to tell you a little bit about my experiences in that program.

I'm originally from Queens Village, and I went to high school in the Bronx. It was through a school bulletin that I learned about the opportunity to become a student at the Scales of Justice Academy. I was born a first-generation American, attended public schools, and at the time, I didn't know any lawyers. If it weren't for the Scales of Justice Academy, I wouldn't have considered the possibility that one day I could go to law school and become a lawyer.

The summer I participated in the Scales of Justice Academy, I took the train every day from my home in Queens to the Fordham Law campus in Manhattan, where the program was hosted. Over the course of the program, I learned so much about the legal profession. We attended lectures on ethics, public speaking, civil procedure, legal analysis, and professionalism. We got to hear from law professors, D.A.s, private practitioners, and judges. The program even took us outside of the four walls of our classroom to experience the law in action: we visited courts in New York City, and as we traveled down to Washington D.C. to visit the Supreme Court.

After I graduated from the Scales of Justice Academy, I went on to attend Fordham University on a full academic scholarship. I earned a degree in business. And last May, I graduated from Fordham Law School. There, I served as the president of the Latin American Law Students Association, and I was awarded the Joseph Crowley Award, which is presented to one graduating J.D. student who has shown academic achievement and concern for others. And last month I was sworn in to practice as an attorney in New York State. I currently work as a corporate associate at the law firm Venable LLP.

It really was the Scales of Justice Academy that inspired me to attend law school and join the legal profession. Now, and for the past few years, I have proudly returned to the program as a lecturer on the college and law school application process. Without the Scales of Justice Academy, and without all the amazing people in the community who dedicate their time to the program, I would not be who I am today. So, I say with great confidence and pride that this program is one that makes a profound difference in the lives of young girls. Thank you.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Like all of our civics efforts, the Scales of Justice Academy depends on the commitment and selfless contributions of our judges and court personnel. To amplify and coordinate our civics efforts, we have created a new position: Statewide Civics Coordinator, to develop and support civics programming. We aim to multiply our civics efforts in the coming years, and are forging alliances with the New York State Bar Association and numerous local bar associations to join in that mission.

Thank you, Justice Martin and Ms. Qamar.

The rest of today's program will focus on the work happening within the walls of our courthouses.

Let's turn now to "problem-solving courts"—the focus of our next few segments.

Historically, we use the phrase “problem-solving” to describe courts that look to the underlying issues that bring people into the court system and employ innovative approaches to address those issues.

The Unified Court System has a long tradition of piloting and sustaining innovative problem-solving courts. From the launch of the first community courts and drug courts over twenty years ago to the mental health courts, veterans courts, and numerous other models that have come since, New York has set a national standard for creativity and effectiveness. Today, we have more than 300 problem-solving courts across the State.

Over the past twenty years, we have built a strong foundation of problem-solving practice. And we have learned many lessons; in particular, we have developed a more nuanced understanding of mental health, substance abuse, trauma, and the other challenges that are often root causes of court involvement. I am committed to ensuring that the court system builds on that foundation and applies those lessons, supporting further innovation and expanding access to therapeutic justice. In doing so, we can simultaneously continue to decrease our reliance on incarceration, save taxpayer dollars and enhance public safety.

As you’re listening to the people who have graciously agreed to travel here to speak to you, I ask you to consider the question I posed earlier: what could we gain from thinking about all of our courts as problem-solving courts? Rather than determining what law was broken, who broke it, and what the punishment should be, could we foster greater trust in the court system, greater accountability in the community, greater public safety, and a better outcome for both the troubled individual and the broader community if, in appropriate cases, we asked who has been affected, what are the needs and responsibilities of all affected persons, and how the harm could best be repaired and future harm avoided?

It’s my pleasure to introduce Kimberly VanCamp, the Treatment Courts Project Director for the 7th Judicial District, which encompasses Cayuga, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Seneca, Steuben, Wayne and Yates Counties.

Introduction by Kimberly VanCamp, MA

Good afternoon! Thank you, Chief Judge Wilson and Distinguished Jurists, for the opportunity to address you today.

The first Drug Court in New York State opened in January of 1995 in Rochester, NY. Since then, the treatment courts in Monroe County have expanded to include: the Rochester Drug Treatment Court, a Mental Health Court, a Veterans Court, the Judicial Diversion Program, a DWI Court, the Opioid Stabilization Part, and the SAFE Court Human Trafficking Part. These treatment courts create a much-needed paradigm shift by

utilizing widely researched Best Practice Standards and a coordinated non-adversarial response to address substance use and mental health challenges with the goal of diverting individuals out of the criminal justice system through successful engagement in community based behavioral health services. For instance, in the Monroe County Judicial Diversion Program—Felony Drug Court, the program from which our next speaker graduated—participants must meet several requirements to graduate, including successful completion of substance use disorder treatment, sustained abstinence from mood altering chemicals, obtain a high school diploma or high school equivalency diploma, be gainfully employed, and have no new arrests.

Our work takes a village. As the Project Director for the 7th Judicial District Treatment Courts, I have the distinct pleasure of working with the dedicated Judges, attorneys, court staff, court officers, probation officers, and community based behavioral health care providers who give tirelessly of themselves to provide the treatment court participants with the clinical interventions, monitoring, and support necessary to gain control of their lives. As we know all too well, active substance use, and untreated mental illness have a devastating impact on the individual, their family, and the community. Treatment courts save lives, restore hope, and build the foundation for brighter futures.

I am privileged to be here today to introduce you to an individual who has risen from the depths of despair, embraced her recovery, restored her family, and has dedicated her professional life to helping others to realize their own personal success stories. In 2016, she graduated from the Monroe County Judicial Diversion Program – Felony Drug Court in Rochester, NY, and she is a true inspiration. Her story captures the losses incurred in the throes of addiction; but it is also a story of hope, restoration, and recovery in action. I am honored to introduce to you, Ms. Keisha Nankoosingh.

Remarks of Keisha Nankoosingh, CRPA

My name is Keisha Nankoosingh. I am a person in recovery and a single mother to three beautiful children. I am also a certified recovery peer advocate.

Ten years ago, my life was very different. For over a decade, I had been dependent on drugs and alcohol. So was my partner, the father of my children. There were times during active use that we wanted to get sober, but we never stayed fully committed. In the end, we had no money, no jobs, no transportation, no home. We had pushed away our friends and families. Then, all the “not yet’s” happened, resulting in criminal charges, and a loss of self.

At my arraignment, the public defender told me I might qualify for treatment court. I was facing up to 7 years in prison. I was relieved because I knew I needed help, and this was my opportunity to get it. I knew that treatment court would provide me with the tools I needed to learn how to maintain my sobriety. I would be required to follow all the treatment recommendations, attend all of my court dates, and maintain communication with court staff. I was told that successful completion of the program would result in no criminal convictions. Choosing treatment court with the best decision of my life. My partner chose treatment court too.

I went straight from jail to inpatient, then a halfway house, then supportive living, then independent living. During my year in treatment court, I intentionally built supports around myself so I could sustain my sobriety when the court services ended. I started going to a 12-step program. I mended my relationships with family and friends. I received a scholarship to become a certified recovery peer advocate and started volunteering as a peer at local recovery programs. I started seeing my children again—first with supervision, then without.

The day I graduated from treatment court was amazing. I had been in the program for one year; I had gone to every appointment, taken every recommendation, used every resource. I found a true sense of connection in the courtroom. The people who work there truly care. They go above and beyond to make you feel seen and heard.

After graduation, my involvement in the community only grew. I got involved with ROCovery Fitness, a community of physically active people brought together by sober living. I have continued to provide support to treatment court participants with my employment at various organizations in our community.

It's been ten years since my graduation. My life has completely turned around. I have my children and my family back. I have a huge support system. I love myself today. But this success hasn't come without pain and struggle. My partner, my children's father, did not graduate. Just months after my graduation, he was sentenced. Unfortunately, shortly after his release from prison, he returned to use and became very ill. He passed away June 24th of 2020. These are the stakes. It is life or death. Treatment court gave me the support and hope I needed to live.

During my recovery, I have learned the saying: "You have to give it away to keep it." What that means to me is that I need to continue to share my experiences, both the good and the challenging, with others. Over the last 10 years, I have found my passion for service, helping others on their journey to health, wellness and recovery. Connection is key. Thank you so much for all that you do and allow me to share with you today.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

It is of course extremely gratifying that our treatment court addressed Ms. Nankoosingh's problems without a punitive response, and that as a result she has a new life filled with three wonderful children. It is also especially important to note that the dividends paid for the court's thoughtful response include Ms. Nankoosingh's own commitment to help others find their way to recovery, sometimes even without any court involvement.

Thank you, Ms. VanCamp and Ms. Nankoosingh.

Those who serve in our country's armed forces often pay a heavy price. Sometimes that price is obvious, sometimes less so. Either way, we owe them a great debt. I turn next to another "problem-solving" court: the Ontario County Veterans Court. I am proud to introduce my colleague, Judge Jaqueline Sisson, who presides over that court.

Introduction by Hon. Jacqueline Sisson

I am Judge Jacqueline Sisson and am the elected Canandaigua City Court Judge as well as an Acting Ontario County and Family Court Judge in the Finger Lakes region. I have the privilege of presiding over our County's Treatment Courts including Veterans Court.

I would first like to thank Chief Judge Wilson for this incredible opportunity to spotlight the crucial work that our treatment courts do throughout our state every single day.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with NYS's Veterans Courts, many veterans return to civilian life and find themselves facing personal challenges, including mental health problems and/or substance use, that are unique to life after military service. Criminal behavior, mental health problems and substance abuse often stem directly from service and may be amplified by reentry into civilian life. Veterans treatment courts were created to offer a solution by connecting justice-involved veterans to appropriate services in a court setting, surrounded by an interdisciplinary team, all of whom work collaboratively to help veterans. The first Veterans Court was established in Buffalo City Court in 2008 and our court was established in 2014.

When I first heard that the Chief Judge was looking for suggested speakers, our treatment team unanimously and without hesitation thought of Corporal Chris McFiggins, a 2021 graduate of Veterans Court.

When Chris entered Veterans Court, it was clear that graduation was not the end goal for him. In fact, I re-read Chris's graduation essay and in it he concluded, "I have hope for the future and I believe I can continue this course." Not only has Chris continued the

course but he is now a gifted peer who always goes above and beyond for others. His lived experience and perspective permit him to support the recovery goals of individuals currently participating in treatment court.

I am proud to introduce Corporal Chris McFiggins!

Remarks of Cpl Christopher McFiggins, CRPA-P

Greetings. My name is Christopher McFiggins and I am a United States Marine. I've deployed twice to Iraq and served honorably for six-and-a-half years.

On leaving the service, and as an unfortunate consequence of a combat injury, I became an opiate addict. That, coupled with my uncontrollable drinking, landed me in the Ontario County Jail from Thanksgiving through Christmas of 2020. Going through withdrawal in jail was brutal: I lost 30 pounds in a month and a half. But the inmates rallied around me and shared their food. I prayed I would never have to go through this experience again, and salvation came to me in a visit from an Ontario County Veterans Court representative.

Instead of treating me as someone who had committed crimes, Judge Sisson and Betsey Lee, the court coordinator, treated me as someone with a treatable addiction. Together with Katie, my VA counselor, they helped me through my first year of sobriety. Until my time in Veterans Court, I had become very hesitant to trust anyone except my Marine Corps brothers. But I became resolved to leave shame and guilt behind. As the months passed and after starting and participating in a 12-step program, my confidence began to grow. I can remember my probation officer, Andrew Park, slowly coming around, and with each appointment or home visit, I began to feel more comfortable in my own skin.

By trusting the people I had met in Veterans Court—along with many others: my VA counselor, my probation officer, and those I met in my 12-step program—my life was transformed. They never failed me. And, like Marines, they never left me behind. I began to feel useful again as I did with my buddies on deployment—I began to feel that I had something to offer. I graduated from Veterans Court without sanctions, and I started volunteering as a veteran mentor to the men and women going through the same treatment court from which I had just graduated.

After nine months, I was offered a paid position with the Finger Lakes Area Counseling and Recovery Agency. My job—my purpose—is to support Veterans and Drug Court clients any way I can, from providing rides to Court or medical appointments, to helping people move, to sharing my experience, strength and hope.

These days, my life is completely different. No more secrets and no more shame. The time I had spent in active addiction now means something: I can pass on my story with the hope of helping someone else through their legal troubles and addiction problems. In addition to serving as a mentor, I have also been asked to participate on the New York State Veterans Court Advisory Board and next week I will be going to Saratoga Springs for the New York Association of Treatment Court Professionals for their annual conference.

Having the chance to help others helps me maintain my own sobriety. To know that each person I share my story with has the same opportunity to experience the relief that I have found in recovery fills me with joy and gratitude. If clients show any willingness at all to try this different way of life, Judge Sisson, Betsey Lee, Andy Park, and I will never leave them behind.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

I hope you can begin to see the parallels in the experiences you are hearing today. Like Ms. Nankoosingh, Corporal McFiggins was charged with a crime, but treated as a human being with an addiction, not a criminal. Our courts supported him in what must have been an immeasurably difficult journey to become whole. And like Ms. Nankoosingh, he has not only recovered to build a healthy life, but he has committed himself to helping others overcome those same challenges.

Thank you, Judge Sisson and Corporal McFiggins.

Through our experiences with drug treatment courts and mental health courts, we have started to think more broadly about alternative to incarceration courts that would not be constrained to people with diagnosed addictions or illnesses. We can adapt the principles that undergird our successes in those areas to persons in trouble for whom a noncarceral alternative might provide a superior solution. One such court is the Manhattan Felony Alternative to Incarceration Court (or “ATI Court”) in New York County Supreme Court. Developed in collaboration with court stakeholders, the court provides individualized programming and rigorous supervision to felony participants who do not fit neatly into other problem-solving courts. By focusing on the whole person and addressing mental health, substance use, employment, housing, social supports, and more, the ATI Court seeks to reduce recidivism and build safer and healthier communities. At the same time, it seeks to reduce case backlogs by facilitating the early resolution of felony cases. Here to introduce that court and another story with a happy ending is Mr. Joseph Barrett, the Project Director of Manhattan Justice Opportunities, a program of the Center for Justice Innovation.

Introduction by Joseph Barrett

Thank you, Judge Wilson, for inviting me to introduce the Manhattan Felony Alternative to Incarceration (or “ATI”) Court.

Launched in 2019, it is the first all-purpose felony ATI court in the country—creating alternatives to incarceration for all types of felony cases, including violent offenses. Expanding on the principles of specialized drug and mental health courts, the court has no charge- or need-based eligibility criteria.

The Court has scaled quickly and successfully. In the five years since it was established, it has grown to an average daily docket of 400 cases, and nearly 200 successful completions. It has prevented literally hundreds of years of incarceration. But, more importantly, the Court has helped people make countless positive changes in their lives, from securing jobs and housing, to progressing in treatment, to rebuilding relationships.

And yet we know that there is a need to scale further. Each month, prosecutors and defense attorneys jointly refer more cases than we can serve, and so some people must wait months to begin programming. With greater resources, we could begin working on referred cases more quickly, and ultimately serve an even greater percentage of felony cases in Manhattan.

Collaboration has been the key to the ATI Court’s success.

Judge Ellen Biben—with the support of the Unified Court System—spearheaded this effort and provides direct oversight from the bench, bringing compassion and rigor to each case.

The Manhattan District Attorney’s Office reviews every felony case to identify and assess whether the person charged can be safely supported in the community. Under DA Alvin Bragg, it has provided over \$2 million in funding to scale this initiative so that as many appropriate cases as possible can be diverted.

The Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor, under Bridget Brennan, also screens and identifies appropriate cases and has provided funding to support the Court’s expansion.

The Manhattan defense providers—the Legal Aid Society, New York County Defender Services, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem and the 18B panel—advocate for their clients’ needs and support engagement.

My team at the Center for Justice Innovation conducts assessments, prepares individualized treatment plans, and provides ongoing care coordination and monitoring.

And community-based providers offer substance use and mental health treatment, employment, housing, and more.

Each day, we are all in constant communication about the details of each case—seriously, you should see the email chains! Each partner brings its own expertise and perspective to achieve a common goal: to build stability and prevent future arrests.

While our success is due in large part to this collaboration, it's equally due to the participants themselves. The ATI Court would be nothing without people to serve. People who have committed crimes and who want to take accountability. People who are willing to work hard. People who are looking to change their lives. The ATI Court gives them that opportunity.

We're very lucky to have one of those people here today. To share her story of resilience and determination, it's my pleasure to introduce Ms. Ronette Cordett.

Remarks of Ronette Cordett

My name is Ronette Cecilia Katherine Cordett. I am an artist. I am a survivor. I am here today to tell you about my experience going through ATI Court.

For you to understand why I ended up in ATI Court, I need to start my story at the beginning. I was born in the Bronx, raised in Manhattan, and had many struggles in my childhood. My mom didn't have custody of my three older siblings; they lived with my Aunt. Living alone with my mom was hard. We didn't get along, and she didn't watch over me. I was lonely and started to get into trouble. My mom sent me away to boarding school in Massachusetts, where I was abused. That added to the trauma of my childhood. And when I got home from boarding school, I didn't have a stable place to live. I went from shelter to shelter. I was arrested multiple times, which resulted in some misdemeanor convictions. I was full of pain and sadness. I was having medical and mental health issues. I was in so much pain I didn't think I would survive. That's when I ended up in court, on a felony robbery charge.

When I learned about ATI Court, I wanted to have my case transferred there. I thought it was my best chance at getting the help I needed. Each time I was in court, I started to feel more seen. Judge Biben cared about me and always asked, "Do you have anything to say?," and that let me speak from the heart and be remorseful for what I had done. As part of my mandate, I took services at the Fortune Society. I started with an anger management class. But I wanted to do more. So I started GED classes, and therapy.

The most healing thing for me at Fortune was their arts program. I wrote poetry. I planted in a garden. I saw Broadway shows. I learned skills that helped me express my pain through art, and that helped my soul heal. I rediscovered the joy of expressing myself through the clothes I wear. I always knew I was a beautiful person, but I was traumatized and angry. ATI Court and Fortune gave me a second chance to show who I really was, without the anger, and to be productive in society.

Last October, I graduated from ATI Court. I wore a beautiful black and white hat and a matching jacket. I remember feeling different than the woman who started there years before. I felt that the people at court knew I was more than my trauma. They knew who Ronette was. They knew I had gone through hard times but that I could be successful. It took a lot of hard work to get to my graduation day. But when I got there, it was a day for celebrating and for smiles.

Today, I have my own apartment. I have a steady job. I have a new computer, and I use it to take classes. I like to cook. I still go to Fortune and am taking a computer class so, one day, I can have an office job. I am reconnecting with my family, and my relationship with my mom is healing. And I still have support from the people I met at ATI Court—my social worker, Taylor, came with me to Albany to support me today!

Here's the best news: I am going to be a mom. My baby boy is due in the spring. I am on a path for a better life for both of us. Thank you to everyone who made ATI Court possible.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Problem-solving courts, like the ones you heard about today, need resources to meet the growing demand for their important work. And to be effective, we will also need partners, including treatment and supportive housing providers who offer truly viable alternatives to incarceration. As the courts devote more resources to this work, the State—and all of us stakeholders—must do more to ensure that we have a robust continuum of community-based care and treatment options.

Thank you, Mr. Barrett and Ms. Cordett.

Most of our criminal courts do not have a felony ATI part. Some of our judges, undeterred, have taken it upon themselves to develop their own unorthodox approaches that promote happy endings. One such innovative and truly amazing judge works less than a block away from here, in Albany County Court. She created a program called “U-CAN.” Here, you get two miraculous stories with happy endings, and I could not be prouder of my colleague, Judge Andra Ackerman, who is here to tell you about U-CAN and introduce you to the first graduate of the Albany County Court felony U-CAN program.

Introduction by Hon. Andra Ackerman

In 2016, during my first week as a City Court Judge in Cohoes, I noticed a pattern: Young adults, who had many factors in common, committing an escalating series of misdemeanors, inching closer to committing felony level crimes and heading down a path likely to take them either to state prison or a cemetery. Most of them had dropped out of school or were on the brink of quitting or being expelled. Most lived in poverty. Most had at least one parent who was not at all in the picture, and the other, if present, was typically emotionally unavailable due to substance abuse. Most came to court alone, and while they tried to look tough, I could see in their eyes that they were scared and on the brink of losing all hope, and headed for incarceration that would leave them even worse off.

I related to these struggling youth. I never met my father and my mother was an abusive alcoholic. My childhood was marked by poverty and neglect until I was about 9 years old when my mother lost custody of both my sister and me. I lived in three different foster homes until I moved in with my sister just shy of my 18th birthday.

As a new judge, I'd sit on the bench looking at the young people before me, and I'd see myself and my sister. Over and over, I'd ask myself, "How come I'm up here, and they're down there standing before me?" I could have so easily ended up on the other side of the bench. So, why didn't I?

I realized that at critical junctures in my life, when I very easily could have gone off the rails, there was someone there: a mentor, who believed in me, saw more in me than I saw in myself, and cared about my future. These mentors saved my life. Without them, there is zero chance I'd be a college graduate, an attorney, a judge—or that I would be standing before you and beside the Chief Judge of the State of New York in the beautiful Court of Appeals Hall.

I wanted to replicate that for the young defendants in my court. I had an idea that I shared with my close colleague and friend, John Caher, and our work together resulted in the creation of a court-based mentoring program called "U-CAN," which stands for United Against Crime Community Action Network.

This is how it works: Young defendants who we, as a team, are convinced truly want to turn their life around but don't know how plead guilty and are placed on a year of interim probation. Sentencing is deferred for a year of tough love—with support and structure. When I say "team"—everyone has to agree, the judge, DA, defense attorney and probation, before a defendant is accepted into the program.

During that year, they are held to the typical conditions of probation, plus they have to meet with their volunteer mentor an hour a week, hold a job, make a good faith effort to obtain their GED and come to court once a month for an update. If they dot their “i’s” and cross their “t’s,” at the end of the year the misdemeanor charge is dismissed and they leave court with a clean slate. More importantly, they leave court with a newly discovered self-confidence, a strong work ethic, a high school diploma or GED and hope for their future.

In Cohoes, we had a success rate of 80%. The model is so successful that it has been adopted in many other courts around the state, though it could be implemented in many more. When I took the Albany County Court bench in 2020, I wasn’t sure if U-CAN would work. In County Court, I deal in felonies, and many of the young adults on my caseload involve gun possession crimes. The risks are high.

And then a case came before me of a young man charged with criminal possession of a weapon. He had no prior convictions, no prior arrests and no known gang connections. We got him into U-CAN. Over the course of the year, this young man’s performance was perfect, so perfect that the DA—who originally insisted on a violent felony conviction and two years in state prison—allowed him to plead to a misdemeanor. It is my honor, privilege and pleasure to introduce you to the very first graduate of the Albany County Court felony U-CAN program: the recently promoted Lance Corporal Anthony Garcia of the United States Marine Corps.

Remarks of LCpl Anthony Garcia

My name is Anthony Garcia. I’m here to tell you about how participating in the U-CAN program put me on the path I’m on today.

For most of my life, I’ve lived in the Albany/Schenectady area. I grew up in a single-parent household. Money was tight, and having enough food wasn’t a guarantee. I dropped out of high school so I could get a job and help pay the bills. While working different jobs to make ends meet, I made a lot of “friends.” But they were not my friends at all; they were into the gang life and drugs. I was never in a gang, but because I was around people who were, I was afraid for my safety, and for what would happen to my mom if anything happened to me. I got a weapon to protect myself.

One Monday morning in 2019, on my way to work, I got pulled over by a state trooper. The trooper searched my car and found the weapon in my trunk. I was arrested and taken to the Albany County Jail. I was charged with criminal possession of a weapon.

Even though I had no priors, my lawyer told me that I was facing real time in state prison. My family somehow managed to make the \$35,000 bail, so I got a job at Walmart while I waited on my case.

Right before I was supposed to be sentenced, my lawyer learned about the U-CAN program. If I successfully completed the program, I could stay out of jail and plead to a lesser charge: a misdemeanor instead of a felony. I knew this was my second chance at life, and I grabbed it with both hands.

During my year in the U-CAN program, I maintained a job; I kept on a straight path with my probation officer, including always having clean drug tests; I met frequently with mentor, Miguel; and every second Friday of the month, I went to a U-CAN meeting at court with Judge Ackerman. At those meetings, Judge Ackerman would gather all the U-CAN participants and call us up one by one to share the progress reports she was hearing from our probation officers, mentors, and others in our lives. Whenever it was my turn, Judge Ackerman always told me she was proud of me. And the mentor U-CAN paired me with: I don't know how they made such a perfect match. My mentor, Miguel, became like family; we would meet more than we were required to, usually in the gym—and he pushed and supported me, both emotionally and physically.

My last day in U-CAN was very special. Everyone was there: my mother, my brother, my mentor, my then-girlfriend, who is now my wife. It was an emotional moment because Judge Ackerman and everyone there truly loved me. It was the day I said to myself, “I did it.” I made it off the streets. I turned my life around.

Since graduation, I have continued on my new path in life. I played semi-pro football and started two LLCs: one focused on personal training, the other on pre- and post-workout nutritional supplements. Even though I loved that work and was making money, I decided to enlist in the Marines. I am now a Lance Corporal in the Marine Corp. and am currently stationed at Camp LeJeune in North Carolina.

I see the Marines as a stepping stone to my ultimate goal: I want to be in law enforcement. I want to be the police officer who is in his community, protecting and serving; who steps out of the squad car to play basketball; who works to understand and earn trust in his community. I am not mad at the trooper who arrested me five years ago. He was doing his job and took a gun off the street. I often think that if he hadn't arrested me, I would have ended up in one of two places: in prison, or the graveyard. Instead, I have met Judge Ackerman, and my mentor Miguel. I joined the Marines, and I am here with you today to share my story. I'm grateful for the opportunity to have turned my life around, and I plan to spend the rest of my life paying it forward.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

It is easy, through institutional indifference, to allow a life to waste. It is much harder to nurture a life in trouble. We want to work harder and do better. Judge Ackerman and Lance Corporal Garcia are the inspirational proof of concept.

Thank you both for sharing your stories with us.

Our next segment will take us into family court. Those who enter our family courts are there to resolve difficulties relating to the most precious people and relationships in their lives. With so much at stake, those who come to family court are often at their most vulnerable.

Last December, I saw an email about a veteran court officer at Kings County Family Court who handled one such moment of vulnerability with exceptional compassion and grace. That email was written by Mr. Brian Zimmerman, an accomplished and longtime practitioner in family court. Here to introduce you to that court officer is Mr. Zimmerman.

Introduction by Brian Zimmerman, Esq.

For the last 37 years I have had the privilege and good fortune to work in Family Court at a job I love, in a place where the work is so meaningful: a place where one case may bring sadness and another, happiness; a place where day in and day out you are helping people emotionally through truly difficult times—from protecting a domestic violence victim, to litigating whether a child needs to be removed from their home, to helping a parent obtain visitation rights or custody, to helping a child with their immigration status by petitioning the Court to make Special Immigrant Juvenile Status findings, to protecting the rights of a youth charged with a juvenile delinquency act. While not a job for everyone, it is as rewarding as any job can be.

Family Court remains drastically under resourced. There are not enough lawyers, jurists, or support staff to handle the volume of cases requiring prompt attention, but each day, every person who works in those Courts does what they can to make the lives of the parties better. The jurists, attorneys, Clerks and Court officers choose to be there because it is such an important Court. Sadly, for Family Court practitioners, caseloads far exceed what anyone handling these cases should maintain. Still, those walking the halls of Family Court will never turn our backs on those in need, and though we have different roles we collaborate to find the best solutions for the families we serve.

That collaboration is what brings me here today. Last year, I represented three children in a matter that deeply touched me and represents what Family Court is truly about. Like many families we see, there was a history of the Court helping the family. Recent discord

between one teenager and her parents led the family back to Court. I was assigned to represent the siblings whose lives were suddenly thrust into limbo about whether they could stay with their parents. During the hearing last December, a day when the Judge spoke privately and reassuringly to my clients, they had hoped the Court would arrive at a decision in their case. When the Judge did not announce her decision that day, one of the siblings, an older teenager who had been keeping it together for days, reached a breaking point and let her feelings be known to me, asking “why do I have to wait one more day,” as her emotions welled up. Her family life, school friendships and education, had been disrupted for almost a week. I knew that Officer Byrd, a member of my Family Court family would instinctively know what to say to my client so I asked him if he would help her in the moment, which he did without hesitation. His kindness helped the three kids hold on for one more day. His generosity to not just my clients, but also the parents, moved all those on this case.

We, who choose to spend our lives in Family Court helping those in need, recognize that every litigant is there fighting for their families, their safety, their dignity. We wear many hats; I, a lawyer, and Steve, a Court Officer. We are part counselor, mediator, and a shoulder to lean upon. Today, I ask you to celebrate Officer Byrd and all the amazing officers he works with, the assigned counsel panels, institutional lawyers, Jurists, clerks, interpreters, in appreciation of the profound good that every small act of kindness can have in the Court.

Remarks of Officer Steven Byrd

Thank you, Mr. Zimmerman. Good afternoon.

When Mr. Zimmerman asked me to speak to his clients, this case had been ongoing for some weeks, so I was somewhat familiar with the family. I began with how very proud I am of them. I acknowledged this is a very difficult time and assured them, there’s a whole team (Judge Williams, Mr. Zimmerman, the other attorneys, and caseworkers) committed to helping their family, and I stressed that what they were doing was amazing! That their faith in God, the love they showed their parents, how they cared for their little brother, and for their schoolwork; that all of this was a great help to their parents. I encouraged them to stay focused and let nothing deter them from their goals, their dreams; because storms are going to come, but given time, they will eventually pass, and the love of their family would remain strong. I implored them to be patient and reminded them they had Mr. Zimmerman to talk to. I then asked if I could pray for them. They said yes and I did so on my own. Lastly, I told them to stay great.

This is generally my approach with every member of our community, as they come into Family Court: speaking with them and wishing them well, when I see they are struggling. I imagine having to go before a judge, in any courthouse, can cause a person to be nervous or to have their guard up, but I tend to believe emotions are even higher in the Family Courts. As Officers, we are the first point of contact for the community entering court and it's our responsibility to set the tone. Yes, maintaining order and ensuring the safety of persons and property may, at times, require a hands-on approach, but sometimes it may just require a little compassion. Just being courteous, or taking a minute to interview and listen, or even the simple gesture of helping a youth tie his tie, can often make all the difference; help diffuse disputes or help ease tensions. This, to me, is what it means to be a Court Officer, what lets me know I've done my job: I secured my post, and I was helpful.

My late sister, Wanda, was a Court Officer in the late '70s/early '80s. I know that she, and my late parents, Richard and Dorothy Byrd, are with me today. I like to believe they are proud, because the values they instilled in me—having respect and empathy for others, showing kindness, and just plain taking the time to listen and to care—are still with me, and I practice them daily.

The Lord willing, I'll wake up tomorrow, hug my Beloved Wife, Shanée, (herself a Court Officer for 26 years, now a Senior Court Clerk) and then, I'll get to go work with The Honorable Judge Jacqueline D. Williams, in Kings County Family Court. And if Jesus Christ allows, I'll gratefully continue serving the people, straight to year 30, for myself and for my sister. Thank you. I wish you God's Blessings.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

The challenges faced by our family courts are numerous and well-documented. As Mr. Zimmerman noted, our family courts are drastically under-resourced. We are grateful to the Legislature and Governor, who last year added 13 new family court judgeships. Looking ahead, we are also seeking funding for 28 more family court judgeships and necessary staff, as well as funding to increase overall nonjudicial staffing levels, including in-part positions such as interpreters, senior court clerks, and court officers. However, those resources will not make a difference unless legal service providers are funded at levels that allow them to attract and retain lawyers to handle matters in family court. Family court facilities are, in some places, a further problem, because the buildings are owned by the cities or counties where they are located, not the courts or the State, and vital repairs and enhancements are often ignored or incompletely addressed. One bright spot is Nassau County, where a brand

new state-of-the-art facility opening this fall will house family court, matrimonial and youth parts, an integrated domestic violence court, and a family court drug treatment part, and will have spaces for present and future support services.

Thank you, Mr. Zimmerman and Officer Byrd, for being here today and for all you both do in family court.

I wanted to complete today's program with another vignette from family court, to emphasize that finding ways to better serve New York's families in distress—including through collaboration with our colleagues in the Legislature and the Governor's office—remains at the forefront of our priorities.

Retired Family Court Judge Susan Danoff is an octogenarian who still works four days a week in family court because she knows the good that can be done by someone who cares and understands the difficulties faced by family members in distress. She presides in what we call the Youth Transition Part, a court that is geared to the needs of teens in foster care who wish to be discharged to themselves as independent adults, rather than remaining in foster care, being adopted or being returned to a parent or guardian. No one smooths out the hard-knock life better than the Honorable Susan Danoff.

Introduction by Hon. Susan Danoff

Good afternoon to everyone here in this beautiful, historic courthouse and to those family, friends and colleagues joining us virtually. Judge Wilson, thank you for inviting me to speak today—it is an honor.

I want to tell you a little bit about myself. I went to college when I was 38 years old and then I went to law school. It took me ten years to become a lawyer. So, I always tell people, “It doesn't matter WHEN you do something; it matters THAT you do it!” The one person in my life I owe everything to is my wonderful husband of 60 years, Marty. He has always been the wind under my wings; the person who said, “Yes, you can” when I thought I could not; the person who had the dream before I ever had the thought!

Since becoming a lawyer, I have spent my entire career working in Family Court: first as a court attorney to the Hon. Paula Hepner, who became my mentor and dearest friend and who taught me everything I needed to know professionally—to work hard with commitment and to be courageous. In 2004, I became a Family Court judge, and I presided over child abuse and neglect cases as well as Family Treatment Court, a special court for drug- and alcohol-addicted parents. When I turned 70 in 2012, the law required me to retire as a judge.

Since May 1, 2013, I have worked as a Judicial Hearing Officer, a fancy title for a retired judge. I work four days a week (so much for retirement!), two days in the Bronx County Family Court, and two days in Kings County Family Court. My courtroom in both boroughs is called the Youth Transition Part, a special court for children between the ages of 16 and 21, who are in foster care but, rather than being adopted or returning to parents or guardians, wish to become independent adults. During the hearings I hold, I ensure the young people receive educational, housing, mental health and many other services. I have created a safe and welcoming place for my court kids to appear where they feel heard and respected. Every day I have the opportunity to make a difference in each of their lives. You can imagine that at the age of 81, how blessed I feel to continue to work, because I don't LIKE my job, I LOVE my job!

I always say that if we keep ourselves open to the universe, amazing things can happen. One day last year in March, something extraordinary happened to me. After one of my virtual hearings concluded and after everyone had signed off, the Case Planner who worked for the agency, stayed on and asked whether she could speak to me. She asked, "Do you remember me?" I said, "You know I never forget a face. So yes, I do recognize you." She said, "I was one of your kids in Brooklyn!!" I almost fell off my chair because in the 11 years I have been doing this work, none of my kids had ever come back to me in this way! She then said, "I remember everything you told me and how dedicated you were and when you gave me a Happy Birthday cupcake just before I turned 21 in 2017." She filled me in on all she had achieved since the last time we met, and I told her, "I am SO PROUD of you!"

And so, here we are today to hear directly from one of my court kids—Yenifer Santana, a wonderful person who was in foster care and who emerged triumphant. How courageous she is to be here today willing to share her personal journey with total strangers. Yenifer, I continue to be so proud of you. The floor is yours.

Remarks of Yenifer Santana

Good afternoon. My name is Yenifer Santana. I am a Case Planner with the Lutheran Social Services of New York. In my job, I support children and families involved in New York City's foster care system. Being able to do this work every day means the world to me, because I was once a youth in foster care.

I was born in the Dominican Republic and had a happy childhood. I had lots of friends, played outside, and grew up in a community where everyone knew me and my family since I was little. When I was in the 7th grade, my dad and his wife—my stepmother—decided to move to the United States and brought me with them. Moving without my own mother, to a new country where I didn't know the language, was hard. But I worked harder: I

learned English and made the honor roll in school. But things at home started to go bad. My stepmother became emotionally and physically abusive. My dad packed his things and left, leaving me with her. My stepmother would hit me, scream at me, withhold food, and force me to cook and keep the entire apartment clean. When I got pregnant at age 16, she kicked me out of the house, and my dad refused to even talk to me. I was afraid and on my own, and was placed in a foster home. My foster parents were kind and supportive, and I developed a close bond with them. And shortly after I moved into their house, I gave birth to my daughter. She cried loudly as she was born, but she got quiet the moment they first placed her on my chest. Right then, I made a promise to her that I would do everything I could to give her a better life than I had, and to make sure she would not go through everything I went through.

Judge Danoff was my judge for part of my time in family court. Whenever I was before her, she would ask me, “How are you? How is the baby? Are you both getting everything you need?” She would also tell me, “I’m so proud of you. You can do whatever you set your mind to doing, and I can’t wait to see what else you become.” Her words touched me. They gave me more fuel to keep going.

And, I kept going! I graduated from high school with a high GPA. I got accepted to the Borough of Manhattan Community College, and graduated with an associate’s degree in psychology two years later. During that time, I also got married and got pregnant with my second daughter. Then, I got accepted to my dream school—the City College of New York—and in 2021, as a mom of two, I graduated with my bachelor’s in psychology.

Today, I feel so fortunate to be a Case Planner with my agency. Case Planners “do it all”—we do home visits, we follow up with our kids’ schools, we ensure our kids are getting medical care they need, and we report back to the court to ensure it has the information it needs to make decisions. Many of the kids remind me of me, and supporting them gives me a deep sense of meaning.

But I also love supporting the kids’ parents. I let each parent I work with know that the main goal is for each child to return home. I consider it my job to help those parents be the best parent they can be so the child doesn’t return to care. I am so deeply passionate about working to break the cycles of intergenerational trauma that too often get passed down from parent to child, parent to child. I am hopeful for the possibilities the future holds for the families of the youths in my care, for my daughters, and for myself.

Thank you.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Ms. Santana’s story exemplifies everything one could wish for an individual going through family court. She took what she learned in court and has not only devoted her personal life to creating a safe and stable home for her own family, but she has devoted her professional life to helping other families do the same.

Thank you, Judge Danoff and Ms. Santana.

Closing Remarks

Transforming a judicial system from one in which the dominant paradigm is the determination of right and wrong, into one in which the dominant paradigm is arriving at the best solution for each individual situation, may appear to be an extraordinarily difficult task. But when I think about the difficulties surmounted by the people you’ve heard from today, I am confident that we can do so. I am not foolish enough to believe that even the best courts and best services can solve every mental health or substance abuse problem, or prevent all crime, or find homes for everyone. But I believe we can do better—much better—if those who work for and with the State of New York work collaboratively toward that objective.

Because of the commitment of thousands of dedicated civil servants, because of the commitment of the nearly 1,300 State jurists who are among the finest in the nation—the Unified Court System is a national leader at innovating the concept of justice. But the court system is under-staffed and under-resourced. Even if our increased budget request for next year is fully granted, our operating budget will be 10% lower than what it was in 2012 on an inflation-adjusted basis. Due to past fiscal crises and accompanying budget cuts, the courts have been forced to make do with less. With greater resources—not just for the courts themselves, but for the attorneys and ancillary providers vital to treating troubled New Yorkers with professionalism, care and compassion—I am confident that we can find ourselves overflowing in happy endings.

And happily, the ending is where we are now! Thank you, all, for your time and trust.



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