



# PRESS RELEASE

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**New York State  
Unified Court System**

**Hon. Anne E. Minihan  
Administrative Judge  
Ninth Judicial District**

**Contact:  
Joseph Palazzo  
Deputy Chief Clerk  
White Plains City Court  
[jpalazzo@nycourts.gov](mailto:jpalazzo@nycourts.gov)**

**[www.nycourts.gov/press](http://www.nycourts.gov/press)**

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## **Misdemeanor Mental Health Court Opens in Westchester**

**WHITE PLAINS, NEW YORK**—Ninth Judicial District Administrative Judge Anne Minihan today announced the launch of the Westchester Misdemeanor Wellness Court (WMWC), a specialized court for individuals charged with misdemeanors in Westchester County living with a serious mental illness that affects their day-to-day functioning.

Located in White Plains City Court, the WMWC will offer eligible individuals court-supervised, community-based treatment and services as an alternative to conventional prosecution, addressing participants' treatment and criminogenic needs while balancing the public safety concerns of the community. Participation in the WMWC is voluntary.

Treatment plans will be tailored to each participant's needs, with the WMWC offering a range of services, such as mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, housing assistance, education assistance and job training. Those who fulfill the court's treatment and other requirements may have their charges reduced or dismissed.

The new court is a collaborative effort of the Ninth Judicial District, the Westchester County District Attorney's Office, the County's Departments of Probation and Community Mental Health, the local defense bar and local service providers, among others. The New York State Court System's Office for Justice Initiatives' Division of Policy and Planning, under the leadership of Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Richardson-Mendelson and Hon. Toko Serita, has been working with the WMWC throughout the planning and implementation process.

To be accepted into the program, WMWC participants must be deemed eligible by the District Attorney's Office and the Westchester Department of Community Mental Health, enter a guilty plea (except in rare circumstances) and enter into a participation agreement with the assistance of defense counsel. WMWC participants are closely monitored and required to appear in court weekly for a minimum of six months, directly interacting with the judge and reporting to the court's care coordinator. Additionally, some WMWC participants may be assigned peer mentors.

Referrals to the WMWC may be made by any Town, Village or City Court in Westchester County; referrals may also come from the County's District Attorney's Office, Department of Community Mental Health, Department of Probation, local defense bar and/or local law enforcement.

Starting today, the WMWC will operate on Thursday afternoons. White Plains City Court Judge Eric Press will serve as the WMWC's presiding judge.

"With the launch of the Westchester Misdemeanor Wellness Court, the Ninth Judicial District moves forward in search of innovative ways for communities and courts to collaborate in reducing recidivism while serving the treatment needs of justice-involved litigants living with serious mental illness. Implementing this project will, we hope, help to break the cycle of incarceration and guide participants toward wellness and stability in the community," said Judge Minihan.

“Westchester County stakeholders came together over the course of many months to plan the Westchester Misdemeanor Wellness Court, which will further enhance access to the criminal justice system, help to achieve better case outcomes and improve public safety. I am grateful to our many community partners and stakeholders for their ongoing support of court initiatives designed to improve criminal justice responses to people with serious mental illness and other behavioral health needs,” said Judge Richardson-Mendelson.

“The WMWC is a welcome addition to the New York State Unified Court System’s more than 300 problem-solving courts, which focus on comprehensively and holistically addressing the behavioral health needs of justice-involved individuals. I look forward to supporting the Hon. Eric Press and the rest of the WMWC team as they begin the hard work of identifying and responding to the unique needs of people living with serious mental illness,” said Judge Serita.

“I am grateful to the Courts and our partner advocates for heeding our call and helping us bring to Westchester County a misdemeanor mental health court, which will serve as a practical and humane alternative for individuals who commit low-level crimes and are in need of treatment and services. In addition to it being the right thing to do, the WMWC will also be an effective early intervention tool, to help prevent some individuals from committing more serious or violent felony crimes in the future,” said District Attorney Rocah.

“As a defense attorney with the Legal Aid of Westchester County who has worked in the felony mental health court since its inception, I am keenly aware of the need for similar services to be offered to clients at the local level. I was privileged to be part of the planning for this court and thrilled it is becoming a reality. It has a great team, with Judge Press at the helm,” said Robin Bauer, Senior Attorney, Legal Aid Society, Westchester County.

“Westchester County has a long history of working to ensure that people with mental health and substance use needs get the help and treatment that is appropriate for them. The Misdemeanor Wellness Court will serve as an alternative to prosecution and connect individuals whose needs have previously been unmet with treatment that will prevent them from intersecting with law enforcement. By collaborating with our partners in the criminal justice system, we are likely to have better outcomes for participants and a safer community for everyone,” said Westchester County Executive George Latimer.

There are currently 42 Mental Health Courts in operation across the State, including 25 Misdemeanor Mental Health Courts, with more in the planning stages. Further information about New York’s mental health and other problem-solving courts is available at: [http://ww2.nycourts.gov/COURTS/problem\\_solving/index.shtml](http://ww2.nycourts.gov/COURTS/problem_solving/index.shtml).

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