

## BUILDING BRIDGES TO THE COMMUNITY

**A** strong court system is independent—free of partiality, protected from transient pressures, focused on the rule of law. While the New York judicial branch cherishes this bedrock institutional value, it also recognizes that courts exist in the community to serve the community. The strongest courts are thus independent in their decisionmaking, but in other respects responsive to the public's needs and concerns. In 1998, the New York State court system pursued several projects to boost the public's understanding of and respect for our system of justice.

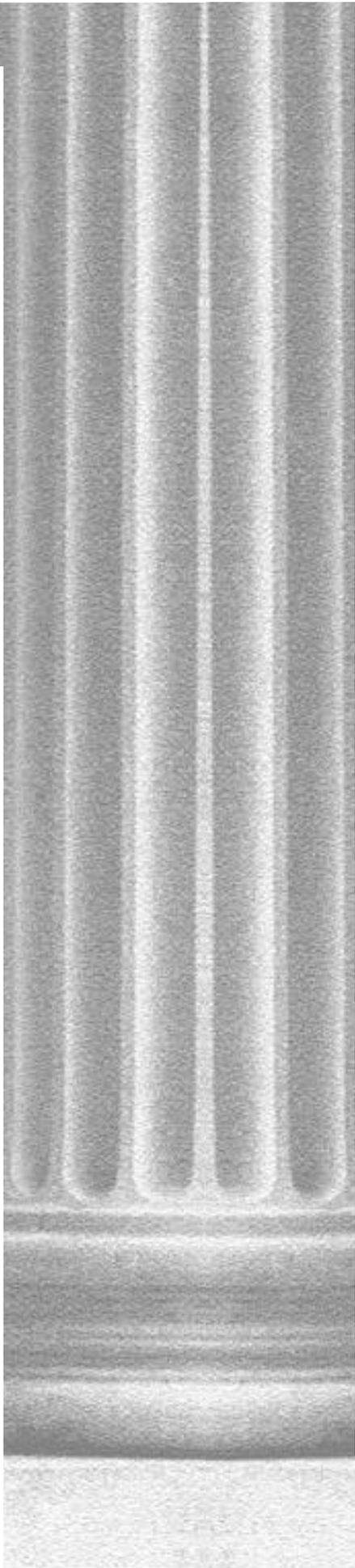
### **Community Resource Centers**

Stepping inside a courthouse for the first time and navigating through court procedures can be intimidating, especially for self-represented litigants. To make the courts more accessible to the public, the Unified Court System is working with local community centers to bring information about court facilities, services and procedures to localities that have traditionally been geographically removed from the courts.

The State's first community resource centers opened last year in the Bronx and Brooklyn to assist local residents who have legal conflicts and need help understanding how courts work. On-site volunteer advisors are available at the resource centers to respond to residents' inquiries and make referrals. They also distribute informational materials on a wide range of legal matters including divorce and separation, domestic violence, child neglect, tenants' and landlords' rights, crime victims' programs, bankruptcy and debt collection, employment law and trust and estate planning. The centers also hold forums on law-related topics of local interest, hosted by legal experts. At the Brooklyn resource center, located in Crown Heights, attorneys and advocates are on hand to aid local residents with housing and immigration matters; the goal is to extend their services to other areas of the law.

### **Red Hook and Harlem Community Justice Centers**

Building on the model of the award-winning Midtown Community Court that opened in Midtown Manhattan in 1993, the New York courts will open two new community justice centers later



this year. The two centers—one located in a former parochial school in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the other in a vacant magistrate’s courthouse in Harlem—will combine the functions of courthouse and community center to help solve neighborhood problems like youth crime, deteriorating housing stock and drug abuse.

The courthouses in both centers will be multi-jurisdictional, using a single judge to preside over a wide variety of cases. Low-level offenders will pay back the neighborhood through such projects as painting over graffiti, cleaning streets and helping out local nonprofit organizations. In addition, the Justice Centers will provide on-site drug treatment, job training, child care and other services to help lawbreakers turn their lives around.

Spearheaded by the Center for Court Innovation, the Justice Centers are the product of a unique alliance between the community, the City of New York, private foundations and state and federal government.

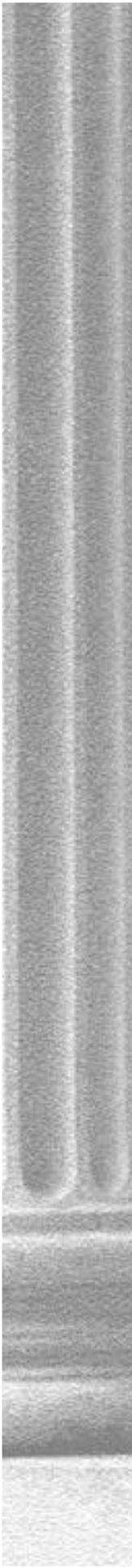
Both the Red Hook and Harlem Centers have convened Youth Courts that use peer pressure to fight vandalism, public drinking and other low-level youth crimes. These programs provide “juries of their peers” for youths who have acknowledged responsibility for their offenses and agree to participate. Working with local police, the Youth Court holds young offenders accountable by sentencing them to community service, letters of apology and anger management workshops.

The Red Hook Justice Center has also launched a unique community service program designed to make Red Hook a cleaner and safer place to live. Created in 1995, the Red Hook Public Safety Corps puts 50 local residents to work helping domestic violence victims, fixing broken locks and windows and providing intake and referral services at Brooklyn’s Housing and Criminal Courts.

## **The New York State Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts**

Composed of judges, court officials, bar association representatives and practicing attorneys, the New York State Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts works with court administrators and outside institutions to fulfill its mandate of eradicating the vestiges of gender bias from New York’s courts.

The Committee relies on education as a primary tool for forging change. Through its local gender bias and gender fairness



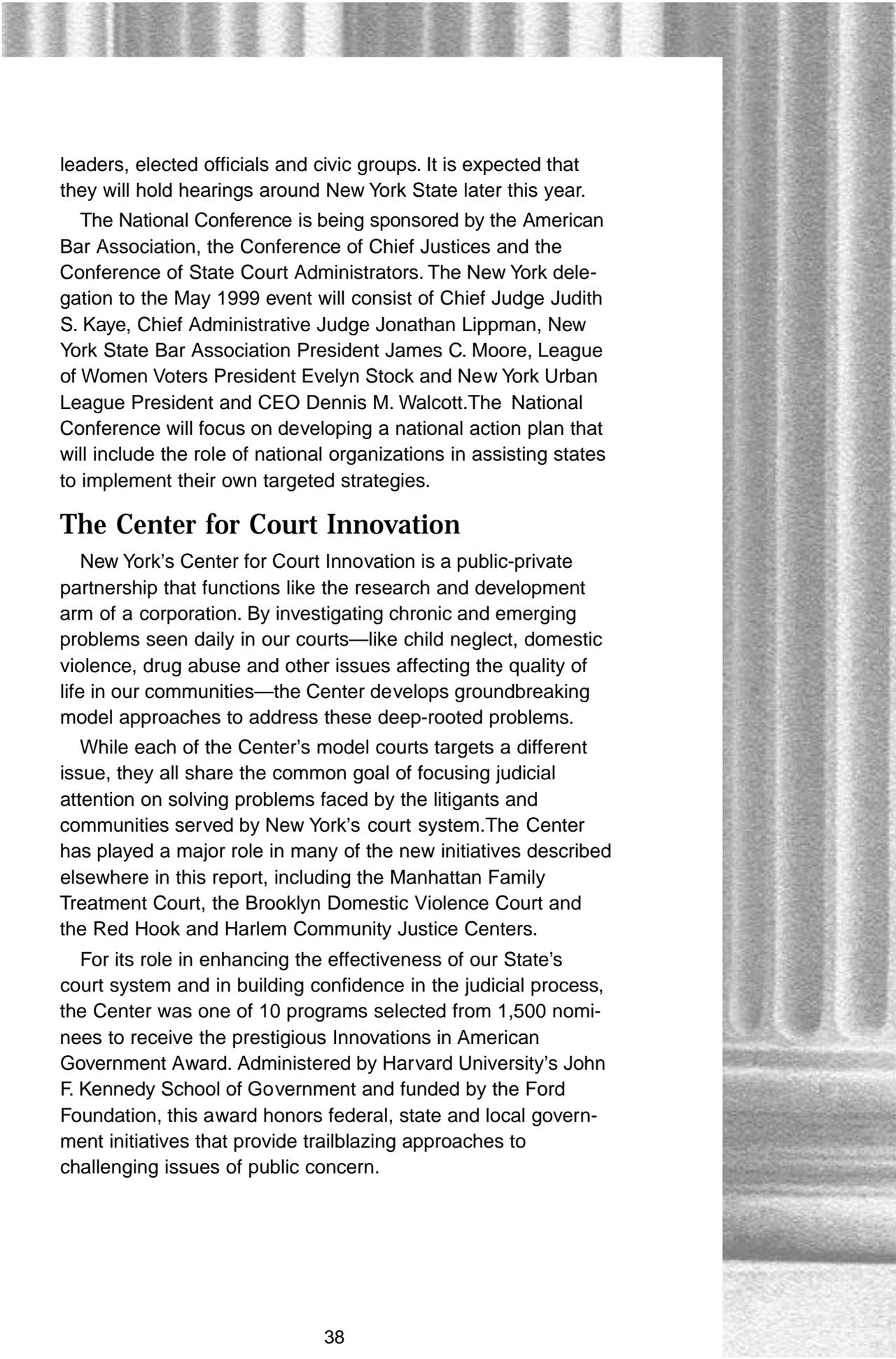
committees organized under the auspices of administrative judges, the Committee helped present programs for Domestic Violence in the Workplace Day on October 1. Joining forces with bar associations and advocacy groups, the Committee assisted with programs on domestic violence, sexual harassment and matrimonial practice. To further spread the word about gender fairness, the Committee produced a second edition of its pamphlet "Fair Speech: Gender Neutral Language in the Courts," readied a new booklet for printing called "On the Bench: Judicial Responses to Gender Bias," and continued publishing its newsletter. The Committee also recommended that the Unified Court System include on its application for employment inquiries about compliance with court orders for child and spousal support, and drafted legislation to improve the mechanism for enforcing support orders in Supreme Court.

### **The Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities**

The Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities was established in 1991 to work on assuring fair and equal treatment—free from the taint or the perception of bias—for all individuals in the Unified Court System. In 1998, the Commission met with representatives from minority-owned banks to discuss the issue of equal access to capital for communities that may have difficulty accessing financing from larger financial institutions. It continued to monitor the issue of hiring and promotion of employees within the court system, developing strategies for increasing available opportunities for minority candidates. The Commission also continued to participate in judicial training programs, this past year presenting a program entitled "Police Brutality and Abuse—What Impact on the Criminal Justice System and the Judiciary."

### **Committee to Promote Public Trust and Confidence in the Legal System**

In preparation for a National Conference on Building Public Trust and Confidence in the Justice System, the Unified Court System has appointed a New York State Committee to develop a list of public trust concerns and propose strategies to address the issues raised. The State advisory group includes representatives of the bench and bar, the media, business and labor



leaders, elected officials and civic groups. It is expected that they will hold hearings around New York State later this year.

The National Conference is being sponsored by the American Bar Association, the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators. The New York delegation to the May 1999 event will consist of Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye, Chief Administrative Judge Jonathan Lippman, New York State Bar Association President James C. Moore, League of Women Voters President Evelyn Stock and New York Urban League President and CEO Dennis M. Walcott. The National Conference will focus on developing a national action plan that will include the role of national organizations in assisting states to implement their own targeted strategies.

## **The Center for Court Innovation**

New York's Center for Court Innovation is a public-private partnership that functions like the research and development arm of a corporation. By investigating chronic and emerging problems seen daily in our courts—like child neglect, domestic violence, drug abuse and other issues affecting the quality of life in our communities—the Center develops groundbreaking model approaches to address these deep-rooted problems.

While each of the Center's model courts targets a different issue, they all share the common goal of focusing judicial attention on solving problems faced by the litigants and communities served by New York's court system. The Center has played a major role in many of the new initiatives described elsewhere in this report, including the Manhattan Family Treatment Court, the Brooklyn Domestic Violence Court and the Red Hook and Harlem Community Justice Centers.

For its role in enhancing the effectiveness of our State's court system and in building confidence in the judicial process, the Center was one of 10 programs selected from 1,500 nominees to receive the prestigious Innovations in American Government Award. Administered by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and funded by the Ford Foundation, this award honors federal, state and local government initiatives that provide trailblazing approaches to challenging issues of public concern.