



*The State of Our
Judiciary 2017*

CHIEF JUDGE JANET DiFIORE

NEW YORK STATE UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM

BRONX COUNTY HALL OF JUSTICE

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22



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STATE OF OUR JUDICIARY

W elcome to the Bronx County Hall of Justice and the 2017 “State of Our Judiciary.” Thank you all for being here.

I am pleased to report that our Judiciary is fundamentally sound, that our trial and appellate judges are working hard, that we are adopting better management systems and that we have improved our performance over the past year. This is not to downplay our many challenges. We are acutely aware that there is much about our court system that needs to improve further, and we are working diligently to bring those needed improvements to the rest of our system.

Last month, I completed my first full year as Chief Judge. It has been an exciting, demanding and satisfying year working with my six colleagues on the Court of Appeals to decide cases of statewide importance and serving as the chief executive of one of the largest, busiest and most complex court systems in the world. Over three and a half million cases are filed in the New York courts every year – cases that affect just about every aspect of our lives and our communities.

Observant court watchers will note that today’s report bears a slightly different title than past reports delivered by my predecessors. I have renamed what had been called the “State of The Judiciary” to the “State of Our Judiciary.” This change reflects the solemn reality that our judicial system belongs to the people of the State of New York. Those of us who are privileged to serve as judges and nonjudicial employees are but stewards of something that is far larger than any collection of individuals, and which ultimately belongs to all New Yorkers.

Our judicial system belongs to the litigants who appear in our courts, to defendants who stand accused of crimes, to victims who are called to testify and to every person who serves on a grand jury or as a trial juror. It belongs to every one of our partners in government who provide us with the support and resources we need to administer justice, and it belongs to every person, business and entity that relies on our courts to uphold the rule of law. It is in recognition of this principle that as the Chief Judge of the State of New York I present to you today this report on our Judiciary.

In my report, I will be summarizing the broad sweep of business conducted by the New York State courts over the last year, and the status of our efforts to improve the delivery of justice services to all New Yorkers. I will highlight some of the early progress we have made, even as we continue to implement additional changes to move our judicial system forward.

THE EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE

When I was formally inducted into office on February 8, 2016, I announced the “Excellence Initiative” for the New York State Courts – my top priority as Chief Judge – focused on achieving and maintaining excellence in every facet of court operations: speeding the justice process, eliminating backlogs and delays, and introducing a range of reforms to improve the broader administration of justice and provide New Yorkers with the first-rate services they expect and deserve from their court system.

We began our Excellence Initiative with a comprehensive evaluation of court operations in order to identify which of our courts are performing well and which of our courts need to improve. As our first order of business, Chief Administrative Judge Lawrence Marks and I convened a meeting of our top court leaders – our Administrative Judges – at which we began the process of reviewing performance and trends in the trial courts throughout the state. Since that initial meeting in February of 2016, we have met with each Administrative Judge on a regular basis to discuss strategies to improve case processing times, disposition rates and trial capacity. At every meeting, Administrative Judges have reported on their progress and their plans for future improvement.

Throughout the process, we have focused – with laser precision – on performance measures, particularly the percentage of cases pending over “standards and goals,” our benchmarks for the timely resolution of cases. In examining the root causes of delay, we have reminded ourselves of the value of standards and goals as an important management tool to measure how well we are performing when it comes to providing timely justice to all those whose justice needs we serve.

THE BRONX

Before I begin to highlight the courts and districts that are making noteworthy progress in carrying out the goals of the Excellence Initiative, you may be wondering why I departed from the longstanding tradition of delivering the State of Our Judiciary in Albany, at Court of Appeals Hall. I chose to deliver the State of Our Judiciary in the Bronx, in this beautiful Hall of Justice, because the court system in the Bronx hasn’t always kept pace with public expectations and, in fact, has been an epicenter for many of the worst delays and backlogs plaguing our justice system.

During my first year as Chief Judge, the Bronx courts have been the subject of our intense attention. Our very able Administrative Judges in Bronx Supreme Court, Douglas McKeon for the Civil Term, and Robert Torres for the Criminal Term, and their judges and court staff, are deeply committed to improving their courts and are well on their way to turning things around and fulfilling our pledge to the people we serve.

Those of you seated in the center and rear of this room can look up and see the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., written on the sculpture hanging from the ceiling – “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Those words convey a stirring, hopeful message. We in the New York State courts are committed to ensuring that Dr. King’s vision of progress toward justice is realized through the work that we do – consistently bending our court system toward justice.

MISDEMEANORS IN THE NEW YORK CITY CRIMINAL COURT

Speaking of justice in people’s lives, here we are in one of the State’s largest criminal courthouses, where we can see, first-hand, how everyone suffers when justice is delayed – crime victims and their families, as they wait for justice to be done; prosecutors and their cases, as key witnesses move away, memories fade and evidence grows stale; and defendants, presumed innocent under the law, who must return to court over and over again or, too often, sit in jail waiting for their cases to be resolved because they can’t make bail or get a prompt trial.

We are changing this dynamic, and in highlighting the progress we have made I want to start with the Bronx County branch of the New York City Criminal Court, the court that hears misdemeanor cases. In cooperation with our criminal justice partners, we have moved aggressively to limit adjournments, manage cases more efficiently and expand our trial capacity. Judge George Grasso, our new Supervising Judge of the Bronx Criminal Court appointed this past June, has implemented a system under which the judges presiding in calendar parts are now managing their schedules to conduct trials every Friday. When parties know that the system is cleared for trial capacity and that trials actually will go forward, they are incentivized and required to prepare their cases and arrive ready for trial or prepared to seriously negotiate a resolution. In addition to his general oversight responsibilities, Judge Grasso personally presides over a special court part dedicated to resolving the oldest pending cases.

Our new “Trial Fridays” program has been an enormous success and greatly increased the disposition rate in Bronx County. Thanks to the leadership demonstrated by Supervising Judge Grasso – and the hard work of our Bronx trial judges and court staff – the oldest misdemeanor cases in this county have been reduced by 50% since last June, and the total number of pending misdemeanors has been reduced over the same period by 32% – remarkable progress which we fully expect to continue.

Make no mistake; we are not dancing in the end zone just yet. We have a long way to go to eliminate what is still an enormous backlog, but we have made a great start, and that progress has been hard earned and deserves to be recognized and applauded. So, thank you, to the judges and nonjudicial staff in Bronx Criminal Court for leading the way. And thank you to District Attorney Darcel Clark and her staff, and to all of our justice partners in the Bronx, including the Bar. We could not have achieved this progress – or accelerate the pace of improvements – without their support and cooperation.

We are exporting our successful “Bronx approach” to the rest of the New York City Criminal Court and seeing improvements in some parts of the City, most notably a 58% decrease in the oldest misdemeanor cases in the Manhattan Criminal Court. Thank you, Supervising Judge Tamiko Amaker, and the trial judges and court staff, for your excellent response and for your exemplary service in Manhattan.

The Summons Part of the New York City Criminal Court is where hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers appear every year for a wide range of lower-level public safety and quality of life offenses. This past December, in close cooperation with the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice (Director Elizabeth Glazer), and the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (Commissioner Lisette Camilo), the Summons Part was moved from its old Civic Center site in lower Manhattan to a newly renovated, user-friendly location in the landmark Municipal Building near City Hall. The new space houses a computerized central clearinghouse for the 330,000 summonses issued every year in the five boroughs. Our new facility coupled with our new technology and user-friendly procedures are already producing better, more efficient outcomes in the hundreds of thousands of cases processed through the Summons Court.

We have modernized and upgraded this court to make it more convenient to the public, provide more comprehensible information and encourage timely appearances by defendants, because failure to appear in court in these cases can – and often does – result in the issuance of an arrest warrant, causing major disruption in the lives of defendants and their families and adding to the overcrowding in our jails.

FELONIES

With regard to our more serious criminal matters, we have worked across the state to put in place processes to move felony cases through the criminal justice system more efficiently. Again, justice delayed harms everyone – victims, defendants and their families.

In the courts outside New York City, Suffolk County is leading the way. Administrative Judge Randy Hinrichs has done a remarkable job. Along with Judge Mark Cohen, the Supervising Judge of the felony courts, Judge Hinrichs has reorganized the case management process, creating a Trial Assignment Part to handle the most difficult-to-resolve cases. Their proactive approach to managing the case flow process has enabled Suffolk County to reduce the number of felony cases pending over standards and goals by a remarkable 58% over this past year. As Judge Hinrichs tells us, their success in Suffolk County would not have been possible without the cooperation of the District Attorney, the defense bar and, of course – and most important – the hard work and support of their trial judges and court staff.

The Suffolk County approach and other local strategies have been adopted by felony courts around the State, including neighboring Nassau County, where the number of older cases was unacceptably high and is now on a sustained downward trend. The Ninth Judicial District, under the leadership of Administrative Judge Alan Scheinkman, assisted by Supervising Judge of the felony courts, Barry Warhit, has made impressive reductions in their pending felony caseloads, with some counties within the Ninth District, like Westchester County, approaching zero cases pending over standards and goals.

In New York City, the number of older cases in our felony dockets, particularly in Bronx, Queens and Richmond Counties, is starting to go down, but we certainly have a long way to go to achieve overall excellence and efficiency. We have taken a number of important steps toward that goal, and I am confident we will get there. In Brooklyn, we have overhauled how the courts process felony cases, and we are working closely with the New York City Department of Correction to improve prisoner transportation to produce defendants in a timely fashion. In New York County, we are also restructuring the way felony cases are processed. In Bronx County, where one court part had a backlog of over 750 drug felonies, we started a special program last summer to attack these aging cases. Six months later, the pending caseload in that part is down by nearly 40% – an excellent start.

DASHBOARD

Smart leaders understand and know how to use – and leverage – the resources and the tools that are available to them to achieve success. A good deal of our early progress has come as the result of leveraging technology. Led by our amazing “tech” operation and Chip Mount, Director of Court Research and Technology, we have created a powerful new case management tool – called the “Dashboard.” The Dashboard enables judges and nonjudicial staff to review every detail of every court’s caseload in an easy-to-use spreadsheet format that can be filtered in any number of ways: by judge, court part, case type, age of case, next appearance date and so on. The Dashboard gives judges and administrators the ability to actively manage and control their dockets. As the maxim goes, if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it – we are now measuring and actively managing.

In the Seventh Judicial District, which includes the city of Rochester and eight counties in Western New York, Administrative Judge Craig Doran is using the Dashboard to identify felony cases that are not moving through the system efficiently. These cases are flagged and promptly transferred to a trial assignment part for a calendar call. Technology-enhanced case management, combined with adoption of new procedures, has led to increased dispositions and trials, with felony cases pending over standards and goals declining by 63% since the start of 2016. Thank you to Judge Doran and the Seventh District trial judges and staff who have dedicated themselves to excellence.

CIVIL JUSTICE

On the civil side of our house, nearly 1.5 million cases are filed in our courts every year: personal injury, foreclosure, complex commercial matters, matrimonial, breach of contract, consumer credit, landlord-tenant, probate, guardianship, and on and on.

Court congestion and delay adds to the already high cost of litigation and disrupts the personal and professional lives of the litigants, their businesses and their families. Litigation can be so costly and time consuming that sometimes plaintiffs with meritorious claims feel compelled to accept lower settlements, or small businesses will enter into unnecessary settlements, just to end the personal and financial burdens of litigation. In the commercial sector, delay in resolving disputes creates uncertainty and adds to the expense of doing business in New York, creating a less than optimal climate for economic growth and job creation.

We are working on many fronts to speed the civil justice process, increase dispositions and enhance public access. In Nassau County Supreme Court, for example, Administrative Judge Tom Adams has used the Dashboard and other techniques to dramatically reduce the number of foreclosures over standards and goals by 58%. Kings County Supreme Court, led by Administrative Judge Lawrence Knipel, has reduced the number of our oldest pending cases by 25%, and increased the number of foreclosures resolved by 62%. And in the Fourth Judicial District, which stretches from Schenectady County all the way to the Canadian border, Administrative Judge Vito Caruso has cut the number of oldest civil cases by 63% over the past year, thanks to focused management and plain, old-fashioned hard work by our judges and their staff.

At the same time, we are re-examining the way we use and assign our nonjudicial resources as a unified statewide system, and deploying them more creatively and flexibly to make sure that courts everywhere are staying current. In Suffolk County, which was hit hard by New York's residential mortgage foreclosure crisis, Judge Michael Coccoma, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for the Courts Outside New York City, designed a plan in which over 80 volunteer court attorneys from upstate New York were recruited to work on the large backlog of summary judgment motions in foreclosure cases. These court attorneys organized, got to work and drafted hundreds of decisions for review and ultimate disposition by Suffolk County judges – again, statewide use of statewide resources. Borrowing from this experience, we now have at the ready in New York City a special team of court attorneys that can be mobilized on short notice for the express purpose of responding to backlogs in motions and other delays in Supreme Court, Civil Term, throughout the City's five boroughs.

And in a similar move, last summer, prompted by our Excellence Initiative outreach, a private attorney called to describe the negative impact on his client caused by the delayed entry of a judgment in New York County. In following up on the lawyer's complaint, there was indeed a problematic backlog in the entry of judgments in the County Clerk's office. We moved expeditiously

to tackle the problem. Working in partnership with County Clerk Milton Tingling, and making citywide use of citywide resources, we developed a five-week plan to clear the backlog by deploying staff from neighboring County Clerks' offices and reassigning the existing staff. The backlog was cleared ahead of schedule and the wait time between submission and entry of judgment has been slashed from three months to less than two weeks for non-emergency cases – all redounding to the benefit of the litigants who rightly expect to have their matters resolved promptly and efficiently.

We are determined to achieve excellence as a statewide court system. Geographical boundaries and artificial practices that no longer make sense will not get in the way of our making decisions about personnel and resources that are in the best interests of our court system as a whole. Putting our resources to their highest and best use is a top priority of this administration.

COMMERCIAL DIVISION

We will also continue to take advantage of the lessons to be learned from our most successful courts. The Commercial Division of the Supreme Court, our internationally respected forum for the resolution of business disputes, has become a laboratory for reforms to streamline litigation, improve efficiency and reduce litigation costs. We are evaluating the impact of recent reforms implemented by the Administrative Board of the Courts at the suggestion of the Commercial Division Advisory Council, chaired so ably by Robert Haig of Kelley Drye & Warren, to determine which of these reforms can be exported to our non-commercial parts to improve the quality and efficiency of litigation throughout the entire civil justice system.

E-FILING

E-filing is another key piece of the Excellence Initiative, with over 1.3 million cases e-filed in our Supreme and Surrogate's Courts around the state. And thanks to legislation enacted in 2015, we are steadily expanding e-filing to additional courts and case types. We are launching a pilot program in the Appellate Division later this year, and working toward implementing e-filing in our Criminal and Family Courts as well.

And to be sure, while the benefits of e-filing are about convenience and cost-savings, e-filing also presents opportunities for us to make creative use of technology to improve justice services. For example, our recently launched Remote Access Order of Protection Program – the first such program of its kind in the nation to be implemented on a statewide basis – uses e-filing and Skype video-conferencing to enhance the safety of our most vulnerable litigants, affording domestic violence victims the ability to obtain emergency orders of protection from the safety of remote locations like shelters and hospitals.

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

In Family Court, a place where we simply cannot afford delays and inefficiencies for all of the obvious reasons, I am pleased to report that over the past year we have seen a 23% reduction in cases over six months old in the New York City Family Court. Under the leadership of Administrative Judge Jeanette Ruiz, the timely disposition of cases in New York City has been prioritized and best practices have been implemented. We are fast-tracking cases involving removal of children from unsafe environments, conducting more continuous trials and hearings and ensuring that “time certain” scheduling is used for all case types to reduce waiting time and inconvenience. These case management and calendar techniques are designed to minimize adjournments and delays, and to ensure that every scheduled court appearance is meaningful. We appreciate the fine work of Judge Ruiz and the hard working judges and nonjudicial staff in this very important court.

THE NEW YORK CITY HOUSING COURT

The pursuit of excellence in our courts includes the Housing Part of the New York City Civil Court, our busiest court, which hears up to 3,000 matters on any given day. With massive dockets, limited resources and tenants who overwhelmingly are unrepresented by counsel, the litigation experience in this court is often characterized by long waits, non-meaningful appearances and a great deal of frustration and confusion.

Because the residents of New York City deserve better, I am appointing a Special Commission on the Future of the New York City Housing Court, co-chaired by Peter Tom, the Acting Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department, and Supreme Court Justice Joan Lobis, both of whom were Housing Court judges themselves, to create a blueprint for the Housing Court’s future – one that balances efficiency with a commitment to just results that are achieved in an orderly, comprehensible fashion. The importance of having a blueprint for the future of the Housing Court is only underscored by New York City’s announcement a few days ago of a historic plan to ensure that all low-income tenants facing eviction have access to free legal services by 2022. This new development, coupled with the support we already receive through our State funding, is sure to advance the quality of justice in this important court. Thank you, Justices Tom and Lobis, for accepting the responsibility of leading this important initiative.

TOWN AND VILLAGE COURTS

Throughout the state there are close to 1,300 Town and Village Courts served by 2,200 justices who handle close to two million cases a year. These are the courts where our residents outside of cities are most likely to find themselves should they have an interaction with the justice system, involving everything from a traffic infraction or a small claims case, to a landlord-tenant matter or,

on the criminal side, a misdemeanor or felony arraignment. While these courts are locally funded and operated, they are part of the State's Unified Court System and we are committed to providing the crucial support and supervision necessary to run an excellent local court system. We have demonstrated our commitment through the planned purchase of an automated case management system to improve operations and information sharing, as well as funding for security, automation and equipment upgrades. Our local justice system will be more efficient and litigant-friendly as we move forward.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Over the last several years, under the leadership of my predecessor, Jonathan Lippman, and with the guidance of our Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, chaired by Helaine Barnett, New York has become a national leader in expanding access to civil legal services through increased funding, lawyer pro bono and thoughtful and innovative new strategies and programming. The \$100 million dollars that is now provided in our Judiciary budget to support civil legal services is estimated to yield a return of \$1 billion to our State – ten dollars for every dollar invested.

Our continued and dedicated investment in civil legal services is absolutely essential, but we know that the value of that investment is greatly diminished if we cannot and do not move cases through our courts with appropriate speed and efficiency. Our efforts to promote timely justice through the Excellence Initiative will enable us to get the most value for every taxpayer dollar that New York State invests in civil legal services for the poor and for every hour of pro bono that the Bar generously donates to make our justice system more accessible. I want to thank Governor Cuomo and the Legislature for their support and for recognizing the need for civil legal services funding and the sound investment it represents.

PURSUING EXCELLENCE IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

Ultimately, the focus of the Excellence Initiative is broader than issues of court operations and case management. It's about providing a sound foundation for excellence in judicial decision-making and justice services, and it's about supporting the ability of our judges to deliver high quality justice. That means, for us, constantly reexamining how business is being done in our courts, and how well we are interacting with and serving every one of our many different constituencies. It means the sustained pursuit of excellence – working every day to find better ways to serve the justice needs of our communities.

I want to thank those of you who have given us your comments and suggestions, many of which have resulted in changes we have made, and we encourage everyone – lawyers, litigants, members of the observing public – to continue to offer your ideas for improvement. We review every comment you take the time and effort to offer, and appreciate your sharing your views with us.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Earlier this month, as part of his State of the State Address, Governor Cuomo announced a six-point criminal justice reform plan. As head of the judicial branch of government, I could not be more encouraged or pleased with the Governor's announced plan for reform. We support his plan and look forward to working with him, with Majority Leader Flanagan, Speaker Heastie and the entire Legislature to move forward on smart, common sense reforms that will make our criminal justice system fairer, more efficient and more effective.

That means reforming our broken bail system, enacting legislation to help eliminate wrongful convictions by strengthening identification procedures and implementing electronic recording of custodial interrogations, raising the age of criminal responsibility, exploring speedy trial reforms, and continuing our ongoing efforts to strengthen and expand indigent criminal defense.

UNIFORM PRACTICE RULES IN THE APPELLATE DIVISION

For the appellate practitioners among us, you know well that New York does not have a uniform set of rules for appellate practice. Practitioners must look to three different articles of the CPLR and to a different set of court rules and procedures for each of the four Departments of the Appellate Division. This is confusing and unnecessary, and it needs to be fixed. Our Presiding Justices of the Appellate Division have formed a working group of clerks and staff to develop a uniform set of rules

that we will release for public comment by this fall. Harmonizing appellate practice is an important step in our pursuit of excellence. It will save attorneys time, save clients money and undoubtedly lead to fewer errors and rejections of non-complying papers.

CONSOLIDATED GUIDE TO NEW YORK STATE EVIDENCE

And for our practicing trial lawyers and judges, New York is one of the very few states that does not have a statutory code of evidence. Our law of evidence is scattered throughout thousands of judicial decisions, statutory provisions and court rules. For judges and lawyers, this is both frustrating and inefficient. This past July, I established an Advisory Committee on Evidence to create a single, definitive compilation of New York's law of evidence. Creating an accessible, easy-to-use guide for judges and lawyers will save research time, promote uniformity in applying the law, avoid erroneous rulings and improve the quality of legal proceedings.

Co-chairing this group of highly respected sitting and retired judges are former Court of Appeals Judge Susan Read and Nassau County Supreme Court Justice William Donnino, with Albany Law Professor Michael Hutter serving as counsel.

The Committee will publish the compilation in discrete sections, with the first publication anticipated by the end of this year. Legal practitioners and judges will benefit greatly from having a definitive treatise on New York's rules of evidence. Thank you, Judges Read and Donnino and the members of the Committee, for taking on this project.

TASK FORCE ON THE NEW YORK STATE CONSTITUTION

On election day this year, New Yorkers will have a historic opportunity to vote on whether or not to have a convention to potentially amend our State Constitution in 2019. If a constitutional convention is to be called, we must be prepared to participate as to all issues affecting our courts. In this regard, I have assembled a Task Force of leading judges, attorneys and constitutional scholars to review Article VI of the State Constitution, which establishes the structure, organization and jurisdiction of the Judiciary. A constitutional convention would give New Yorkers an important opportunity to modernize our judicial system.

The Task Force will ensure that the Judiciary is fully prepared to participate actively in any and all discussions that could lead to making our courts more efficient, accessible and responsive to public needs and expectations. The Task Force is being led by Justice Alan Scheinkman, Administrative Judge of the Ninth Judicial District, and attorney Dennis Glazer, a former partner at Davis Polk & Wardwell.

EXPANDING THE MISSION OF THE JUSTICE TASK FORCE

In 2009, then-Chief Judge Lippman created the Justice Task Force, to focus on identifying and eliminating the principal causes of wrongful convictions through systemic criminal justice reform. Now co-chaired by former Court of Appeals Judge Carmen Ciparick and Judge Mark Dwyer, and comprised of experienced judges, reform advocates, lawmakers and representatives of our State's criminal justice system – and supported by the outstanding and generous pro bono efforts of Davis Polk & Wardwell – the Task Force's recommendations have generated important reforms in New York State, including expansion of the DNA Databank and greater access to post-conviction DNA testing by criminal defendants, as well as best practices around electronic-recording of custodial interrogations and procedural safeguards for lineups and photo identifications.

I am pleased that these and other potential reforms are presently receiving the close attention of the legislative and executive branches, along with early and expanded discovery, improved forensic practices, and the recent ground breaking recommendations of the Justice Task Force that New York State trial judges issue standing orders at the outset of a criminal action addressing both the prosecution's constitutional and ethical duty to disclose favorable information to the defense as well as the duty of defense counsel to comply with statutory notice obligations of disclosure.

Having seen first-hand how effective the Task Force can be in effecting change, and having the highest respect for the abilities and motives of its members, I am expanding the original mission of the Justice Task Force to address broader issues of concern for a fair and effective criminal justice system, such as the impact of protracted delays on the disposition of cases, a review of ethical requirements and disciplinary measures for attorney conduct, and systemic problems in affording all persons due process. We look forward to the Task Force's expanded mission, and to implementing future recommendations into law and practice.

CHANGING THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

We have identified as our top priority strengthening our organizational culture and striving for excellence at every level. Judge Marks and I have worked to make certain that every judicial and court leader carrying out the mission and goals of the Excellence Initiative is given the support, the training and the tools they need to perform. Since last July, we've held a series of leadership training sessions conducted by recognized judicial leadership experts from the National Center for State Courts and the Harvard Executive Program for State Court Leaders. Our Administrative Judges, Supervising Judges and, very soon, our top nonjudicial managers from all around the State, will all have attended these training sessions. We want every leader to be given the opportunity to take their leadership skills to the next level and to be in a position to inspire their colleagues and staff to honor the mission and satisfy the goals of our Excellence Initiative.

We are empowering our leaders with a clear vision and a clear set of values. We have already seen what can be accomplished through refined leadership, creative thinking, collaboration and plain, old-fashioned hard work. In every courthouse, our judicial leaders and court managers are focused like never before on monitoring and improving the progress of caseloads, on supporting their staff and on devising practical solutions that make sense for their courts as they seek to deliver fair and timely justice.

And, because we know that proper training and education is critical to achieving operational and decisional excellence, I want to thank Judge Juanita Bing Newton, Dean of the New York State Judicial Institute, who has worked so hard over the past year to ensure that the philosophy and objectives of the Excellence Initiative are integrated into every educational training program for judges, court attorneys and court managers. To this end, we are re-introducing the Summer Judicial Seminars this year in order to give our front-line judges the kind of in-depth, skills-based training they need to help them manage their daily caseloads and address their operational challenges.

CONCLUSION

In New York, the position of Chief Judge is really two jobs rolled into one: serving as the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals and of the State of New York. Indeed, it is an immense privilege to lead our State's highest court. And so, before I conclude, I would like to recognize my colleagues on the Court of Appeals, whom I have come to admire, respect and enjoy so very much: Jenny Rivera, Sheila Abdus-Salaam, Leslie Stein, Eugene Fahey, Michael Garcia and Rowan Wilson. I am honored to work with you.

Our Chief Administrative Judge – Larry Marks – is my valued partner in all of our court administration initiatives. I could not ask for a better, smarter or more thoughtful partner – thank you, Judge Marks. And thanks also to his excellent deputies, Judges Fern Fisher and Michael Coccoma; the Presiding Justices of the Appellate Division, Peter Tom, Randall Eng, Karen Peters and Gerald Whalen; and our many superb Administrative and Supervising Judges throughout the State, all of whom have doubled down over this past year and led the progress achieved in their jurisdictions. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to give all of them a special mention, but I urge you to look through the report we have issued today, which is also available online at www.nycourts.gov, to see the kind of broad progress our courts have made across the State under their direct leadership. No Chief Judge could have a better team or one more dedicated to achieving excellence in the delivery of justice.

Equally rewarding for me has been the opportunity to work alongside our outstanding trial and appellate judges – the men and women who bear the brunt of our load – along with the nonjudicial staff whose support of our judges is so critical to achieving and maintaining excellence in the courts. And last, but certainly not least, our uniformed court officers – the public face of our court system, the men and women who risk their lives every day to protect us and provide safety and security to our judges and staff and the many thousands of people who enter our 350 courthouses every day.

We are so very proud of the work that is being done throughout the courts. All New Yorkers have reason to feel good about the State of Our Judiciary – and to feel confident about the future of our court system.

Finally, I want to leave you with a story. Not long ago, I walked into the Manhattan Criminal Court at 100 Centre Street, one of the State's busiest courthouses. I noticed the beautiful antique four-sided clock hanging from the ceiling of the two-story marble lobby. I also noticed that the clock wasn't working – each of its four faces telling a different time of day – none of them accurate. When I asked how long had it been that way, I was told: “many years – maybe 10, maybe 20.” No one could really recall. Well, I'm glad to report that with the City's help the clock has been repaired and is again telling time and functioning as intended. Not a big deal? Actually, it is. It exemplifies

the way we view our work and our mission as stewards of our justice system. We want to do all things – the big things and the little things – to the best of our ability. Excellence in everything we do – at every level, and in every courthouse – is our goal.

We appreciate that imperfection is inevitable, but settling for imperfection is not. We do not accept delays and deficiencies in the courts as inevitable – not in the Bronx, not in Manhattan, not in Nassau, Suffolk, Erie, Monroe Counties or any other part of our State. Our first responsibility is to fix what’s broken, and to get things right when it comes to honoring our constitutional mandate and satisfying our core obligation of providing fair, timely and affordable justice to the people we serve.

We have no illusions about the challenges we face or the difficulty of achieving excellence throughout our system. We know that not every problem can be fixed with a phone call to the City. But we do know that persistent, creative leadership, at every level, will effect positive change and give the hard working men and women in our system a clear direction and set of goals to assist and support them in moving in the right direction.

Like that broken clock, we will continue to identify all those things in our system that aren’t working, and we will strive to repair and restore them until we get it right. That is our pledge to you – from all of us.

Thank you for your time and attention.

