

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

August 31, 2020

Thank you for giving us a few minutes of your time for an update on the latest COVID developments affecting our courts and the justice system.

In recent weeks, I have reported on the initial success of our phased-in return to in-person operations, and we continue to move ahead steadily on that front, keeping a watchful eye on public health and safety issues, including the flow of people in and out of our courthouses, the proper use of masks and PPE by everyone in the courthouses, including our judges and staff, COVID screening and temperature checks, and the cleanliness of our court facilities. And all the while we are carefully implementing, monitoring and adjusting our safety plans in accordance with each courthouse's specific structure, layout and surroundings.

And among all the progress being made, I'm very pleased to single out our high-volume criminal courts in New York City, which continue to hear hundreds of in-person matters weekly, and our grand jury operations, which resumed in July outside New York City and three weeks ago in the City's five boroughs. Collectively, more than 100 grand juries have been empaneled so far and all of the participants in the system are adjusting to the new normal and working hard to ensure the smooth operation of this very important piece of our criminal justice system.

We also remain on track with our plans to restart jury trials outside New York City in September. Trials will initially be conducted on a pilot basis in judicial districts spanning from Buffalo to Long Island. We've spent many weeks planning for and instituting numerous safety measures and protocols in preparation for the restart and we look forward to moving ahead. In addition to all the other safety measures now in place, the trials will be held in our largest courtrooms to allow for proper distancing between jurors and all other participants, including judges, attorneys, litigants, clerks, court reporters and witnesses.

As we incrementally re-establish jury trials in keeping with our constitutional mission and duty, I want to again assure you that we are proceeding cautiously and responsibly. And that we will continue to be

guided by the science, by the data and by the best available public health guidance, all the while closely monitoring every aspect of our jury trial operations as they relate to participant safety, continuously re-examining our protocols and procedures and, of course, modifying those practices whenever necessary or advisable. We will keep you apprised of our progress.

Now, as you know, my weekly reports have catalogued our efforts to ensure the smooth continuity of court operations during the pandemic. I have focused often on how we are using technology to keep our courts open and functioning and to support our judges and professional staff in moving cases forward to final resolution.

And today I want to highlight some of those advances. First, let me say with absolute confidence that our technology teams in all of our Courts and Districts, under the expert direction of Christine Sisario and Sheng Guo, have done an absolutely phenomenal job of providing critical expertise and support across the state and developing and expanding our virtual courts. Their hard work, expertise and skill have enabled us to provide continuous service to litigants and lawyers throughout the pandemic, and certainly their work has set the stage for our future.

And there are countless examples to be cited. For instance, in northern New York's Fourth Judicial District, virtual kiosks situated near the courthouse entrance offer self-represented litigants the opportunity to participate in virtual court proceedings and receive live videoconference assistance from court personnel. These kiosks are providing access to justice for litigants who lack necessary computer equipment or internet access, particularly in the rural areas of our state where internet service is often unavailable.

And in the Capital Region's Third Judicial District, our in-person Help Centers have not only been transformed into virtual Help Centers to provide remote assistance to hundreds of self-represented litigants, but they have actually been expanded during the pandemic to include two new virtual Matrimonial and Surrogate's Court Help Centers.

We have also relied on virtual technology to maintain our strong commitment to high quality professional education and training. The Judicial Institute's 2020 Judicial Seminars have gone virtual, of course, and our Dean, Juanita Bing Newton, and her staff, have done a great job of developing an excellent curriculum for these unique times we are living through, with new plenary sessions offered every Wednesday throughout the Summer addressing emerging and pandemic-related legal issues along with helpful updates. We thank them for their work.

Our Office of Justice Court Support, which provides technical support and training to New York’s 1,300 Town and Village Justice Courts, is preparing to deliver its upcoming “Taking the Bench Certification Training Program” for newly elected and appointed Town and Village Justices -- all in a virtual format. This is an intensive, week-long curriculum and it will instruct our new Town and Village Justices on: conducting criminal arraignments, issuing orders of protection, the fundamentals of criminal, housing and other substantive areas of law, ethical obligations under the Code of Judicial Conduct, and financial reporting responsibilities. I want to thank the Director of the Office of Justice Court Support, Justice Nancy Sunukjian, and her staff, for all of the hard work behind their successful transition to the virtual format.

I also want to take a moment to mention our Coronavirus Hotline, which we launched in March to provide litigants and members of the public with immediate access to critical information about court services and operations in the COVID era. The trained court professionals who answer the Hotline have responded to over 25,000 calls on everything from where to go to obtain orders of protections, to how to access virtual court services and participate in virtual court proceedings to how to obtain free legal assistance and other forms of social services and assistance. We will continue to operate the Coronavirus Hotline -- which is 833-503-0447 -- for the foreseeable

future, and we are doing so in tandem with our general hotline -- 800-COURT-NY -- which typically fields 100,000 calls each year.

And thanks to the commitment of our judges and professional staff, we have been able to engage online platforms to continue our valuable programs. For instance, the Suffolk County Courts, in partnership with the District Attorney's Office and the Legal Aid Society, successfully transitioned their in-person summer internship program to a virtual model. This was an important accomplishment on many levels. The commitment of all those involved gave more than 400 undergraduates and law school students from around the country the opportunity to use their summer productively to remotely view court proceedings and work with and learn from our outstanding judges and lawyers. A wonderful and enriching experience for those students, notwithstanding all of the challenges they, too, are facing.

Clearly, this has been a Summer like no other and as it quickly draws to a close I can't help but marvel at the resourcefulness and resilience of our judges and staff. They have been upbeat, creative, and inventive in leveraging technology to keep us moving forward and ensuring access to justice in today's new normal. And no matter the frustrations or the inconvenience created by this public health crisis, our folks have stayed positive and have worked together, as a team, to

overcome every challenge and set new strategic and operational goals to meet our responsibilities during this continuing public health crisis.

We are all proud to acknowledge our Judges and professional staff across the state for their tireless efforts, their resolve and their steadfast commitment to our critical mission.

And I extend our appreciation to the Bar and the members of our stakeholder agencies. Our efforts could only take us so far without your critical and ongoing assistance and support.

So again, I thank you all for your time today. Please stay safe and disciplined in keeping yourselves and all those around you safe.