

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

July 12, 2021

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

First, as a reminder, we have scaled back the frequency of our Monday Message, and so, as it has been two weeks since I last addressed you, I would like to take a moment to say I hope that you and your families had a fun Fourth of July weekend, and that you are safely enjoying these initial weeks of summer.

Today, I am pleased to announce that, with the ongoing improvement in the COVID metrics and vaccination rates over the past two weeks, along with the recent lifting of New York's COVID-19 State of Emergency, we will be making an important change to the court system's mask policy.

Since mid-June, judges and court employees who certified that they were fully vaccinated are no longer required to wear a mask in the non-public areas of our court facilities. In the coming days, this same cohort of judges and court staff, those who have certified their vaccinated status, will no longer be required to wear a mask in the *public* areas of the courthouse, including inside our courtrooms. For those of you who would like to take advantage of the new, expanded mask policy, but have yet to confirm your vaccination status, we encourage you to do so online. The process is simple and convenient for all who would like to participate.

The mask policy, as it pertains to court visitors, is also being revised. The current policy requires all visitors to wear a mask in all areas of the courthouse. In the days ahead, this policy will be modified to permit fully vaccinated court visitors, who can show proof of their vaccination status, into our buildings, to enter and remain in our

courthouses without a mask. Detailed information regarding the implementation of the updated mask policy will be distributed, and available shortly.

Now, regarding operations, because of continued improvement in the COVID metrics, we have been able to make significant strides over the past two weeks in our return to in-person court proceedings.

As of today, in-person day arraignments have resumed in the New York City Criminal Court in all five counties, with the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island now on board.

And, with respect to in-person night arraignments, we started last week in Manhattan Criminal Court, resume today in Brooklyn, and are scheduled to begin next week in the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island. We expect that by July 24th, the New York City Criminal Court will have fully transitioned back to in-person arraignments, including on the weekend.

Outside of the City, in-person arraignments have resumed in every Judicial District.

As I have emphasized in previous messages, the restoration of in-person arraignments provides an important, and necessary, opportunity for defendants to interact face-to-face with their lawyers at this critical stage of the criminal justice process. And so, we appreciate the work and commitment of all involved to hasten our return to in-person arraignments.

We will continue to press forward with a responsible restoration of in-person operations, and I want to assure everyone that as we expand in-person proceedings, your safety will remain a top priority for us. The requirements of face masks for those individuals not certified to be fully vaccinated will continue, as well as other safety measures, including distancing, and excusal of individuals who are ill or have been exposed to COVID.

So, while the COVID metrics are encouraging, we know that we still have challenges ahead of us. You have already demonstrated your extraordinary patience, commitment and diligence in adhering to the safety protocols implemented in our courthouses, as well as your resilience and adaptability in navigating the many operational and logistical issues we have faced throughout the various stages of the pandemic, and we appreciate your sacrifices, and have every expectation and confidence that, difficult as this is, your continued commitment to our mission will not waver.

And speaking of resilience, last Wednesday, New York City sponsored a “Hometown Heroes” ticker-tape parade to honor our healthcare, law enforcement and other essential employees for their strength and sacrifice during the COVID crisis.

And our New York State court system employees were among the essential workers celebrated at the parade. A contingent of Court Officers and Court Clerks marched up the Canyon of Heroes in Lower

Manhattan, from the Battery to City Hall, cheered on by hundreds of spectators, proudly representing their colleagues from across the City and State.

The parade contingent included Lieutenants Vincent Sinclair and Steve Vera, of the Court Officers Academy in Brooklyn; Court Officer Timothy Horbach, New York City Family Court, Bronx County; Court Officer Sharifa John, New York City Family Court, Kings County; and Senior Court Clerk Jeanessa Walker, New York City Criminal Court, Kings County. We thank each of them for their perseverance in carrying out their essential duties, and for so ably representing our court system workforce. The parade was a wonderful way to honor our heroes.

And on a related note, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge another of our outstanding employees, Sergeant Garry Williams, of Kings County Supreme Court's Criminal Term.

Sergeant Williams oversees the Court's video-conference center and its staff. He is responsible for the coordination and scheduling of all

virtual court appearances involving incarcerated defendants, with the center acting as a conduit between the Court and the corrections departments in New York City and New York State.

As the Court's volume of virtual proceedings grew exponentially with the onset of COVID, Sergeant Williams kept apace, playing an instrumental role in the use of new technology, which enabled the Court to connect remotely to correctional facilities around the State and conduct thousands of emergency hearings and other proceedings.

Critically, the Court's video-conference center has provided a venue for defense attorneys to meet with their clients remotely from the facilities in which they are being housed, making it possible for counsel to connect remotely from their safe work spaces with their clients.

Sergeant Williams, I hope you're tuned in. You are the epitome of professionalism, and we are deeply grateful for your exemplary service and commitment to access to justice.

In closing, I want to take a moment to congratulate two of our judges on their recent appointments: Judge Kathie Davidson, who has been named Dean of the New York State Judicial Institute; and Judge Kevin Carter, who has been appointed Administrative Judge of the Eighth Judicial District in Western New York.

Judge Davidson has been serving the Hudson Valley's Ninth Judicial District, most recently as Administrative Judge. She will succeed Juanita Bing Newton, who retired as Dean last year following an illustrious judicial career, and Sherry Klein Heitler, who served as our Interim Dean.

Judge Davidson is widely regarded for her judicial expertise, collegiality—and her capacity for innovation and inclusion—qualities and skills that will redound to the benefit of the work done at the Judicial

Institute, and we thank Judge Davidson for taking on this new responsibility.

In his new position, Judge Carter will oversee the management and day-to-day operations of the trial courts in the Eighth Judicial District. He replaces Judge Paula Feroletto, who, after 12 years as Administrative Judge, is returning full-time to the trial bench.

Judge Carter is a seasoned judge and forward-thinking leader, certainly demonstrated in his performance as the District's Supervising Judge of the Family Courts, where he deftly navigated the countless challenges posed by the pandemic. We look forward to working with Judge Carter in his new capacity, and I invite you to join me in welcoming both Judge Carter, and Judge Davidson in their respective new roles.

We also extend our appreciation to Judge Bing Newton, who leaves behind a rich legacy as Dean of the Judicial Institute; to Judge Heitler, for so graciously stepping in to fill the void created by Judge

Bing Newton's retirement as Dean; and to Judge Feroletto, whose leadership and embrace of the goals of our Excellence Initiative have made the Eighth Judicial District a statewide model.

So, thank you again for tuning in, and staying disciplined to keep yourselves and those around you safe. Our next Monday Message is scheduled for July 26.