

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

May 9, 2022

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.

I am pleased to report that our return to full court operations is progressing smoothly. With each passing week, we are growing more comfortable and proficient in meeting the goals of the Excellence Initiative in the context of our new hybrid model of in-person and virtual court operations.

As I have said on many occasions, our journey during the pandemic from a traditional in-person operating model to what is now a well-functioning hybrid model of court operations has been a remarkable achievement. And that's not just me saying that.

Today, I am proud to share with you the news that our court system has been awarded a place in the prestigious "2022 US CIO 100." The US CIO 100, now in its 35th year, showcases the finest IT work

around the country by presenting awards to the top 100 companies and organizations that are leading the charge in technology innovation.

This year's CIO 100 includes many household names, from the American Red Cross to General Motors and Verizon, and the Unified Court System has now become a member of that select group in recognition of our IT innovation and leadership in successfully upgrading hundreds of courtrooms across the state and equipping judges and staff with the technology tools that enabled us to safely and effectively conduct virtual and hybrid trials and proceedings during the pandemic.

So, it is distinctly a feather in our cap to be one of only seven governmental organizations in the CIO 100 receiving what has become an acknowledged mark of "enterprise excellence" given annually to organizations for tech innovations that -- and I quote -- "deliver business value, improve business practices, enable growth and improve relationships with customers."

We could not be more proud or grateful to our Division of Technology professionals in all of our judicial districts across the state, led by our Director of Technology, Christine Sisario, and our Chief Technology Officer, Sheng Guo, who leads the resourceful and dedicated IT professionals of our Courtroom Modernization Initiative

team. Together, they did an absolutely phenomenal job of developing a virtual court model that enabled us to provide continuous access to litigants and lawyers during the pandemic, and then they parlayed those innovations into a robust and efficient hybrid operating model that has positioned us not only to return to, but actually exceed, our pre-pandemic efficiency, productivity and access.

And, of course, we are grateful to our judges and professional staff for skillfully embracing, and taking full advantage of the opportunities presented by our new hybrid platform; our court leadership team for their sound planning and execution; and the judges, lawyers and technology experts on our Commission to Reimagine the Future of the New York State Courts, led by past-State Bar President, Hank Greenberg, which provided invaluable guidance on technology solutions and innovations that helped us navigate the operational challenges of the pandemic.

In light of how valuable the Commission's recommendations have been, we have decided to form a new "Pandemic Practices Working Group" to conduct a thorough examination of the court system's response to Covid-19, and to issue a report with findings and recommendations designed to help us prepare for future emergencies and facilitate the safe and effective delivery of justice services post-

pandemic. The Working Group will conduct a series of public hearings around the state, beginning on June 7th at Court of Appeals Hall. More details to follow.

I want to thank Hank Greenberg and the members of the Commission's new Pandemic Practices Working Group for helping us distill the lessons of the pandemic and lay out a blueprint for how our court system can take advantage of what we have learned in order to improve our services and keep pace with the public's evolving justice needs and expectations.

Now, believe it or not, the CIO 100 is not the only national recognition that we have reason to be proud of today. Just last week, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Mendelson received the "2022 Equity Award" from the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts in recognition of our work to implement Secretary Johnson's recommendations for a fair and inclusive court system that provides equal access and opportunity to all.

The National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness was established more than 30 years ago for the purpose of fostering state court systems that are fair, equitable and free of racial and ethnic bias. The Consortium presents its Equity Award each year to individuals or organizations that have made important contributions to eliminate bias

from court operations, inspire a high level of trust and confidence in the courts and promote equal access to the courts.

The Equity Award is not only a recognition of the extraordinarily important work that is underway to help ensure equity, diversity and inclusion in our court system, but also a crucial reminder that our collective effort is being closely watched, credited and even replicated by other jurisdictions across the nation. So, kudos to Judge Mendelson, and kudos to our judges and professional staff. Your hard work and commitment to equal justice have earned us this wonderful recognition.

Now, staying on the topic of equal justice, we have yet another virtual Town Hall Meeting that is scheduled to take place on May 19th, from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m., on “Dismantling Systemic Racism in the Courts.”

We are grateful to the Franklin Williams Commission for sponsoring this fourth Town Hall Meeting, back by popular demand, in order to allow more of our judges and court staff an opportunity to be heard and enable our court leaders to report on the many reforms that have been implemented, and that remain underway, to dismantle systemic racism and bias in our courts.

Next Thursday’s Town Hall will feature a special keynote speaker, none other than Jeh Johnson, our “Special Adviser on Equal

Justice in the Courts.” We are very fortunate to have Secretary Johnson’s continued engagement to inspire and guide the work of our judges and court staff.

Secretary Johnson has generously made himself available to participate in many court events, including the 2021 summer judicial seminars, and last month, he participated in an important panel discussion hosted by “Legal Information for Families Today,” in which leaders of the Bench and Bar, local communities, the nonprofit sector and elected officials came together to examine the impact of race and poverty in the family justice system and formulate solutions for enhanced resources, advocacy and collaboration to improve the quality of justice for low-income families and communities of color in our state.

Thank you, Secretary Johnson, for your passionate commitment to equity and meaningful inclusion in the New York State courts.

Thank you for the opportunity to update you on so much positive activity in the New York State Courts,-- and thank you, once again, for listening, and for remaining disciplined in doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe.