

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

October 18, 2021

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 begin with an update on our system-wide mandatory vaccination program, which has been in place since September 27th. We have had a near perfect response from our judges, and I am grateful to them for setting an excellent example for our professional staff, who have overwhelmingly followed their lead in submitting proof of vaccination or requests for exemption.

As you are aware, a number of our court unions have brought lawsuits challenging the vaccine requirement and seeking to prevent its implementation. This past Friday afternoon, the Albany County Supreme Court, where all of these matters are being heard together, issued a decision denying the unions' request for a preliminary

injunction and permitting the vaccine requirement to be fully implemented.

We will be providing updated guidance this week directed to those employees who have not yet submitted proof of vaccination or a request for a medical or a religious exemption. I urge everyone to carefully review that guidance and to take the necessary steps to come into compliance with our vaccine health and safety requirements as soon as possible.

We are pleased that Friday's decision will enable us to follow through on implementing the vaccine requirement, which is a critically important health and safety measure necessary to prevent the spread of the virus in our court facilities, and assure the public that our courthouses are safe and healthy places to appear and conduct business.

We recognize that Friday's decision may not end all of the litigation surrounding this matter, but we welcome every opportunity to demonstrate that the vaccine requirement is fully within our legal

powers as a responsible, appropriate and necessary response to the serious threat that COVID-19 poses to the health and safety of our workforce and the public we serve.

So, thank you for your continued patience and support, and for understanding that our actions during this continuing public health crisis are all about maintaining the safest possible environment in our buildings as we continue our careful, and deliberate return to in-person operations, including jury trials, bench trials and other in-court proceedings and hearings.

And now on to other important matters affecting our courts, starting with the appointment of Judge Anne-Marie Jolly as the Administrative Judge of the New York City Family Court, effective November 1st. Judge Jolly is a highly respected judge and proven leader who brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to her new position overseeing the day-to-day operations of the New York City Family Court in all five boroughs.

Judge Jolly has devoted her entire professional career to serving the justice needs of families and children, starting in The Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division before joining the Family Court in 2000. Judge Jolly served in important legal, policy and managerial positions before her appointment to the Family Court bench in 2010. In 2015, Judge Jolly was appointed Deputy Administrative Judge of the New York City Family Court, and while in that position, played a key role in improving the court's operations and services, and keeping the Court open and functioning to serve at-risk families and children during the pandemic.

Judge Jolly is ideally suited to lead the New York City Family Court into the future, and we are delighted to welcome her to our leadership team. Welcome aboard, Judge Jolly.

Now, this brings me to the bittersweet task of congratulating Judge Jeanette Ruiz on her retirement at the end of this month after six years of stellar service as the Administrative Judge of the New York City Family Court. In 2015, within weeks of her historic appointment as the first Latina to lead that important and busy court, Judge Ruiz issued a "Strategic Plan for the Future of the New York City Family Court,

focused on improving efficiency and promptness; fostering a culture of dignity and respect for the litigants; and providing high-quality justice services to at-risk families and children. And I am proud to say that under Judge Ruiz's leadership, and the banner of our Excellence Initiative, the New York City Family Court made significant progress toward achieving all of these vital goals.

And in March 2020, Judge Ruiz led the absolutely magnificent response of the New York City Family Court judges and staff to the stunning arrival of the pandemic, and we watched as they worked around the clock to create and operate a virtual court model that enabled us to safely hear tens of thousands of emergency and essential matters in the midst of an unprecedented public health crisis.

On behalf of all of us in the Unified Court System, I thank Judge Ruiz for her competent and caring leadership of the New York City Family Court, and we thank her for the many impactful contributions she has made to improve the delivery of justice to at-risk families and children in our state. Judge Ruiz, we wish you good health, happiness, and the very best in all of your future endeavors.

And today, I'd also like to welcome another skilled and talented jurist to our leadership team -- Judge Anne Minihan, our new Administrative Judge for the Ninth Judicial District. Judge Minihan has served with excellence both as a County Court Judge and as an Acting Supreme Court Justice in Westchester County. Judge Minihan brings strong leadership skills and broad judicial and legal experience to her new position. She is well-prepared to build on the 9th JD's long tradition of excellence and innovation. We look forward to working with her.

And now, I'd like to draw your attention to a special ceremony that will take place next Tuesday, October 26th -- the dedication of the "Betty Weinberg Ellerin Children's Center" at 111 Centre Street, in lower Manhattan. This much-needed Children's Center is being named in honor of our trailblazing judge whose seven-decade career has been defined not only by so many historic firsts -- the first woman law clerk in the New York State Courts, and first woman Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department -- but by her deep commitment and impactful work to improve the treatment of women and children in our courts and the justice system.

And as our courts steadily return to in-person operations, we are pleased and excited that parents and caregivers appearing in the busy New York City Family, Criminal and Housing courts will soon have a safe and nurturing place where they can leave their children, a place where children from low-income and underserved backgrounds will receive positive interventions and services, including educational resources and vital healthcare and nutritional support services.

And, of course, we are thrilled to come full circle and dedicate the Children's Center in honor of Judge Ellerin, who first suggested the concept to us of creating safe, enriching spaces in our courthouses staffed by trained professionals where struggling litigants could leave their children while appearing in court -- just one of her countless contributions to improve the treatment of women and children in our courts. Congratulations, Judge Ellerin, and thank you for your excellent service to children and families in New York State.

Finally, I want to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to Cyrus Vance, the District Attorney of New York County, for providing a generous grant from the Office of the District Attorney's "Criminal Justice Investment Fund" to support the creation of the "Betty

Weinberg Ellerin Children’s Center.” Thank you, District Attorney Vance, and good luck to you in the next chapter of your professional life.

And now, another date of special interest to our court family – October 22nd. As Chief Judge of the State of New York, it is my privilege to proclaim Friday, October 22nd “Franklin H. Williams Day,” in honor of the 104th birthday of the distinguished civil rights lawyer, Ambassador and founding Chair of the first permanent court-based commission in the nation dedicated to fostering racial and ethnic fairness in the courts -- a Commission which now bears the name of Franklin H. Williams and is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

So, on October 22nd, Franklin Williams Day, I urge all of you to take some time to reflect on the legacy of this extraordinary man who devoted his life to the pursuit of equal justice, and to reaffirm your own personal commitment to fostering fair and equal treatment for all.

And, one more significant date and event -- Friday, October 29th, marking the celebration of the “One-Year Anniversary” of the New

Rochelle City Court’s “Opportunity Youth Part,” one of our nationally innovative pilots focused on the development of age-appropriate alternatives to incarceration for non-violent, emerging-adult offenders aged 16 to 24.

The Opportunity Youth Part is the product of a remarkable partnership between the New Rochelle City Court, our Office of Justice Initiatives, the Columbia Justice Lab, the Westchester County District Attorney’s Office, and community-based service providers in the area. City Court Judge Jared Rice and his staff work collaboratively with prosecutors, defense counsel and community groups to change the trajectory for justice-involved young adults through job training and placement, behavioral health therapy, mentoring and access to college and GED classes.

The one-year anniversary celebration of the Opportunity Youth Part, which has engaged more than 100 participants, will publicly highlight the positive successes of its graduates and the effectiveness of community-based rehabilitative alternatives to incarceration for non-violent emerging adults involved in the criminal justice system. I want to thank Presiding Judge Jared Rice for his outstanding leadership of the

Opportunity Youth Part, and all of our partners in justice, including the Westchester District Attorney's Office, for supporting age-appropriate alternatives to incarceration.

So that concludes this week's message. Thank you all again for listening, and most important, for remaining disciplined in doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe.