



PRESS RELEASE

New York State
Unified Court System

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Chief Judge DiFiore Delivers Her First “State of Our Judiciary” Address

New York – Hon. Janet DiFiore today in the Bronx delivered her first “State of Our Judiciary” address as Chief Judge, reporting on the significant progress of the court system’s Excellence Initiative – which she unveiled last February to achieve and maintain excellence in every facet of court operations, with a laser-like focus on eliminating case backlogs and delays – and announcing additional reforms to enhance the delivery of justice for all New Yorkers.

Explaining the decision to present her first State of Our Judiciary at the Bronx Hall of Justice, departing from the longstanding tradition of delivering the address at Albany’s Court of Appeals Hall, Chief Judge DiFiore said, “I chose to deliver the State of Our Judiciary in the Bronx ... 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,” adding, “Our very able administrative judges in Bronx Supreme Court ... 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.”

In highlighting the advances made since the launch of the Excellence Initiative, Chief Judge DiFiore began with the **dramatic progress achieved in the Bronx, which saw a 50 percent reduction in the county’s oldest misdemeanor cases, from 2,433 cases in June 2016 to 1,222 in February 2017, and a 32 percent in the total number of pending misdemeanors over the same period.** “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**

percent decrease in the oldest misdemeanor cases in the Manhattan Criminal Court,” she reported.

With regard to felony cases, the Chief Judge said that “we have worked across the State to put in place processes to move felony cases through the criminal justice system more efficiently.” For instance, **in Suffolk County, improvements to the case management process and creation of a trial assignment part to handle the most difficult-to-resolve cases have enabled the Court to reduce the number of felony cases pending over standards and goals** (the court system’s aspirational time tables for resolving cases) **by a remarkable 58 percent over the past year.**

Suffolk County’s proactive approach has been adopted by felony courts around the State. **In the Ninth Judicial District,** which comprises Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties, **impressive reductions have been made in pending felony caseloads, with some counties, including Westchester, approaching zero cases pending over standards and goals,** the Chief Judge reported.

In the Seventh Judicial District, which includes Rochester and encompasses eight counties in Western New York, **the Chief Judge said that high-tech tools were being utilized to identify felony cases that are not moving through the system efficiently.** Such cases are then flagged and promptly transferred to a trial assignment part for a calendar call. **This approach, combined with the adoption of new procedures, has led to increased dispositions and trials, with felony cases pending over standards and goals declining by 63 percent since the start of 2016.**

On the civil justice side, Chief Judge DiFiore said, “We are working on many fronts to speed the civil justice process, increase dispositions and enhance public access.” Successes over the past year cited by the Chief Judge include **a 62 percent increase in the number of foreclosure cases resolved in Brooklyn; a 58 percent reduction in the number of foreclosure cases over standards and goals in Nassau County; and in the Fourth Judicial District,** which stretches from Schenectady County all the way to the Canadian border, **a 63 percent reduction in the number of oldest civil cases, from 2,694 to 997 cases,** with Judge DiFiore lauding the “focused management and plain, old-fashioned work by our judges and their staff.”

Among other highlights of the speech, Chief Judge DiFiore stated that the court system is “re-examining the way we use and assign our non-judicial resources ... and deploying them more creatively and flexibly to make sure that courts everywhere are staying current.” She also announced the expansion of the original mission of the Justice Task Force, formed in 2009 to focus on identifying and eliminating the principal causes of wrongful convictions through

systemic criminal justice reform. A former co-chair of the Task Force, Chief Judge DiFiore said its mission will be broadened to address a wider range of 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.”

Additionally, she discussed efforts aimed at “strengthening our organizational culture and striving for excellence at every level,” including a new leadership training series designed for the court system’s administrative and supervising judges, as well as its non-judicial managers. “We want every leader to be given the opportunity to take their leadership skills to the next level ... to be in a position to inspire their colleagues and staff to honor the mission and satisfy the goals of our Excellence Initiative,” she said.

For a copy of the 2017 State of Our Judiciary, including a comprehensive report on the first year of the Excellence Initiative, or to view a webcast of the address, go to:

www.nycourts.gov/Admin/stateofjudiciary/.

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