

Office for Justice Initiatives

LAW DAY REPORT

VOICES *of* DEMOCRACY

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The mission of the Unified Court System is to deliver equal justice under the law and to achieve the just, fair and timely resolution of all matters that come before our courts.

In the service of our mission, the UCS is committed to operating with integrity and transparency, and to ensuring that all who enter or serve in our courts are treated with respect, dignity and professionalism.

We affirm our responsibility to promote a court system free from any and all forms of bias and discrimination and to promote a judiciary and workforce that reflect the rich diversity of New York State.

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"It is our true aspiration that every litigant of whatever sort who walks out of one of our courtrooms at the conclusion of a matter, whether they won or they lost, will think that they were treated fairly."

-Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson



A Message from Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives

Hon. Edwina G. Richardson



Law Day is an annual commemoration held to celebrate the rule of law and cultivate a deeper understanding of the legal system. First established in 1957 by the American Bar Association (ABA), in 1961 Congress designated May 1st as the official date for celebrating Law Day. Since then, Law Day has grown exponentially in scope and is now celebrated in many countries around the globe. While the theme has changed from year to year, the focus has always been about embracing how we can use the rule of law to protect our rights and freedoms, while acknowledging that many in our society continue to struggle to obtain basic liberties.

Within our nation, democracy holds and binds us together. Similarly, the rule of law fortifies the structure of our society and reflects the shared conscience and essence of our democratic ideals. Serving as the unifying thread amid diverse voices, it amplifies the resolute commitment to equitable justice. In our mosaic of differing backgrounds, perspectives, and perceptions, democracy stands as the cornerstone, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued. By raising our voices and embracing the principles of democracy, we strengthen the foundation upon which our government stands, ensuring it remains responsive to the will of the people.

This year's Law Day theme, "Voices of Democracy," recognizes the important fact that, in democracies, systems of government must listen to the voices of the people they serve. The ABA has tied this theme directly to the upcoming elections by encouraging people to deepen their understanding of the electoral process, discuss important issues of civility and, of course, vote. As New York's judicial branch, we view this theme from a different lens in accordance with our duty to remain impartial and ensure that our courts reach fair and unbiased decisions. While we, as the Judiciary, cannot advocate for one position over another, we can, and must, advocate for the people of New York by upholding the laws enacted by their representatives.

In years past I have used my voice to report with great enthusiasm on the work of the Office for Justice Initiatives, which I am proud to lead. This year, however, you will hear about our work through the voices of our court leaders, the tremendously talented court professionals who work to make the court system better each day, and members of the public who have participated in court proceedings. For those of you viewing this report digitally, you will not only be able to read their words but also to hear their actual voices. That is, quite literally, what this year's theme is all about.

It is my true pleasure and deep privilege to serve the cause of justice with Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson, Chief Administrative Judge Joseph A. Zayas, First Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Norman St. George, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge James P. Murphy, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Deborah A. Kaplan, and the Unified Court System's entire leadership team. We welcome your feedback – and your voices – as we strive to preserve our democracy and to improve the lives of New Yorkers who connect with our justice system. Thank you for reading, and listening to, our Law Day Report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edwina G. Richardson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Edwina G. Richardson



"Look, judges are not firemen or firewomen or police officers. They're not in the business of rescuing people. We don't really usually think of judges as rescuers, but judges in treatment courts are saving people's lives."

-Chief Administrative Judge Joseph A. Zayas





Michelle Smith, Esq.
Chief of Staff

Office for Justice Initiatives (OJI)

The Office for Justice Initiatives is a statewide office that develops policies, programs, and innovative ways to address the evolving needs of people who interact with New York State courts. In furtherance of our mission, we partner with various Unified Court System (UCS) offices, committees and commissions, UCS access and equal justice committees, national, state and local agencies, bar associations, affinity organizations and the public to create a court system that is fair, accessible and welcoming to all court users and court employees.



Rosemary Martinez-Borges
Deputy Chief of Staff
and Director

Youth & Emerging Adult Justice

At the core of this year’s Law Day theme is a recognition of the importance of education and collaboration as a means of empowering our citizenry. OJI’s Division of Youth and Emerging Adult Justice (YEAJ) provides oversight, guidance and training on youth justice matters in New York State. Collaboration, education, and empowerment are central to OJI’s dedication to our youth and emerging adults. YEAJ is committed to fostering sustainable positive outcomes for justice system-involved children and young adults through developing qualitatively improved court processes that promote fairness, individual and community safety, and timely resolutions.



Lisa M. Zayas, Esq.
Director

Access to Justice

The Access to Justice Division’s (A2J) mission is to promote meaningful access to justice in all New York State Courts for people of all backgrounds, incomes, and abilities. A2J develops and supports pro bono attorney programs, self-help services, technological tools, and endeavors to secure stable and adequate non-profit and government funding for civil legal services programs. Access to legal information deepens our understanding of the court process and empowers court users to engage in meaningful court interactions. This is a key component of A2J’s mission.



Trista Borra, Esq.
Director

Child Welfare & Family Justice

The Division of Child Welfare and Family Justice oversees the New York State Child Welfare Court Improvement Project (CWCIP). CWCIP, in partnership with the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), supports statewide and local multi-disciplinary child welfare collaboratives that bring stakeholders from the family court and legal community together with child welfare professionals and others system actors to improve outcomes for children and families who intersect both systems. CWCIP also maintains partnerships with the Office of Addiction Services and Supports, the Department of Health, the Office of Mental Health, tribal nations upon whose land New Yorkers reside, and not-for-profit agencies such as the Center for Justice Innovation and Casey Family Programs. Our goal is to engage parents and youth impacted by the family courts, and to improve the court responses to families impacted by substance use disorder. CWCIP is dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of family preservation and reunification and implementing trauma informed care practices and solution focused strategies to improve civility and reduce exposure to trauma.



Tony Walters
Director

Diversity & Inclusion

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) provides resources to judges and court personnel on diversity-related matters and identifies and develops practical mechanisms through which the court system attempts to ensure a diverse workforce and bias-free work environment. In pursuing its objective of ensuring an atmosphere where all people feel comfortable, valued, and productive, ODI regularly works with other UCS offices and commissions such as the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission, the Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission, the Inspector General’s Bias Unit, and the Hon. Betty Weinberg Ellerin Committee on Women in the Courts. To provide ODI with enhanced access to judicial leadership and greater resources to carry out its mission, OJI joined the Office for Justice Initiatives in 2023.



Randy Bowens
Statewide Equal
Justice Coordinator

Equal Justice in the Courts

Equal Justice in the Courts is a multi-faceted, enduring effort committed to rooting out all forms of bias and discrimination in our court system including those based on race, age, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, religion, national origin, disability, marital status or socioeconomic status, weight, and more. This year, the UCS leadership team has guided our court system as a whole to be a stronger champion for democracy. In this regard, it is our continuing mission to ensure that every individual, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, background or other identity, is treated fairly and impartially under the law.

Judiciary Civil Legal Services

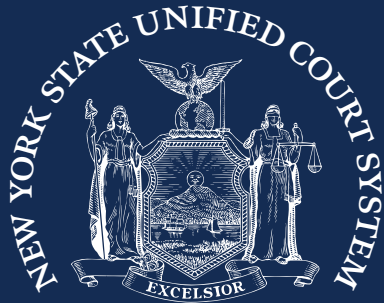
The Judiciary Civil Legal Services (JCLS) Division provides programmatic oversight of the JCLS grant. By providing a stable funding source for the delivery of civil legal services and access to justice services, the grant promotes meaningful access to the courts for low-income New Yorkers and the legal assistance they need to secure the essentials of life.



Steven Helfont
Director

Policy & Planning

The Division of Policy & Planning’s (DPP) primary focus is to support alternatives to incarceration for justice-involved individuals by providing guidance to New York’s problem-solving and accountability courts. These specialty courts were highlighted by Chief Judge Wilson in his recent State of the Judiciary, in which he called upon seven extraordinary individuals to share their stories about their court experiences. DPP is committed to the Chief Judge’s vision of transforming courts into places that improve the lives of those we serve by building problem-solving court capacity throughout the State that focus on promoting the best outcomes, and bringing cutting-edge, evidence-based practices to existing problem-solving courts.



Office for Justice Initiatives

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Voices of Democracy

The American Bar Association's 2024 Law Day theme, Voices of Democracy, "recognizes that in democracies, the people rule. For nearly 250 years, Americans have expressed their political views and wishes by speaking their minds and voting in elections. In 2024, the United States will hold its 60th presidential election, and Americans will address fundamental questions about democracy and the rule of law."

In this Law Day Report, the Office for Justice Initiatives examines what the New York State Unified Court System is doing to amplify the voices of those who work in our courts, those who work with our courts, and those who are served by our courts. To ensure that everyone is heard and included, our initiatives acknowledge and recognize that:

**In Democracies, the Judiciary Encourages
the People to Participate**

**In Democracies, the Judiciary Deepens
the People's Understanding of the Law**

**In Democracies, the Judiciary Moves
the Country Forward**

**In Democracies, the Judiciary Responds
to the Needs of the People**

Embedded in the pages of this report are the "voices" of court leadership, court users, and others, depicted in art, audio, pictures, video, and written formats. These voices represent just a small portion of the many people throughout New York State who have lifted their voices to strengthen our democracy.



"I have adopted a brand new motto just this week ... and I think it fits nicely with the motto 'Law in the Service of Human Needs'. It is 'we should give more to this world than we take'".

-Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives Edwina G. Richardson





2024 State of the Judiciary featured both court staff and court participants who shared personal stories about their work for and experiences with the Unified Court System.

In Democracies, the Judiciary Encourages the People to Participate

The People of the state of New York participate in the court process in a number of ways. From jury outreach to artistic expression, and from community-based stakeholder engagement to the ongoing development of self-help tools and volunteer attorney programs, our courts encourage people to actively participate in shaping their case outcomes.

Jury Diversification

Jury Diversification is critical to ensuring equity and equal protection under the law. However, we know from our own experiences and anecdotal accounts that jury duty is regarded more as a burden and less as a civic obligation of service to the community. It is up to us to change that narrative and promote jury participation through our equal justice endeavors.

In 2022, the Unified Court System’s Jury Support Office launched a multi-year project aiming to increase participation rates in jury service around the state. Through this Statewide Juror Response Improvement Project, outreach, engagement, training, and technology initiatives have been introduced to encourage participation. The Jury Support Office has prioritized the importance of diverse and inclusive jury pools by launching two new courses - Juror Inclusivity 101 and Community Outreach and Engagement - for all jury staff in the courts around the state. In addition, in the last 12 months, the Commissioners of Jurors have hosted over 275 events and activities in their communities, reaching an estimated 56,000 people. In addition, technology initiatives have included the expansion of dashboard statistics to assist with targeting outreach in areas where jurors are currently least likely to participate, and the automation of emails to jurors reminding them to complete their qualification questionnaire and to check for reporting instructions for upcoming service. The past 12 months have also seen the number of jurors who volunteer double. Anyone interested in serving as a juror can volunteer on nyjuror.gov. Jury service is the most direct way we can be sure that justice is being carried out. Justice starts at jury. Jury starts with YOU.





Hon. Toko Serita, Statewide Coordinating Judge for Problem Solving Courts

Problem-Solving Courts

Problem-Solving Courts rely upon community-based stakeholder teams. These teams include domestic violence agencies, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation, child services, housing advocates, shelter agencies, mental health programs, legal services, hospitals, supervised visitation providers, religious leaders, and other government agencies. Together, these stakeholder teams collaborate to address gaps in services and barriers encountered by treatment court participants and survivors of domestic violence. Interagency collaboration has provided many benefits including increased communication and coordination of services, improved levels of cooperation, greater safety planning and opportunities for cross-training and feedback. Through these partnerships, communities can provide a multi-agency, and more coordinated response to substance use disorder, behavioral health needs, and domestic violence.

Self-Help & Technological Initiatives

OJI offers resources that court users may access on their own either at the courthouse, at home, or at any location with stable internet and appropriate technology.

Help Centers

Help Centers are located within courthouses and some public access law libraries. They provide court users with information about the law, court procedures, forms, and other written materials; make referrals; and assist litigants who require accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act or need access to legal interpreters for court proceedings. OJI is currently working with the 5th Judicial District to establish a districtwide Help Center. In 2023, more than 125,000 people were assisted by Help Centers throughout New York.

CourtHelp

CourtHelp is an online legal information portal that can be accessed by computer, tablet, or smartphone anywhere there is an internet connection. Written entirely in plain language, the website provides legal information sorted by eleven subject matters. In addition, it contains access points for resources such as Ask-A-Law Librarian, Americans with Disabilities accommodations, requests for information, legal glossary, Help Center directory, LawHelp, lawyer services, e-Filing, DIY Form Programs, and more. In 2023, users visited Courthelp 4,643,173 times and viewed over 16,000,000 individual pages.

DIY Form Programs

Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Form Programs not only deepen the court user's understanding of the law and what the court requires to process and review court filings, but also encourages users to participate in the court process by completing court forms using guided computer programs. After completing an online DIY Form Program, the court user is provided with a copy of the papers needed to file in court along with step-by-step instructions. The Division of Technology develops and maintains the DIY Form Programs, and OJI offers trainings on programs and creates and distributes promotional materials.



Queens Family Court Help Center

Volunteer Programs

The advice of counsel is crucial to understanding one's legal options. Litigants often also need assistance with preparing paperwork to initiate or respond to a case. OJI supported volunteer attorney programs provide these vital services to unrepresented people.

Civil Volunteer Lawyer Program

In collaboration with the City Bar Justice Center's Civil Court Project, OJI oversees a Civil Volunteer Lawyer Program (VLP), which provides free telephone and online consultations to people who do not have an attorney representing them in New York City Civil Court. VLP attorneys provide legal advice and guidance on a wide range of Civil Court matters, including small claims, name changes, security deposits for residential leases, warranties of habitability, consumer debt and more. Volunteers also assist with court forms and advise court users on how best to represent themselves in court, providing unrepresented court users with information about their legal rights and options. In 2023, 142 unrepresented litigants received advice and assistance from this program.

Family Court Virtual Volunteer Attorney Program

The Family Court Virtual Volunteer Attorney Program (VAP) provides free online and phone consultations by volunteer attorneys and law students for unrepresented court users with initial pleadings in support, paternity, custody, visitation, family offense, and guardianship matters. This service helps to reduce delays, ensures more efficient and fairer outcomes, empowers court users to pursue their cases to final resolution, and helps court users better understand the critical legal rights involved in Family Court cases. This past year the program assisted 867 court users.

Volunteer Lawyer for the Day Consumer Debt Program

The Volunteer Lawyer for the Day (VLFD) Consumer Debt Program has had an enormous impact in assisting clients to efficiently resolve their cases. The program is offered in partnership with the NYC Civil Courts, the New York County Lawyers' Association, the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) and Access Justice Brooklyn (formerly the Brooklyn Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyer Program). In 2023 the program assisted 5,170 court users.

Pro Bono Awards Night, Volunteer Recognition

The Office for Justice Initiatives, the New York State Bar Association, and the New York County Lawyers Association co-sponsored our annual pro bono volunteer recognition event on Thursday, October 19th, 2023. It was the first in-person pro bono awards event since the Covid-19 pandemic. The annual awards ceremony established by the American Bar Association joined events across the country to promote and recognize pro bono service and spotlight the difference lawyers and other professionals can make in their communities. The event honored 21 volunteers who received plaque awards for their outstanding pro bono service. Additionally, 135 volunteers received certificates recognizing their distinguished service to our Access to Justice and Attorney Emeritus programs. Special recognition was given to Court Attorney Angela Britton who was honored with the Circle of Excellence Award for her outstanding contributions to the New York City Family Court Volunteer Attorney Program.



“We see changes on a day-to-day basis. And I’m excited to be involved in the changes in our court system. We have to roll up our sleeves, have difficult conversations and make changes. . . So, we have our work to do. I’m encouraged and invigorated and energized to assist in doing that work.”

–First Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Norman St. George



Creative Artworks

In collaboration with Creative Artworks, a nonprofit organization which seeks to empower youth through arts programming, the Queens and Bronx Family Courts unveiled a series of murals created by a group of “Youth Apprentices.” The murals, which are on permanent display, were designed to be reflective and representative of the courthouses and their local communities. Link to the digital brochure for the Bronx Family Court mural: https://issuu.com/caw4kids/docs/2023_queens_family_court_comm_broch_issuu_pages

“I want to start with a quote from Supreme Court Justice and Bronx native Sonia Sotomayor: ‘As you discover what strength you can draw from your community, look outward as well as inward. Build bridges instead of walls.’ This mural is a bridge that links our stories together. Your mural depicts the range of emotions from sadness on one end to joy on the other. The bridge between sadness and joy is communication. At Bronx Family Court, we want to ensure that all families are heard and that all voices are amplified. Your voices are now a piece of history that will impact everyone that sees it.”

– Ruth Whalen, First Deputy Chief Clerk, New York City Family Court



Students from Creative Art Works and their mentors put finishing touches on four murals at Queens Family Court.



Liberty Sings



Mitchell Homick

Auburn High School
Cayuga County - 7th Judicial District

Artist's Description:

In developing this work, I was driven to demonstrate how a unique sense of unity within our country is developed during the election process. I felt that Lady Liberty would portray the unified voice of the nation. In the piece, Lady Liberty sings an ode to democracy next to a ballot box as she encourages the audience to vote and have their own respective voices heard. As she presents herself in the opera show, symbolizing an election, the biggest spotlight in the theater highlights the importance of her guidance. The audience is represented primarily with red and blue to show the partisan nature of our country. Despite this political division, Americans are able to come together in the theater to hear Liberty sing.



Democracy Bring Us Together



Shangjing Chen

General Douglas MacArthur High School
Nassau County - 10th Judicial District

Artist's Description:

At the center of the work is a figure speaking into a microphone. This represents the main concept of democracy; the voice of the people. The stairs under the microphone represent the step-by-step progress Americans have made using their voices since they were granted free speech. The three branches next to it represent the ideas proposed by the people and adopted by the government; making the distribution of power more equal and allowing more people's voices to be heard. Behind the figure is a globe, representing the power of democracy to influence the world. Finally, the different races of hands at the bottom represent different voices and are considered a representation of democracy. What people think matters and should be expressed.



The Source of Our Voices



Milo Brustein

Home Instruction
Kings County - 2nd Judicial District

Artist's Description:

The inspiration behind this piece came to me when I thought about the voices of democracy, more specifically where they come from. I then realized that many of us in this modern day get our voices from entertainment and media, which I thought was important to express. To illustrate this, I depicted the modern American family gathered around the TV, where icons of our democracy are shown (Lady Liberty, The bald eagle) speaking into a mic to express how they are the voices of our nation. I think that its important to recognize that the many pieces of media we consume build our sense of right and wrong, and we reflect that in our own voices.

In Democracies, the Judiciary Deepens People’s Understanding of the Law

2024 Law Day Art Contest

As part of our Law Day celebration, the Office for Justice Initiatives, in partnership with the Historical Society of the New York State Courts, invited high school students in New York State to participate in an annual Law Day art contest inspired by the American Bar Association’s Law Day theme. The winner of the 2024 Law Day Art Contest is Mitchell Homick from Cayuga County, for the piece titled “Liberty Sings”. The second place winner is Shangjing Chen from Nassau County for “Democracy Brings Us Together”, and the third place winner is Milo Brustein from Kings County for “The Source of Our Voices.” The Office for Justice Initiatives offers our congratulations and thanks to all participants, each of whom will receive a certificate of participation and a pocket size U.S. Constitution. The winners’ artwork will be featured on our Access to Justice website until May 2025. Cash prizes, courtesy of the Historical Society, were awarded to the first, second and third prize winners.

Civic Education & Engagement

Civic education and engagement are hallmarks of democracy that play a critical role in our society. Actively engaging individuals outside of the judicial system ensures that it remains accountable and transparent, and best serves the needs of the public. By giving a voice to the public, the courts can bridge the gap between the legal system and everyday citizens. The Court System hosts court tours throughout our state. Visitors are provided with information about court operations, allowed to observe trials, and to speak with judges, court officers, court reporters, court interpreters, and other non-judicial personnel regarding their professions and positions in the court system. Here are two examples of court-based civic engagement programs.

Court Navigator Program

Trained Navigators provide moral support, aid individuals in finding their way around the courthouse, organize court user’s documents, inform unrepresented court users about DIY Form Programs, assist in accessing interpreters, navigate the court’s website, deliver legal information, and guide court users to access - in accessing critical court services. Court Navigators are volunteers who come from diverse backgrounds and identities. In many ways, they embody what it means to function as a “government by the people” by remaining receptive to the needs of court users and safeguarding the intrinsic human rights of individuals who walk through the doors of our courthouses. Their assistance is available at multiple court sites as an extension of Help Centers. Together with local courts, OJI manages this valuable program, which was first implemented in Bronx County Civil Court and Kings County Civil Court in 2014. The in-person court navigator program was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 but resumed in White Plains Supreme Court and in Kings Civil Court in 2023. The program continues to flourish thanks to the dedication of the volunteers and the support and commitment of the court team. This year, the volunteers attended training programs which included information about the Court Navigator program and Trauma Informed Care, DIY (Do-It-Yourself) Forms, as well as substantive and procedural information related to the types of cases commonly heard in their assigned courts. Participants also took part in interactive role-play scenarios to apply the knowledge and techniques gained during the training. The impact of this program is demonstrated by the number of individuals assisted: during the Fall of 2023, the Westchester Court Navigators successfully served 2,679 individuals and the Kings Court Navigators assisted 3,346 individuals.

NEW YORK STATE UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM
EXCELSIOR
Office for Justice Initiatives
Access to Justice

COURT NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

ASK ME!
I CAN HELP!
OFFICE FOR JUSTICE INITIATIVES

Volunteer to Serve as a
Court Navigator and Make a
Difference in Your Community!

courtnavigator@nycourts.gov

JUST LAW (Justice, Understanding, Societal Trust and Literacy, Attendance, Writing)

JUST LAW is a collaborative effort between the 7th Judicial District's Justice for All Initiative, the City of Rochester, radio station 103.9 FM WDKX, the Rochester Black Bar Association, and the Rochester City School District. This initiative provides an opportunity for 6th-9th graders to interact with judges and other court officials and learn about the U.S. legal system, their local court system, the variety of careers available in the courts, and the importance of jury service. Over the course of a year, judges, support magistrates, and court attorneys from the 7th Judicial District visited 20 schools to present information to more than 2,000 students on how the justice system works and the role it plays in the community. During the school visits, students were given the opportunity to share their own perspectives and experiences, fostering important dialogue between court officials and participating youth. Following the school presentations, students were asked to write a 250-word essay on the topic, "What Justice Means to Me." Each year, more than 150 essays are submitted and are judged by the JUST LAW executive committee members. The top 12 essays are selected as the winners and the student authors are invited to the Monroe County Hall of Justice to read their winning essays aloud. Students receive prizes from participating partners at the ceremony.



J.U.S.T. L.A.W. is a collaborative effort to help students in grades 6 - 9 in the Rochester City School District better understand the law and our country's legal system.

The program explores the following topics:

- The concept of legal literacy
- The importance of school attendance
- The value of developing strong writing skills
- The significance of the written word in the court system
- Ways to express concerns, questions, desires and expectations relating to the court system
- An overview of the U.S. Judicial System
- Career opportunities within the courts

J.U.S.T. stands for Justice, Understanding, and Societal Trust, and is a community outreach program initiated by Supreme Court Justice Craig Doran, the administrative judge in the 7th Judicial District.

Judges will visit participating schools in the RCSD, where they will explain how the justice system works, as well as the role it plays in the Rochester community. Students will then have an opportunity to share their own perspectives on - - and experiences with - - the justice system.

L.A.W. stands for Literacy, Attendance and Writing. This component of the program was initiated by Mr. Andre Langston, Owner and General Manager of radio station WDKX, and uses these three concepts to help improve student understanding of the court system. The goal is for participating youth to develop research and analysis skills, gain a better understanding of the power of the written word and acquire a deeper appreciation for the value of education. School attendance will also be stressed.

How the Contest Works:

- Virtual visits are arranged and judges/attorneys make presentations to the students.
- After the presentation, students in the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th grades will be asked to write a 250 word essay on the topic, "What Justice means to me..."
- Attendance is an important component of the program. J.U.S.T. LAW requires a 90% average attendance rate for participants. This may be waived at the request of school administrators and/or if special circumstances exist.
- Prizes for the winners may include a tablet, gift cards, cash, certificates and more.

■ Essay winners will have an opportunity to take part in three special events:

- 1) A possible tour of the Hall of Justice to meet judges, clerks and deputies, attorneys and visit the Law Library;
- 2) A special "Meet and Greet" for students and parents where they will be matched with their RBBA mentors; and
- 3) A special virtual awards ceremony in May or June where they will be recognized and have an opportunity to present their essays in front of a panel of judges and court staff, as well as parents, teachers, school personnel, local law enforcement and members of the media.

How can schools help?

- Each school is unique. It is helpful if principals and staff take the lead and advise J.U.S.T. LAW program coordinators how their school's visit should be structured (for example, the number of students that should attend and the best location to hold the event). Schools should complete the information sheet as soon as possible, but no later than January 15, 2021. Included should be two potential dates for the visit and the name of a contact person.

- Parental consent forms, as well as media release forms, must be obtained from all student participants. Teachers can be very helpful in supporting efforts to obtain the necessary paperwork, so that all youth who want to take part in the program will be allowed to do so.
- At the end of the program, you will be provided with an evaluation form. Please be sure to complete this form and give us your honest feedback. We want this to be a positive and effective experience for students and teachers.

If you are interested in having your school participate, contact Liliana Ruiz at (585) 428-6588 or email: Liliana.Ruiz@cityofrochester.gov. Please send us the name and email address of a school contact person to receive program updates and schedule visits.

Collaborating partners include the City of Rochester, 103.9 FM WDKX, the Rochester Black Bar Association, the Rochester City School District and the 7th Judicial District.

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Hope Cards

The Unified Court System, in conjunction with other government agencies, has begun implementation of recently enacted legislation known as the “Hope Card Act.” This bill requires the court system to issue “Hope Cards” to individuals that have been granted a final order of protection. Hope Cards are a wallet-sized version of the order of protection which petitioners can carry with them. There will be no cost to the individual and the card will include information needed in emergency situations. The “Hope Cards” will be available online and in the courtroom. The goal of the Hope Card program is to empower domestic violence survivors by providing information about the disposition of their court cases, and to encourage confidence in the court process.

New York Association of Treatment Court Professionals

By addressing the underlying issues facing justice-involved individuals, problem-solving courts located across New York State are working to reduce recidivism and increase public safety. These specialized courts work tirelessly with hundreds of New Yorkers each year who are engaged in building pathways for productive lives. As highlighted in Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson’s 2024 inaugural annual State of the Judiciary address, the state’s treatment courts employ innovative approaches and take different forms, including drug and mental health courts, which focus on treatment and rehabilitation. Following Judge Wilson’s address, judges, attorneys, court personnel, treatment professionals, law enforcement officers and others who work in New York’s treatment courts gathered from March 6 to March 8 in Saratoga Springs to participate in the New York Association of Treatment Court Professionals’ 2024 Conference.

There, they networked with colleagues and exchanged information and ideas on the full range of treatment court-related issues, from dashboard tools to person-centered care to ethics and best practice standards, among other topics. Conference speakers included Statewide Coordinating Judge for Problem-Solving Courts Toko Serita, who kicked off the meeting, Chief Administrative Judge and keynote speaker Joseph A. Zayas, and Queens County Treatment Court Presiding Judge and National Association of Treatment Court Professionals President Marcia Hirsch, in addition to other distinguished presenters.

Reasonable Efforts Judicial Academy

Reasonable Efforts Judicial Academy (REJA), also known as the Judicial Academy, is a highly interactive two-day training for Family Court Judicial Officers who preside over child welfare cases. The agenda for REJA includes instruction on the federal ‘black letter law,’ the art of making reasonable efforts findings, a discussion of the Indian Child Welfare Act and the differences between Reasonable and Active Efforts. As part of their training, judges learn new skills to prevent the unnecessary removal of children from their parents or caretakers, and how to ensure that those who are removed from their homes are reunited or achieve permanency in a fair and expeditious manner. Court observations are conducted by Child Welfare Court Improvement Project staff and serve to assess the effectiveness of the training academy.

Sequential Intercept Model Mapping

Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) Mapping is a cross-systems approach to enhancing local strategies for providing behavioral health care to those within the criminal justice system. The SIM workshop brings together key community stakeholders, such as law enforcement, court personnel, prosecutors, defense counsel, and community service providers who intercept justice-involved persons at each point in a case from initial police encounter through prosecution and disposition. OJI’s Division of Policy & Planning sponsored SIM workshops in Sullivan, Genesee, Delaware, Greene, and Cortland Counties, bringing together key stakeholders to develop a collaborative multi-system approach to preventing overdose deaths in their communities. The SIM workshops were facilitated by Policy Research Associates, who worked with court and community stakeholders to identify resources, gaps in services and opportunities for improvement. During the workshop, groups worked together to develop priorities for change with a focus on improving service delivery for those at high risk of overdose entering the court system. Strategic action plans were developed for each community with an emphasis on optimizing local resources and strengthening partnerships.



“There is, frankly, simply nothing more important than eliminating bias from court operations and creating a court system that promotes fairness and diversity and treats every person who comes here as seeking relief with the respect and dignity that they deserve.”

-Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for New York City Courts Deborah A. Kaplan



In Democracies, the Judiciary Helps to Move the Country Forward

Cultural Theme-Month Programming

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) hosted many programs in 2023 to enhance awareness of and respect for diverse traditions. These included celebrations of Black History, LGBTQ Pride, Hispanic Heritage, and Native American Heritage. ODI also collaborated with the NYS Judicial Committee on Elder Justice to provide a program on Ageism and Elder Abuse, and hosted our 3rd Annual Diversity Summit.

Diversity Summit

In June, the UCS hosted our 3rd Annual Diversity Summit to educate and inform judges and court employees on topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Nearly 240 judges and court staff attended the virtual program. The theme for the 2023 Summit – “Opening Doors to Opportunity” – explored the concepts of Intersectionality and Allyship, and their impact on the workplace. Featured speakers were Diya K. Wynn, a nationally recognized leader from AWS Machine Learning Solutions Lab, and Sandra Perez, Executive Director of NYC Pride.

Black History Month

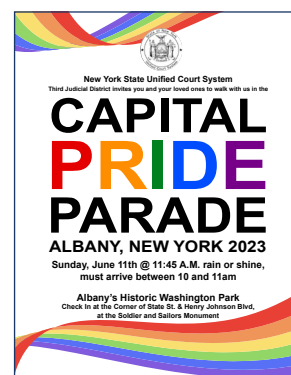
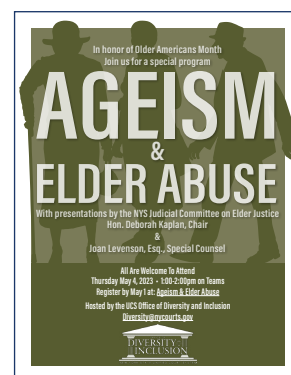
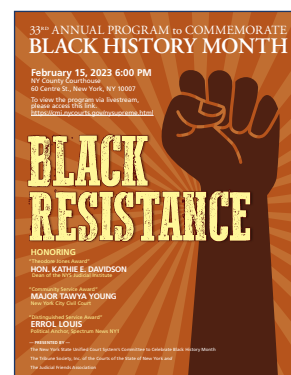
The Unified Court System’s Committee to Celebrate Black History Month, The Tribune Society, Inc. of the Courts of the State of New York, and The Judicial Friends Association presented the 33rd Annual Program to Commemorate Black History Month on Wednesday, February 15, 2023. This in-person celebration was held at the NY County Supreme Courthouse in lower Manhattan. The title for this program was Black Resistance and the master of ceremonies was Hon. Milton Adair Tingling, New York County Clerk.

Older Americans Month

On May 4th, in honor of Older Americans Month, ODI hosted the virtual program Ageism and Elder Abuse. During the lunchtime program, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Deborah Kaplan and Joan Levenson, Esq., Chair and Counsel to the NYS Judicial Committee on Elder Justice, addressed many of the stereotypes and biases that older people encounter, how to identify signs of elder abuse, and ways to combat ageism, often referred to as “the last socially accepted -ism.” One participant shared, “DCAJ Kaplan and Joan Levenson are amazing speakers, and this was no different. Their ability to engage with the audience, convey facts and figures in a relatable and comprehensible way, and inform us, as court employees and people, of what we can do to combat ageism was inspirational and impactful.”

Pride Month

On June 14th, the Pride Alliance of the New York State Courts, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, The Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission, and the Ninth Judicial District’s Access to Justice Committee hosted the 2023 Pride Month event entitled Strength in Solidarity. Almost 200 judges and court employees tuned in to hear about the panel’s experiences as part of the LGBTQ+ community of the Unified Court System. On June 20th, ODI lent support to a Bicoastal LGBTQ Pride Month Conversation, held inside the New York County Courthouse’s Honorable Paul G. Feinman Ceremonial Courtroom. This event featured a number of presenters, including the Hon. Anthony Cannataro, Associate Judge, New York Court of Appeals, the Hon. Kelli Evans, Associate Justice, California Supreme Court, and the Hon. Martin Jenkins, Associate Justice, California Supreme Court.



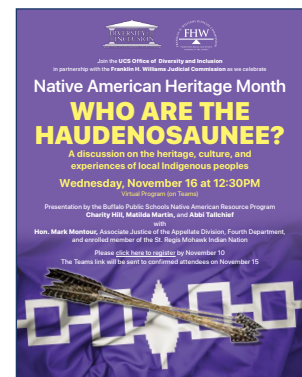
Hispanic Heritage Month

On October 6th, ODI and the Latino Court Officers Society (LCOS) celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month. The LCOS welcomed attendees to a lunch of delicious Latin cuisine, which was followed by the program, where LCOS President Lt. Jessica Hernandez sang a beautiful rendition of the National Anthem, and Chief Administrative Judge Joseph A. Zayas moderated a dynamic discussion of the 2023 theme “Latinos: Driving Prosperity, Power and Progress in America.” Panelists shared stories of their heritage and culture, its impact on their lives, and how things have changed during their careers with the UCS. One participant shared, “I enjoyed hearing about everyone’s background and getting to know court personnel that I wouldn’t have normally met or heard from otherwise. I very much appreciated the lunch reception and how inclusive and welcoming everybody was. There was a great energy and atmosphere created which is directly tied to the efforts made by the sponsors and by the new leadership.”



Native American Heritage Month

To commemorate Native American Heritage Month, ODI lent support to an event sponsored by the Hon. Mark A. Montour, Associate Justice of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department, a member of the St. Regis Mohawk Indian Tribe and the first Native American person ever elected to a state level judicial position. The program, held in Buffalo, New York, highlighted speaker Jamie Jacobs of the Tonawanda Seneca Turtle Clan as well as local Native American fare. Participants also had an opportunity to participate in a celebratory dance. One participant, when asked about their favorite element of the event said, “Every component was well done, but, if I had to pick one, the opening Thanksgiving Prayer might be it. It was poetry, exceptionally inclusive, and particularly meaningful at this time of year.”



Equal Justice in the Courts Committees

Throughout the state, Equal Justice Committees have been working at the local level to support the court system’s mission to ensure that everyone is treated fairly, and to foster a welcoming environment for all who enter and serve in our courts. These committees are comprised of dedicated judges, court staff and in some cases court system partners who are all working tirelessly to advance equal justice by connecting with their local communities. Below are a few examples of their work:

“C3” - Courts and Communities Conversation

Coined by the Hon. Joanne D. Quiñones, Kings County Supreme Court Justice, “C3” is a community outreach program intended to provide a forum to discuss the public’s perception of our courts and to brainstorm ways to improve the court system’s relationship with the community. In November 2023, the Kings County Supreme Court, Criminal Term, and the Second Judicial District Equal Justice Committee hosted a “C3: Courts and Communities Conversation” with AHRC NYC, a non-profit organization that provides services and support to neurodiverse young adults. Twenty-five AHRC participants and staff joined committee members and other court employees for a court tour, had a discussion on the importance of jury service, and participated in a court observation of the Brooklyn Mental Health Court.

Buffalo Mayor’s Summer Youth Program

August 3rd, 2023 marked the 8th Judicial District’s 10th annual event in partnership with the Buffalo Mayor’s Summer Youth Program and H.E.A.L. International (a local organization that serves refugee and immigrant families). Erie County Family Court invited approximately 100 refugee and immigrant youth to a panel event of court and legal representatives whose country of origin is not the United States or who are first generation American born citizens. The panelists shared their stories, their successes and provided advice and hope on applying and qualifying for rewarding careers available in the courts.

Teen Day

Bronx County Family Court hosted a Teen Day event for court-involved youth and young parents. Local community providers set up clothing, employment, mental health, and educational booths for the young people. Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson and NYS Senator Jamaal Bailey were in attendance and provided inspirational words of encouragement.

Diversity Dialogue Podcast

Interviews are recorded in which employees of various backgrounds discuss their paths, their careers, and the importance of maintaining an inclusive workforce. In 2023, these dialogues included then newly appointed Chief Judge Wilson (New York's first African American Chief Judge) and Chief Administrative Judge Zayas (New York's first Latino American Chief Administrative Judge), as well as dozens of others court personnel from diverse backgrounds.

Gender-based Violence

The OJI's Division of Policy & Planning has been working with representatives of the Brooklyn District Attorney's Gender-Based Violence Division, the defense bar, Kings County Criminal Court, and NYC ENDGBV to expand the Brooklyn Human Trafficking Intervention Court to include cases of defendants who are victims of gender-based violence. Potential participants will be identified and referred by the project partners and will include accused persons in domestic violence cross-complaint cases who have a history as domestic violence complainants or of prostitution arrests.

Raise the Age (RTA)

OJI was instrumental in leading the court system's statewide implementation of the seminal legislation raising the age of criminal responsibility in New York to 18 years of age. Before Raise the Age, New York was one of the only two states where individuals aged 16 and 17 were automatically prosecuted as adults. On April 10, 2017, New York enacted the RTA legislation, incrementally raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18. This comprehensive legislation amended various statutes, including the Criminal Procedure Law, Penal Law, and Family Court Act, and was implemented in two phases: on October 1, 2018 for 16-year-olds, and on October 1, 2019 for 17-year-olds. Under RTA, 16 and 17-year-olds accused of felony-level offenses are designated "Adolescent Offenders" and their cases are adjudicated in a specialized Youth Part of superior courts. Judges trained in juvenile justice, adolescent development, custody and care of youths, and the effective treatment methods for reducing unlawful conduct by youths preside over these courts. The RTA legislation ushered in a new paradigm by restructuring New York's juvenile and criminal justice systems and brought sweeping changes to how our courts interact with youth. RTA Youth Parts were created in each of New York's 62 counties. The RTA legislation created a brand new Juvenile Justice System and reflects a recognition that the adolescent brain is not fully developed until the mid to late twenties. Adolescent Offenders charged with non-violent crimes, in most cases, may be eligible for removal to Family Court, thereby allowing these youth to avoid the stigma associated with a permanent adult criminal conviction, while also providing our youth the opportunity of receiving enhanced services in Family Court. Our Youth Part judges daily demonstrate their commitment to our youth and to our communities.

OJI provides support to Youth Part Judges and staff, monitors statewide data trends, and in collaboration with OCA Counsel's Office, develops Raise the Age-related training materials and procedural guidance for state judges and court personnel.



"I have the unique opportunity to engage with young people charged with low-level misdemeanors to serious violent felony offenses. No matter the outcome of the case, it is critical that young people leave court with a sense of hope for their future. Judges can serve as the catalyst to ignite or reignite that hope. We can encourage young people to find their voice, participate in civil discourse and use their lived experiences to share their stories, educate others and maybe even change the trajectory of another young person's life."

-Hon. Alison M. Hamanjan



“Really, the biggest challenge I think for everybody right now is access to justice. We have a tremendous need for legal services and how to get people into our courthouses who need to be in here, how to get the ones that do show up here help.”

–Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Courts Outside New York City James P. Murphy





OJI staff attended a workshop to learn about the Seneca Nation population. The Seneca Nation was the largest of six Native American nations, which comprised the Iroquois Confederacy or Six Nations, a democratic government that pre-dates the United States Constitution. Participants heard from speakers Hayden Haynes and Dr. Quigley, who presented her research and findings of historical/generational trauma at the Thomas Indian School.

In Democracies, the Judiciary Remains Responsive to the Needs of the People

Better for Families

The New York State Unified Court System continues to work with other state agencies to prioritize early identification of families suffering from substance use disorder while supporting enhanced access to quality treatment. This is the core of the Better for Families (BFF) initiative, whose primary goal is to improve outcomes for all children and families affected by substance use disorder by integrating Family Treatment Court (FTC) best practices into counties without FTCs. The BFF project also promotes continuous quality improvement through sharing data, cross-training, supporting the use of universal screening, access to quality assessments, more frequent court reviews, and integration of trauma-informed care practices. BFF is overseen by an Executive Committee that includes representation from the Office of Court Administration, the Office of Children and Family Services, the Office of Addiction Services and Supports, the Department of Health, the Office of Mental Health, and the Center for Justice Innovation. Regional trainings were held in September 2023 and May 2024.

Additionally, a website with links to collaborating statewide agencies is being piloted. Several rural counties such as Allegany and Steuben have taken steps to implement BFF and some larger counties such as Erie and Suffolk are in the planning phase as well.

Child Permanency Mediation

Child Permanency Mediation is a consensual dispute resolution process for child welfare cases in which a specially trained mediator helps parties to identify issues, clarify perceptions and explore options for a mutually acceptable outcome. It is available statewide virtually and in person in some counties. A court-based roster lists experienced mediators who have participated in training in advanced family mediation techniques, child welfare laws and regulations, large group facilitation techniques, trauma informed care, cultural awareness, and implicit bias. A four-day mediator training was held in October 2023.

Domestic Violence Courts/ Integrated Domestic Violence Courts

Domestic Violence (DV) Courts oversee the criminal prosecution of intimate partner violence. These courts are presided over by a single judge and have a dedicated prosecutor and enhanced staffing to provide outreach to community stakeholders and advocacy agencies, and to monitor compliance by those arrested for domestic abuse. Ongoing judicial monitoring is often considered the most effective way to encourage accountability. Defendants are frequently assigned to abusive partner intervention programs while being continuously monitored. These programs have been expanded through local government investment and grant awards. There is a continuing statewide discussion between the courts, advocacy agencies, government partners and survivors regarding the need to create many more of these opportunities in counties where there is no available intervention programming. DV Court judges are trained to understand the dynamics of domestic violence and its impact on the victim, children, the accused, and the community. This specialized training positions DV Judges to make more informed decisions, require frequent court appearances, and tailor the sentence individually to each defendant, all while ensuring due process and community safety. This encourages participation in the court process by the domestic violence survivor who can see that the court system is seriously addressing their concerns.

Integrated Domestic Violence (IDV) Courts were created to handle all related cases pertaining to a single family where the underlying issue is domestic violence. Cases involving these families pending in Criminal Court, Family Court or Supreme Court can be transferred to an IDV Court. The courts seek to promote justice and protect the rights of all litigants while providing a comprehensive approach to case resolution, increasing offender accountability, ensuring victim safety, integrating the delivery of services, and eliminating inconsistent and conflicting judicial orders. The IDV model is meant to lessen the burden of traveling from courthouse to courthouse and court part to court part which is so disheartening for litigants who are also victims of intimate partner violence. The litigants can make better informed decisions and have a greater understanding of the court process because all their issues are being discussed and decided by the same judge, court staff and attorneys. IDV Court staff receive specialized training on the dynamics of domestic violence, monitoring and accountability, technology, courthouse safety, available victim and other community services, and assessments. The IDV Court encourages participation in the court system by focusing on providing a respectful, thoughtful, and organized court process. This year, innovative technology has been implemented in the IDV Courts to improve the identification of these cases throughout the court system, allowing many more victims of domestic abuse to benefit from and access these specialized courts.

Emerging Adulthood

New specialty courts across the state are specifically designed for the 18 to 25-year-old or “emerging adult” population. These emerging adult courts seek to assist emerging adults, by connecting them with community-based services as an alternative to incarceration. Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett coined the phrase “emerging adulthood” in 2000 to describe a unique and crucial stage of development that occurs between childhood and adult maturity. It is well recognized that the adolescent brain is not fully developed until mid to late twenties. This emerging adult population often engages in risk-taking behavior and are particularly vulnerable to peer influence. While emerging adults are still viewed as adults for statutory purposes, emerging adult courts work collaboratively with their local communities and populations served by the courts. The Office for Justice Initiatives, through the Youth and Emerging Adult Justice Division, is committed to supporting these critical access to justice efforts in criminal and juvenile justice to ensure that young people who are involved in the juvenile and criminal justice system are treated appropriately and given the best opportunities for a productive life. Investing in our youth and creating meaningful connections between our youth and their community is key to strengthening our society. Below is a snapshot of two of the existing emerging adult parts:

Alternatives to Incarceration Part – Emerging Adult Track

Led by the Hon. Ellen Biben, New York County Supreme Court’s Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) Part– Emerging Adult Track is a partnership with many stakeholders, including the New York County District Attorney’s Office, the Center for Justice Innovation (CJI), and the Columbia Justice Lab. The track is designed to offer developmentally appropriate programming and supervision for young people between the age of 18 and 25 who might not otherwise meet the eligibility criteria required for participation in other existing specialized problem-solving courts, like Drug Treatment Court, Mental Health Court, or Veterans Treatment Court. This track focuses on helping participants work towards key developmental milestones (e.g., employment) by connecting them with community-based organizations that have age-specific expertise and relevant resources.

The Opportunity Youth Part

The Opportunity Youth Part (OYP) in New Rochelle, led by Hon. Jared R. Rice, is an alternative to incarceration part for emerging adults. Judge Rice works collaboratively with the District Attorney's office, the defense bar, and community stakeholders to provide court-involved young adults ages 16-24 with treatment options, including behavioral health therapy, workforce development, job placement, access to college and GED classes as well as mentorship classes and opportunities. OYP also connects participants in mentoring programs with local New Rochelle businesses and community leaders. The OYP recently celebrated its 3rd anniversary, and since it began the court has engaged with more than 250 individuals. Judge Rice's OYP was recently showcased on NBC. <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/helping-youth-get-out-of-criminal-justice-system-in-new-york/5258930/>



"In the Opportunity Youth Part, we make it a point to democratize some of the various components of our Emerging Adult Justice initiative. Whether it is promoting Community Justice for our stakeholders to directly participate or emphasizing Procedural Justice for our young participants to have a voice, it is important that we all recognize that we have a collective stake in the outcomes of those who come before the court."

–Hon. Jared R. Rice

Family Preservation/Reunification Workgroup

OJI's Child Welfare Court Improvement Project (CWCIP) leads a workgroup composed of multidisciplinary stakeholders and people with lived experience to commemorate June as National Reunification Month. The workgroup developed a profound two-part training series held on June 1st and June 15th, 2023 called "Listen and Learn, Seen and Heard: Families Know Best," for people with lived experience and experts in the field to highlight the importance of family unity and preservation, acknowledge the historical harms and trauma of removal, and offer best practices for successful reunification. CWCIP and the Permanent Commission on Justice for Children then transitioned this workgroup into a broad collaborative by bringing people with lived experience and expertise to the forefront of the work, making them the leaders of this multidisciplinary platform, to assist CWCIP develop trainings and programs and to inform broader policy and practice improvements.

"I mean, even though I've had some bad moments in the system, I will say that now, and especially within the last like three to four years, I've had amazing moments that I've had amazing teams of people help me and are dedicated to me. And I say that with my whole heart because I know what it's like to be in the system where nobody cares about you. I know what it's like, so to find people that are willing to help me and even these group of people here on this teams meeting means so much to me because, clearly, you're already making the steps to help protect the other children that you can't hear their voices."

–Nadirra, Family Preservation/Reunification Workgroup

Human Trafficking Intervention Courts

Human Trafficking Intervention Courts (HTICs) recognize that people charged with prostitution and unauthorized practice of a licensed profession are often victims of commercial sexual exploitation and may be victims of sex trafficking. HTICs seek to connect these individuals with a wide array of services to assist their well-being, promote agency and independence, and offer choices for a personally determined path. To help achieve this, HTICs facilitate access to restorative services and alternatives to criminal punishment. This spring, Suffolk County Family Court Judge Fernando Camacho will be launching New York's first Family Court-based HTIC, named the Expedient Resource Intervention Network or "ERIN" Court, after a young woman who previously appeared before him. The ERIN Court will provide services and safety planning for young victims of trafficking who enter the Suffolk County Family Court system.

Hidden Victims Project

A four-part human trafficking training module, entitled “Hidden Victims: Responding to the Needs of Impacted Women and Girls,” has been completed and will soon be available to the public. This training module is intended for widespread viewing and is part of the Hidden Victims Project, funded by the Office on Violence Against Women, which operated for years in Queens County under the direction of Statewide Problem-Solving Coordinating Judge Toko Serita as part of a collaboration with partner agencies that provided services for justice-involved victims of gender-based violence.

Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

The New York State Child Welfare Court Improvement Project works with various state agencies and the eight federally and one state recognized tribes who are on the land now known as New York State to build and enhance relationships, facilitate collaboratives, and provide training and strategic planning to ensure compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act. This year, in partnership with the NYS Judicial Institute, the Child Welfare Court Improvement Project and the Office of Children and Family Services coordinated a training program where the nationally recognized Erie County Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Court and the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe presented simulated hearings in ICWA cases highlighting proper notice, tribal jurisdiction, active efforts findings, and Qualified Expert Witness testimony to support judicial and legal practice that is in compliance with ICWA and best practices for Tribal and State government collaboration in child welfare matters. Hosted by the Shinnecock Nation, Nassau and Suffolk County Family Court staff and representatives from both the Unkechaug and Shinnecock Nations participated in the first Downstate ICWA roundtable. Participants sat at the roundtable to voice and hear each other’s concerns and agreed to continue conversations every six months.

Mental Health Courts

Mental Health Courts (MHCs) depend on a team of resource coordinators, case managers, dedicated prosecutors and defense counsel, and community mental health partners, who work collaboratively to identify and connect justice involved individuals living with mental illness to community based mental health care providers for individualized treatment plans while also addressing co-occurring substance use issues and improving public safety. OJI’s Division of Policy & Planning currently supports 40 MHCs in 26 of New York’s 62 counties and is engaged in collaborative efforts to create MHCs in other counties.

Trauma-Informed, Solution Focused Strategies

In June 2023, the NYS Bar Association’s Task Force on Mental Health and Trauma Informed Representation recommended that “In conjunction with the New York State Judicial Institute, OCA should sponsor additional training programs on trauma and trauma informed practices for judges and attorneys.” The Task Force identified the Court Improvement Project’s “Incorporating Trauma-Informed, Solution Focused Strategies” as a model for participation for judicial and legal practitioners. In 2023, the training was hosted for Court Help Desk and Court Navigator Staff, Judicial District Managers, Appellate Division staff, and to Family Court Judges during the NYS Judicial Institute Summer Series.

Women’s Health Initiative

The Bronx Criminal Court received a BJA grant for \$549,928 (over three years) to develop a screening tool to identify women who may be appropriate for one of the Bronx problem-solving courts or who may be in need of mental health and/or other trauma-informed services. OJI’s Division of Policy & Planning wrote the grant application for this pilot, which will aid in our continuing work to implement a universal screening program for women with substance use disorder and/or serious mental illness, as well as other forms of trauma. This grant award will also assist our effort to identify hidden victims of trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence.

Virtual Court Access Network (VCAN)

VCAN locations, also known as community hubs, provide members of the public with a safe and private location within their community to access court services and resources. VCAN locations are designed to help those who lack access to or cannot afford transportation, have childcare needs, or have personal safety concerns that make travel to the Courthouse difficult. Community locations include public libraries, community centers and houses of worship. There are VCAN sites in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 9th, and 10th Judicial Districts. The Harlem Community Justice Center’s VCAN office, which celebrated its one-year anniversary on April 12, 2024, is designed to assist community members who are facing eviction or need repairs. In that year, their VCAN team helped over 300 community members with court filings.

Conclusion

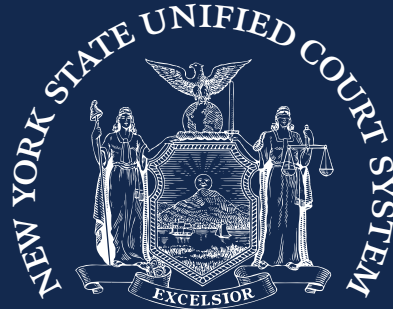
New Yorkers often discuss and debate what is important to us and what is needed for the greater good. It is our collective voices and participation in those discussions that shape our society and that are most crucial to the success of a true democracy. These principles also apply to our court system, a place where the lives of so many are impacted every day by the decisions, policies, and practices we put into place. The court system can continue to be a vehicle for impactful change, too, if we keep listening to the voices of the people we serve.



“...we should cease thinking about courts as places where a judge merely decides which party is right and which is wrong. Instead, we should think of the courts as similar to our other branches of government: institutions that attempt to make decisions that will improve the lives of those we serve.”

–Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson





Office for Justice Initiatives

We thank you for taking time to review the Office for Justice Initiatives' 2024 Law Day Report. As we work to strengthen our democracy by rebuilding trust in our institutions, we pledge to enhance our civic engagement within our local communities. We likewise reaffirm our commitment to providing meaningful and equal access to justice for all New Yorkers who enter and who serve in our courts.

We invite you to contact the Office for Justice Initiatives with any questions, suggestions or feedback:

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