

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

August 1, 2022

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

Last week, we announced the launch of our comprehensive, multi-year bias education and training program, titled “Justice and Fairness for All: Dignity and Respect in the New York State Courts.” This is a required program for all of our judges, court staff and uniformed personnel. And it starts with an introductory session on implicit bias this summer, followed by later sessions that will be tailored to different court roles and responsibilities.

Designed to follow through on one of the most important recommendations made by our Special Adviser on Equal Justice, Secretary Jeh Johnson, “Justice and Fairness for All” addresses the need to improve our knowledge and understanding of complex issues such as implicit bias, so that we are better able to foster fairness, trust and inclusion in our daily interactions with the public we serve and the colleagues we work with.

I want to thank Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Mendelson, and our Equal Justice Implementation Committee, for all of

the hard work, research and thoughtful consideration that has gone into developing this excellent training program.

Please be on the lookout for upcoming communications and instructions on when and how you can view the program. And let's embrace "Justice and Fairness for All" as an opportunity to work together to transform our court system into a model of fairness, equity and respectful treatment for all.

I want to thank you for your commitment to equal justice and for all you do on a daily basis to preserve the public's trust and confidence in the fairness and integrity of our court system.

And speaking of trust and confidence, I would like to focus on an issue that directly affects the public's perception of our court system, and that is the experience of the many hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who are summoned to serve as jurors in our courthouses every year.

As I mentioned in my last message, we have a very exciting Virtual Jury Selection pilot underway to help us improve the convenience and efficiency of jury selection in the future, but there is a lot of other work that is being performed behind the scenes to ensure that jury service is a positive experience for all New Yorkers, including important efforts to make sure that our jury pools are genuinely representative of the

demographics and the diversity of our different communities all across the state.

A case in point? The new dashboards that our Jury Support Office, led by Jessica Simard, has introduced to provide Commissioners of Jurors with comprehensive data that they can use to analyze and monitor the lists of persons qualified to serve as jurors, the rates at which those qualified jurors are actually appearing for service and the areas within each community with the highest rates of non-responders and undeliverable mail. With this helpful data at their disposal, Commissioners of Jurors can work with community stakeholders to develop focused outreach and engagement strategies to help ensure that juries are being selected and empaneled from pools that genuinely reflect the rich diversity of all communities throughout the state.

And just this past month, we kicked off our “Statewide Jury Response Improvement Project,” which is designed to address what has been a pandemic-related decline in juror qualification and juror response rates. Working with a number of Jury Commissioners and representatives of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, our Jury Support Office is committed to recommending and implementing operational, technology, training and outreach initiatives to help increase jury participation and representativeness across the state. And we will follow up with annual reports monitoring the progress of

our efforts to implement these recommendations in order to maintain public trust and confidence in New York’s jury system.

And now, I would like to take a moment to publicly recognize and thank one of our stellar judges who recently retired from the bench in order to pursue new professional opportunities, and that is Judge George Grasso who was serving as Administrative Judge for Criminal Matters in Queens Supreme Court. Judge Grasso has been one of the leaders of the Excellence Initiative, excelling in every one of the challenging assignments that he was asked or volunteered to take on.

As Supervising Judge of the Bronx County Criminal Court, Judge Grasso led the Court’s judges and staff in implementing new programs and procedures, such as our “Trial Fridays” initiative, which increased dispositions and dramatically reduced the large backlog of pending misdemeanors.

Judge Grasso played a formative role in creating the “Bronx Criminal Court Overdose Avoidance and Recovery Track,” a specialized case track for misdemeanor offenders at high risk of opioid overdose that has been expanded across the City.

In January 2021, Judge Grasso was selected to oversee the New York City “Unindicted Felony Parts” initiative, which successfully reduced the pandemic-related backlog of unindicted felony complaints awaiting grand jury presentation.

And in August 2021, he played a key role in developing the “New York City Gun Initiative” that has enabled us to effectively prioritize the fair and prompt adjudication of felony gun possession cases and significantly reduce the backlog of these serious cases.

We are grateful to Judge Grasso for his impactful leadership and service to our courts over the last 12 years, and we wish him the very best in all of his future endeavors. Thank you, Judge Grasso.

And finally, on behalf of our entire court system, I want to take a moment to send my condolences to the family of Judge Richard Simons, who passed away on July 17th. Judge Simons joined the Bench at the age of 36, becoming one of the youngest Supreme Court Justices in our state’s history, and he went on to serve with great distinction as a Justice of the Appellate Division, Third and Fourth Departments, Associate Judge of the Court of Appeals and Acting Chief Judge from November 1992 to March 1993. Judge Simons leaves behind a truly admirable legacy as a learned, wise, honorable and non-ideological judge whose long and distinguished record of public service remains a source of inspiration to all of us.

So thank you all for tuning in to this week’s message, and thank you for doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe and healthy.