

## **MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE**

**March 15, 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.

As you know, the COVID metrics have improved and the vaccination campaign is expanding to reach more and more people in New York State. As a result, we are moving forward with our plans to incrementally expand in-person operations and re-start a limited number of civil and criminal jury trials on Monday, March 22nd.

We will continue to prioritize and enforce social distancing, the use of personal protective equipment, our strict cleaning regimen, and the maintenance of an environment where everyone -- jurors, lawyers, litigants, witnesses, judges, staff and all other participants -- feels comfortable and confident about the safety of our courthouses.

We received good news last week when the State announced that, effective March 10th, the categories of individuals eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccination are expanding to include individuals 60 years of age or older, and importantly for us, effective Wednesday, March 17th, to “public facing” essential governmental officials and employees, which includes Judges and Justices of the Unified Court System.

While many judges have already been vaccinated, making the vaccine available to all of our judges will certainly expedite our ability to safely expand in-person operations and eventually achieve our goal of resuming a full range of in-person court operations, including jury trials. And, of course, this will allow us to get back to some form of normalcy in our own personal lives as well, which is so important to our mental health and well-being. So, we encourage everyone who hasn't yet received a vaccine to schedule an appointment as soon as possible.

Now, to be clear, our commitment to expanding in-person services and restarting jury trials does not mean that we have any intention of returning to the kind of courthouse density that existed before the arrival of COVID-19. First of all, we will be moving forward

gradually, and second, we will be moving into a new and presumably better normal, defined by our increased reliance on technology options, such as video-conferencing and e-filing, that will enable us to limit courthouse traffic while providing efficient access to our services.

In the meantime, the majority of court matters will continue to be handled virtually for the foreseeable future, and last week our judges and staff remotely conferenced and heard over 24,400 matters, settled or disposed of more than 5,600 of those matters, and issued over 2,460 written decisions on motions and other undecided matters. In addition, more than 1,200 virtual bench trials and evidentiary and fact-finding hearings were commenced last week across the state.

It was exactly one year ago tomorrow, March 16th, that the court system temporarily postponed non-emergency, non-essential in-person functions in order to limit courthouse traffic and stem the spread of the virus. That very same week, we began our remarkable journey of reinventing ourselves from a massive, complex, in-person operating model into a functioning virtual model, capable of using remote technology to provide court access in the broadest possible range of cases. An incredible achievement that was accomplished in record time

through the commitment, dedication and ingenuity of our judges and professional staff, our leadership team, and our Division of Technology professionals.

And while nothing has been easy for any of us this past year, and while COVID-19 has certainly taken its toll in ways big and small, our judges and professional staff pressed on through enormous challenges, and the result of their effort has been the provision of our services through a new virtual model that has enabled our courts to function safely and effectively, and ensure access to essential court services.

As I said a moment ago, it hasn't been easy for any of us. In fact, it has been very challenging to maintain our mental health and emotional well-being in the face of the disruption, stress and anxiety of the past year.

And we remain mindful of our responsibility and our desire to assist our employees and their families through these challenges. Our Work Life Assistance Program, which is available to all nonjudicial employees and their family members, offers a wide range of free and

confidential services through Corporate Counseling Associates (CCA), an outside provider of professional services around: alcohol and drug use, grief and depression, marriage and family problems, including issues affecting children, legal and financial concerns, and other difficult issues affecting the well-being of our workforce. CCA even assists our employees with daily challenges like finding licensed day care providers for children and nursing homes for elderly parents, challenges that can feel absolutely overwhelming, especially in the midst of a pandemic.

I want to thank the professionals at “Corporate Counseling Associates” for the valuable help and assistance they provide in support of the mental health and well-being of our workforce, and I also want to thank our Chief of Operations, Nancy Barry; Director of Human Resources, Carolyn Grimaldi; and Deputy Director, Anne Johnson-Endy for their commitment to maintaining a strong and vibrant Work Life Assistance Program. And special thanks to Senior Management Analyst, Alisha Ostasher-Cox, and Principal Court Analyst, Ann Marie Riccardi, for working so diligently to get the word out to all of our Human Resource Administrators, Chief Clerks and District Executives at the local level. Their combined efforts are paying off, and this valuable resource is being maximized by our staff as evidenced by the recent

webinar on “Coping During the Pandemic,” which attracted the attendance of several hundred court professionals.

We encourage anyone who is struggling with personal, family or work-related issues to reach out for help by calling **1-800-833-8707**. Assistance is confidential, it’s free, and someone is always available to help, 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Well, that concludes today’s Monday Message, and once again, I thank you for your time, and ask you to remain disciplined in doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe.