

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

May 3, 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.

We are moving ahead with our plans for the physical return of all judges and court staff to their assigned courthouses on Monday, May 24th, and the transition is taking place incrementally, with our Judicial Districts outside New York City operating at about 80% staffing, and our courts in New York City operating with staffing levels ranging from 50% to 75%. Those percentages will continue to increase with each passing week as our Administrative Judges and court managers work through all of the different safety and operational issues in order to reach full staffing levels in our courthouses.

Obviously, the physical return of our judges and professional staff will enable us to expand in-court operations and services for lawyers

and litigants, and increase the number and types of matters that can be heard again in-person, including, of course, jury trials and other court proceedings. And consistent with this goal, I'm pleased to report that more than 70 civil and criminal jury trials are scheduled to commence this week in our trial courts across the state, the largest number since the beginning of the pandemic.

Our re-staffing sends an important message to the public, and to our partners in government that our judges and staff are present in our courthouses doing the people's business and supporting the state's economic reopening at this critical time when the COVID metrics have improved significantly, more and more people are getting vaccinated and restrictions on business, cultural and recreational activities are being lifted.

But even as we move forward into our new and better post-pandemic normal, we will continue to maintain and enforce the extensive safety measures, such as COVID screening and temperature checks, face masks and PPE, social distancing and strict cleaning and sanitizing standards that have worked so well to preserve the health and safety of everyone entering our buildings.

And because it's imperative that we keep the number of lawyers, litigants and court users in our buildings down to safe and manageable levels, we will continue to rely on our virtual court model to limit unnecessary personal appearances and meet the broad demand for our services.

And with regard to our virtual courts, I'm pleased to report that well over 1,100 online bench trials and hearings were commenced last week, and that our judges and staff remotely conferenced more than 24,500 matters, settled or disposed of more than 6,100 of those matters, and issued more than 2,100 written decisions on motions and other undecided matters.

Our virtual model has truly been a remarkable "experiment," and we are most appreciative of the important work that our judges and staff have been doing to educate the public about virtual courts and help remove the barriers to justice that some New Yorkers have been challenged by. And I am particularly proud of our excellent outreach to religious and faith leaders in communities across the state to assist us in this regard. When I served as the elected District Attorney of

Westchester County, I established strong partnerships with the faith leaders in my community. I did that because we know that very often the first people to whom community members turn for help and support when facing serious legal and personal crises, such as family violence, addiction, eviction, financial problems and other challenges, are their faith leaders.

And here in the courts, we are also turning to those leaders in Districts across the state. And our Administrative Judges are doing a great job of reaching out to their local clergy to provide information about the broad range of resources and services that are available to their congregants through the courts and, of course, through our many justice partners.

Last week, in the Eighth Judicial District, Administrative Judge Paula Feroletto hosted a very well organized and productive meeting of faith leaders from western New York. Judges and staff presented information and answered questions about the work of our courts and used our virtual platform to upload and share relevant resources with the audience in real time, including the availability of help and assistance for unrepresented litigants seeking to access virtual courts as

well as information for congregants dealing with domestic violence, eviction and other legal problems. In addition, Justice Shirley Troutman, who co-chairs the Franklin Williams Judicial Commission, gave an overview of the work we are doing across the state in our ongoing Equal Justice Initiative, and encouraged the leaders in attendance to share information about the career opportunities available in the courts.

A similar meeting was convened in the Seventh Judicial District last month by Administrative Judge Craig Doran. The fourth in a series, this latest meeting of the 7th J.D.'s faith leaders focused on landlord-tenant issues, with judges, lawyers, housing experts and representatives of local government offering information on housing court services, access to legal assistance and representation, rental assistance and other resources available to individuals and families facing eviction and other housing-related issues.

In the Third Judicial District, Administrative Judge Gerald Connolly and his team have collaborated with legal service providers and nonprofits to convene a series of meetings with their local faith leaders this year, meetings that will also be focused on housing and eviction

issues during the pandemic, as well as how we are working to bridge the digital divide in virtual courts through remote Public Access Kiosks and Help Centers, and, of course, as we always like to do, we share information and encourage interest in career opportunities in the courts.

I want to thank all of the Administrative Judges, trial judges, District Executives, professional staff and justice partners who understand the importance of working with the clergy to better serve the justice needs of our communities. And I want to thank Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Mendelson, and our Office For Justice Initiatives, for supporting these outreach efforts as part of our institutional commitment to fostering access to justice for all New Yorkers.

As I'm sure you know by now, today is Law Day, a special day set aside each year to celebrate the importance of the rule of law in our nation's history. One of the core elements of the rule of law is the principle that every individual, no matter who they are, or where they come from in life, is entitled to equal justice under the law.

And so, on this Law Day, I want to take a moment to make you aware of two upcoming programs that continue our conversation as a court family about equal justice, and about the issues of racism and bias that must be acknowledged, identified and eliminated.

The first of these programs, “A Dialogue on Race and Cultural Sensitivity,” is focused on issues affecting Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and it will take place this Wednesday, May 5th, at 12:30 p.m., featuring an outstanding panel of distinguished judges, attorneys and academics. I want to thank the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission, celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, for sponsoring this virtual event in honor of “Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.”

And, next Thursday, May 13th, our Office of Diversity and Inclusion will sponsor a Lunch and Learn Program on “Pathways to Inclusion: Public Service and Leadership in the Court System.” During the program we will be highlighting the professional journeys and experiences of many of our Asian American colleagues, and addressing concerns over Anti-Asian bias and discrimination.

I hope that you will be able to tune into one or both of these programs as we continue the dialogue and our ongoing efforts to understand, appreciate and fully embrace the beauty and rich diversity of our court family. So, please register to attend by checking your email or visiting the respective web sites of the Williams Commission and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

And now, in closing this week's Message, I once again urge you to remain disciplined in doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe. Thank you.