

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

June 14, 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.

I begin this week's message with an announcement regarding a modification of our mask policy for judges and court staff. Beginning this week, judges and court employees who have been fully vaccinated will no longer be required to wear masks in non-public areas of our court facilities, including judges' chambers, back offices and other private areas that are not accessible to members of the public. Participation is voluntary and judges and staff who have been vaccinated may take advantage of the new policy by engaging in a simple online enrollment process that will result in the issuance of a special I.D. card confirming your status as a fully vaccinated person.

Importantly, vaccinated Judges and court staff will still be required to wear masks in all public areas of our court facilities, including courtrooms, courthouse lobbies, elevators and other public hallways and spaces. And judges and staff who have not been vaccinated will still be required to wear face masks in private courthouse areas, as per our existing protocols.

And, of course, all members of the public entering our court facilities will still be required to wear face coverings, and to comply with all of the extensive safety measures we have implemented, including temperature checks and physical distancing. So, nothing has changed in that regard.

A memorandum containing detailed guidance on all of these issues, including the online enrollment process, is being distributed to all judges and staff today and will be available on our web site. I strongly encourage you to review the memo, and to bring any questions you may have to the attention of your human resources administrator.

Our decision to ease the mask requirement for vaccinated judges and court personnel was based on careful consideration of the latest public health guidance, which indicates that vaccinated individuals pose little or no risk of spreading the virus, as well as the continuing good news surrounding COVID positivity rates and the fact that the number of judges and court staff testing positive for COVID on a daily basis has been at or near zero for several weeks now. Under these circumstances, we feel confident that this decision will help provide vaccinated judges and staff with a much-needed sense of normalcy while still keeping everyone who works in and enters our courthouses safe and healthy.

We are now entering week four of our return to full in-person staffing and with each passing week we are gradually increasing the range and number of in-person proceedings heard in our courthouses, including the phased resumption of in-person arraignments in the New York City Criminal Court, beginning in Manhattan, on June 28th. We have a lot of work ahead of us to overcome the ongoing challenges and after-effects of the pandemic, but it is certainly encouraging and exciting to see our judges and staff once again interacting face-to-face with lawyers and litigants to move our dockets forward, an indication,

hopefully -- keeping our fingers crossed -- that the end of the pandemic is finally in sight.

And in other hopeful and exciting developments for our court system, last Wednesday, June 10th, we celebrated the grand opening of our new Family Court facility in the City of New Rochelle, in Westchester County, replacing the wholly inadequate and dilapidated court facility formerly located at 420 North Avenue. Our new state-of-the-art Family Court facility, located adjacent to a transportation hub at 26 Garden Street, occupies 35,000 square feet and two floors of a newly constructed six-story building. It features the very latest in court technology and equipment and houses two courtrooms, three hearing rooms, judges' chambers and ample office space for non-judicial staff and family justice agencies.

Most important, the new facility provides families and children with an appropriate sense of dignity and respect as they seek critical justice services in sensitive child abuse and neglect cases, domestic violence matters, juvenile delinquency proceedings and other matters. I want to thank and recognize the Westchester County Executive,

George Latimer, and the Westchester County Board of Legislators, for their demonstrated commitment to meeting the modern-day justice needs of families and children. And, of course, we are grateful to Kathie Davidson, our Administrative Judge in the 9th Judicial District, for her tireless efforts and perseverance in bringing this project to fruition for the benefit of the families and children of lower Westchester County.

And this coming Friday, also in Westchester County, we are launching our new “Emerging Adult Justice Part,” in the Mount Vernon City Court, a nationally innovative pilot focused on developing age-effective court approaches for emerging adult offenders, the 18- to 25-year-old demographic that makes up only 10% of our population, but 24% of all arrests in New York State and 29% nationally.

Research shows that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a time when the brain is still developing and young adults are more susceptible to risk-taking behaviors and peer pressure. And responding to this research, the mission of the Emerging Adult Part is to work collaboratively with prosecutors, defense counsel and with

community organizations to provide effective alternatives to prosecution and incarceration for 18 to 25-year-olds charged with certain non-violent offenses. And the goal, of course, is to reduce recidivism, improve public safety and help young adults build the foundations necessary for healthy, productive futures.

I want to thank Administrative Judge Kathie Davidson, and Justice Sam Walker, the Supervising Judge of the City Courts for the 9th Judicial District, for their leadership and commitment to reform in this area. And, of course, I want to thank and recognize the Mount Vernon City Court Judges -- Lyndon Williams and Nichelle Johnson -- who will be presiding over the Emerging Adult Justice Part. They have been “all in” on this project from the very outset, and have worked diligently with our justice stakeholders and community partners to create a comprehensive manual of policies and procedures to successfully guide the work of this important new court.

We appreciate their commitment, and that of all of our judges and court staff and justice partners, to fostering age-effective

rehabilitative approaches for justice-involved youth and emerging adults in our state.

And on the topic of engaging with our young people and building trust in the courts and the justice system within our underserved communities, I am pleased to highlight our “J.U.S.T. L.A.W. Program,” now in its third year of operation in the City of Rochester. J.U.S.T. L.A.W. stands for “Justice, Understanding, Societal Trust and Literacy, Attendance and Writing,”-- seven words that describe an innovative and exciting collaboration between our judges and court staff in the 7th Judicial District and the City of Rochester, the Rochester Black Bar Association, the Rochester City School District and radio station 103.9 FM. This collaboration gives students in grades six through nine the opportunity to interact with judges and court officials to learn about our courts and the legal system in order to understand how they operate, and to appreciate the importance of the rule of law.

And today, in Rochester, it just so happens that, as part of JUST LAW, Administrative Judge Craig Doran will be joined by Mayor Lovely Warren for a virtual awards ceremony recognizing 12 outstanding

students whose essays on the topic of “What Justice Means to Me” were selected from among hundreds of contestants. Congratulations to the 12 essay contest winners, and their proud families and teachers, for their excellent work. And kudos to Judge Doran and our Rochester partners for their shared commitment to community outreach and education in order to foster public trust and understanding about the important role of the courts and the rule of law in our society.

And on that note, I thank you for “tuning in,” and 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.