

## MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

July 26, 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.

On July 14th, we implemented some important changes to the court's system mask policy. As a result, attorneys- agency personnel- and members of the public who are able to show proof of their vaccinated status can obtain special passes permitting them to enter our court facilities without wearing a face mask- having their temperature taken;... or completing a health safety screening.

Under the new policy, attorneys or agency staff who regularly conduct business in our buildings may obtain a 90-day green pass enabling them to conduct business in all areas of the courthouse without a face mask. To obtain a green pass, you must present a valid secure pass or official agency i.d.- and proof of vaccination,- to a court

officer at the entrance to the court facility. The green pass is to be openly displayed on your person at all times inside the court facility.

Members of the public may obtain a one-day white visitor's pass after showing a valid government-issued form of i.d.- and proof of vaccination,-- to a court officer when entering the court facility. The white pass,-- or lapel sticker,-- must be worn at all times on the outside of the visitor's clothing.

In addition, fully vaccinated judges and non-judicial personnel who have applied for and received orange i.d. cards no longer have to complete our health safety protocols, and may enter and remain in any area of the courthouse- private or public- without wearing a mask or face covering.

For more information about these changes- including acceptable forms of proof of vaccination- please review the updated "Protocol for Entering Courthouses" on our web site- at [www dot New York Courts dot Gov](http://www.dot.NewYorkCourts.dot.Gov).

The changes to our mask policy have been implemented in keeping with our commitment to follow the guidance promulgated by the CDC, and the State Department of Health for individuals who have been fully vaccinated.

-- And, of course, these procedures are completely voluntary. Fully vaccinated judges, employees and court users who prefer to continue wearing a mask in our facilities are free to do so.

And judges;- court employees;- attorneys;- agency personnel;... and court visitors who have not been vaccinated,- or have not requested or received either an orange, green or white pass,-- are required to comply with our health safety protocols,- including wearing a mask or face covering and having their temperatures taken.--

We do strongly encourage everyone to get vaccinated- especially in light of the risks posed by the new COVID-19 variants- and we hope that, upon doing so, you will take advantage of the revised mask policy.

Finally, as we all know, the science and safety procedures surrounding COVID-19 continue to change and evolve, so we must continue to adapt to additional guidance,-- or changes in the existing guidance,-- even on short notice.

And notwithstanding the shifting safety protocols, our judges and staff have shown great flexibility and resilience in expanding in-person operations and services. As of today, all arraignments- day, night and weekend- are again taking place in-person in New York City, and across most of the state. Court appearances are taking place in person, especially in our trial assignment parts- and the number of in-person jury trials continues to expand- with a significant increase in jury trials planned for September.

So, a lot of forward progress- and a lot to be encouraged about, and grateful for. And as to the dedication and service of our folks here in the court system, we are pleased to continue our practice of recognizing members of our court family who excelled in their service to the courts and the public during the pandemic. And this week, the spotlight falls on Craig Stratton,-- who serves as a Case Manager with the Albany County Recovery Court.

Earlier this month, the CDC reported that drug overdoses killed a record 93,000 Americans in 2020- an increase of nearly 30% from 2019. The stress and anxiety, and the restrictions and economic upheaval caused by the pandemic not only intensified the problems facing individuals with substance abuse disorders- but it also disrupted the care systems that were put in place to support these individuals.

In March of last year, when in-person court operations were temporarily suspended, Craig Stratton and his colleagues in the Albany County Recovery Court immediately understood the urgency of staying connected with the court's participants, and they worked around the clock to set up a virtual operating system that allowed Presiding Judge Gerald Connelly to communicate effectively with dozens of treatment participants and service providers.

Thanks to Craig's determination and ingenuity in leveraging remote technology, the Recovery Court was able to carry on its life-saving work with little or no interruption,-- assessing and admitting new participants;... monitoring the progress of their treatment;... connecting

participants to critical support services;... and even conducting virtual graduations.

Craig's contributions to the Albany Recovery Court reflect the dedication and resourcefulness of all the judges and court staff who serve in our problem-solving courts. During the pandemic, they found creative ways to navigate the many COVID-related restrictions affecting our justice system. And thanks to their efforts, since March of last year, nearly 5,000 New Yorkers were able to successfully complete their respective treatment programs in our problem-solving courts.

In the words of Deborah Miller, a Resource Coordinator in the St. Lawrence County Court Felony Drug Treatment Part:

“Drug Courts refused to abandon the people we serve! We came together. We reached out. We found ways to communicate. We found ways to be supportive. We were essential workers. [And] the greatest asset we had during this time was our persistence and dedication to serve.”

I could not agree more with Deb.

So, to both Craig Stratton and Deborah Miller- and all of our problem-solving judges and court professionals- please know that we are grateful to you for your hard work and dedication in maintaining those life-lines of rehabilitative justice services that were so important to the participants- and the well-being of our communities throughout the pandemic.

We are also proud of the fact that- notwithstanding the relentless daily pressures and operational challenges of the pandemic- our judges, court leaders and professional staff have never lost sight of the need to reform our justice system. And an excellent case in point is our “Child Welfare Court Improvement Project,”- a project focused on promoting the safety, permanence and well-being of abused and neglected children by providing resources and technical assistance to improve the quality of court permanency hearings, and ensure better case outcomes for vulnerable children.

Earlier this month, as part of that Project, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Mendelson moderated an excellent panel discussion exploring the lived experiences of children;... parents;... and

child welfare advocates who have been involved in family separation and reunification proceedings. This informative program- entitled “Family Preservation is the Law,”- was recorded as a webinar to be shown to our judges and court staff who hear child welfare matters in every Judicial District across the state.

Research has confirmed what we instinctively know- separating children from their families has a negative impact on their development and well-being,- and family separation, historically, has disproportionately affected families and children of color. In New York, our judges and staff are working to appropriately prioritize family preservation, and we are proud of the progress that our entire child welfare system is making to achieve that vital goal.

And we are planning to put that progress on display next June- during “National Reunification Month”- with events and activities highlighting the programs and individuals who are working successfully to help families stay together- Our goal is for New York to emerge as a national model, and a leader in the celebration of family reunification. – Protecting children, and preserving and reuniting families. -- What could be more worthy of celebration?

And on that note, I will conclude this week's message, and thank you all again for "tuning in," and for staying disciplined in doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe.