

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

March 28, 2022

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.

Today marks two weeks since we moved to 3-foot physical distancing for all judges, court staff and court users in all of our trial courts. I am pleased to report that the change is going smoothly and that, not surprisingly, there has been a noticeable increase in courthouse activity across the state, with more jurors, lawyers and litigants coming through our buildings as we schedule more jury trials and in-person proceedings to clear out the pandemic-related backlogs that have built up in many of our courts.

And now that we're back to full-scale operations and adapting well to the "new normal" in our courts, we have been asked about other possible modifications to our health and safety protocols, including the use of face coverings in public courthouse areas. Like so many of you, I can't wait for the day when we can all finally drop our masks, but we need to be patient and disciplined for a while longer.

Our COVID positivity rate, which we carefully monitor on a daily basis, has seen a minor uptick over the last two weeks, and while that slight increase is not in itself a cause for concern, it does bears watching given the parallel increase in our courthouse traffic levels.

So, under the circumstances, it makes sense for us to stick with the tried and true public health protocols that have helped to keep everyone in our courthouses safe and healthy over the last two years. But you can rest assured that, when the time is right, we will make safe and appropriate modifications after a careful and thorough review of all of the COVID-related data and the facts on the ground, and in line with the recommendations issued by public health authorities. So, thank you, for your continued patience and understanding.

I turn now to a topic that was first discussed last Fall, the plight of hundreds of women judges and lawyers in Afghanistan who lost their jobs after the Taliban's takeover of their country, women who now live under the threat of violence and death for their official actions in sentencing men to prison for the assault, kidnapping, rape and murder of Afghan women and girls or for ruling against men in divorce and custody cases.

Spurred by the disturbing news reports about the threats these women face, including the murder of two Afghan women Judges in

2021, my Court of Appeals colleague, Madeline Singas, suggested that we reach out to the National Center for State Courts and the Conference of Chief Justices to discuss what our nation’s judicial leaders could do to help and assist these women. That effort led to last November’s unanimous Resolution, adopted by the Chief Justice of every State, Commonwealth and Territory in the United States, urging, among other measures, that state court systems work with the National Center for State Courts to support the resettlement of Afghan women judges and justice system refugees.

Under Judge Singas’s continuing leadership, we have been following through on our commitment to support these courageous women and, today, I am pleased to announce that the Unified Court System has implemented a new program -- “Judges for Career Opportunities for Refugees,” or “J-COR” -- to provide career placement opportunities in our court system for Afghan refugees with law-related experience or interest.

Under the “J-COR Program,” eligible Afghan refugees will be placed in full-time, paid “analyst” positions for a 12-month period. To qualify for these positions, applicants must be: proficient in English; have relocated to the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 or 2022;

possess the requisite immigration status to work in the U.S; and have relevant experience in the legal profession.

Individuals interested in applying for these positions are asked to compile and submit a resume to J-COR@nycourts.gov. Qualified applicants who successfully complete an interview process will be placed in positions that closely match their experience, their interests and their preferred geographic location.

I want to express my thanks to Judge Singas, for her commitment to this important humanitarian cause; our Chief Administrative Judge, Lawrence Marks, and our OCA Chief of Operations, Nancy Barry, for approving and implementing the necessary procedures; to Mary McQueen, the President of the National Center for State Courts, a great friend and partner to the New York State courts, for her invaluable guidance and support; and Emily Grasso, Law Clerk to Judge Singas, for all of her work and research in support of this important initiative.

This is a truly worthy endeavor, and the least that we can do here in New York to support the courageous women judges and lawyers who have risked their lives over the last 20 years to uphold the rule of law and enforce the human rights of women and girls living in Afghanistan. My sincere thanks to everyone involved.

Continuing in the vein of good news and regarding the Court of Appeals, I am pleased to announce that the formal investiture of our three newest Judges -- Madeline Singas, Anthony Cannataro and Shirley Troutman -- will take place on Tuesday, April 5th, at 11:00, in the Courtroom of Court of Appeals Hall, in Albany.

This will be a very special day for our Court, a day that has been a long time in coming. As you may recall, Judge Singas and Judge Cannataro both joined our Court last June while Judge Troutman joined our Bench this past January. Unfortunately, due to public health restrictions and complications, we have been compelled, until now, to defer the public investitures of our three new colleagues.

And even now, the number of guests and dignitaries invited to attend the investiture ceremony is necessarily limited by the 3-foot rule in our buildings. However, the entire ceremony will be live-streamed on the Court of Appeals' website, and the family, friends and colleagues of our new Judges, as well as our court family and the legal community, are cordially invited to tune in to what will be a singular, historic event in our Court's history, the investiture of our three new Judges: Madeline Singas, the 114th;... Anthony Cannataro, the 115th;... and Shirley Troutman, the 116th Associate Judges of the New York Court of Appeals. I hope that you can join us and tune in to the livestream of

the ceremony as your time and responsibilities permit. That is, Tuesday, April 5, at 11:00 a.m.

And now, finally, for all of the judges, court professionals and stakeholders who are working on many different fronts to expand access to justice in New York State, I want to let you know that our 7th annual “Access to Justice Technology Conference,” sponsored by the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice, is taking place on April 11th and 12th.

This year’s Conference, which is being presented virtually, features an excellent two-day agenda focused on how we move forward and take full advantage of the innovative, short-term technology solutions that were developed in response to the pandemic, and, most importantly, transform those temporary measures into permanent improvements in how we provide legal services and ensure maximum court access for low-income New Yorkers -- now, and in the future.

I invite those of you who can be available and wish to attend this year’s Conference to visit the Permanent Commission’s page on the court system’s website to review the Conference agenda and register by the deadline of April 7th.

So, thank you all, once again, for listening, and for remaining disciplined in doing all that you can and should be doing to keep yourselves and those around you safe.