

## MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUDGE JANET DIFIORE

June 6, 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.

I am pleased to report that our return to full court operations is progressing smoothly and that we are making significant strides to improve court access, efficiency and productivity in many of our courts.

A case in point -- something you may have read about in last Wednesday's Daily News -- is our New York City "Felony Gun Case Initiative" prioritizing the fair and prompt resolution of illegal gun possession cases.

Across the City, we have designated special teams of judges to preside over pretrial hearings, pleas and trials in this category of cases, and we have increased the number of sitting grand juries and fast-tracked the oldest pending cases. We have also issued citywide written protocols by which these cases are managed, with a strong emphasis on early exchange of discovery materials in order to foster meaningful

plea negotiations and the fair, efficient and speedier resolution of these cases.

The Felony Gun Case Initiative was launched in August of last year to address the backlog of gun cases that had built up during the worst phases of the pandemic, and, in January, in anticipation of Mayor Adams' "Blueprint to End Gun Violence," we expanded our plan.

The results of the Gun Case Initiative speak for themselves. Since January, our judges and court staff have tripled the average number of weekly dispositions – from 30 to 100. And remarkably, even as the number of gun arrests increased, our dispositions have gone up and the case backlog has gone down. Since August 15, 2021, we have disposed of over 2,100 felony gun cases and slashed the backlog of pending cases by a third.

Remarkable progress made possible by:

- the skill and commitment of the assigned judges and court staff;
- the strong leadership of our Administrative Judges, led by Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Deborah Kaplan, and Administrative Judges: George Grasso in Queens; Ellen Biben in Manhattan; Matthew D'Emic in Brooklyn; Alvin Yearwood in the Bronx; and Desmond Green in Staten Island;

- and, of course, the cooperation and support of our justice partners, including the Mayor’s Office, and Counsel to the Mayor, Brendan McGuire, as well as the City’s District Attorneys; the defense bar; and the Department of Correction.

Kudos to all of them for their excellent work.

During this month of June, which is “National Gun Violence Awareness Month,” and in the wake of the unsustainable gun violence that has destroyed so many lives and families in our communities, it is important for every New Yorker to know that the courts are functioning as intended, and that our focus is on prioritizing the fair, prompt and efficient adjudication of these very serious violent felony cases. I will continue to report on the results of this important initiative throughout the coming months.

Turning now to the needs of our court system, I want to thank Governor Kathy Hochul for moving swiftly to fill 16 judicial vacancies in our appellate and trial courts last month, starting with her appointment of four superbly qualified Justices to the Appellate Division, Second Department, one of the busiest appellate courts in the nation. Justices Barry Warhit, Helen Voutsinas, Lillian Wan and Janice Taylor bring experience, skill and diversity to the Second Department, and it is my

pleasure to congratulate and welcome them to the Second Department bench, led by our Presiding Justice, Hector LaSalle.

On May 27th, Governor Hochul also appointed a highly-qualified and richly diverse slate of 12 Judges to the Court of Claims. And we are most grateful to Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, and the members of the New York State Senate, for confirming these Judges who will positively impact both our civil and criminal dockets.

Congratulations to our 12 new Court of Claims Judges,

Anthony Brindisi

Betty Calvo-Torres

Zainab Chaudhry

Maureen Heitner

Sarika Kapoor

Tim Lewis

Stephen Miller

Anar Patel

Joanne Quinones

Stephanie Saunders

Michael Siragusa, and

Javier Vargas

-- and welcome to your new positions!

Now, in addition to being national gun violence awareness month, the month of June is also “National Reunification Month,” and a perfect time to prioritize and reaffirm our institutional commitment to family preservation and reunification, and to recognize the many caring judges, court staff and child welfare professionals who are working to preserve the bonds of family and reduce the trauma of family separation.

During the month of June, Judge Mendelson and the Office for Justice Initiatives, working with Administrative Judges and Family Court Supervising Judges, are sponsoring a series of programs to educate and sensitize judges and court staff about the traumatic effects of family separation on children, the disproportionate impact of family separation on parents and children of color and the advantages of family preservation and reunification.

These programs center around an impactful and moving video presentation of Judge Mendelson’s conversations with children, parents and child welfare professionals who have lived through the trauma of family separation. The video presentation is followed by a live discussion, moderated by OJI staff, highlighting best practices designed to protect and keep children safe, help families stay together, and dismantle systemic racism in the child welfare system.

Thank you to Judge Mendelson and our OJI professionals for their leadership on family reunification, and for their year-round work to improve the adjudication of child welfare cases.

Finally, June is also “LGBTQ Pride Month,” and I am pleased to announce that we are kicking off our Pride Month celebrations with an excellent “Diversity Dialogues Podcast,” featuring a candid, wide-ranging interview with the two Co-Chairs of the Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission: Judge Anthony Cannataro, my Court of Appeals colleague, and Joanne Winslow, Associate Justice of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department.

During the interview, conducted by John Caher, our Strategic Communications Adviser, Judges Cannataro and Winslow offer many rich and fascinating stories and insights about their personal and professional journeys, and Judge Winslow even chooses the occasion to announce her engagement to her fiancé, Lin. So, congratulations to Justice Winslow!

The Failla Commission was created in 2016 as the first court-based Commission in the nation focused on issues facing members of the LGBTQ community in the courts and the justice system. And when we created the Commission, we took that important step because we believe that the court system, from top to bottom, must reflect the rich

diversity of our state, and that every person, of every background, must always feel welcome and safe in our courthouses. As Judge Cannataro says in the podcast: “The success of the courts has to do with the trust that is placed in [the courts] by the [members of the] community, and it is easier to have that trust when each community can look at the courts and see themselves.”

And I think that is exactly right, so I hope that you will take the time to tune in to this wonderful podcast, which is available on the home page of the Office of Diversity & Inclusion, and I hope that you will participate in the many other programs that are being sponsored by our courts and bar associations across the state in honor of Pride Month.

Thank you for the opportunity to update you on so much positive activity in the New York State Courts, and thank you, 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.