

## **Annual State of the Judiciary Address**

Trial Court Administrator John A. Bello

October 27, 2021

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us. It is a great honor and pleasure for me to address you for the first time as Court Administrator.

I would like to begin my remarks by acknowledging the upcoming retirement of Chief Justice Carey. I am extremely honored to have worked with her since I began my career with the Trial court. Over the past 18 months, we have worked very closely and there isn't a challenge she shies away from. Her incredible ability to lead from the bottom of her heart and the fact that she deeply cares about every single person in our system, in the justice system is truly inspirational and I am a better person for that. She is an incredible leader who have dedicated her life to the work of the court system. I will deeply miss her as will the entire system but know I have a friend and mentor in her.

One of my longstanding guiding principles is that work done in collaboration yields better results. Across the entire justice system, collaboration, and teamwork – internally and externally – help us all meet our mutual and essential goal of ensuring the delivery of justice.

Since March when I became Court Administrator, one of my key areas of focus has been to identify opportunities where we can collaborate with the Bar and other partners to continue improving the system. Thanks to the enormous collaboration and contributions by so many, we navigated the court system through the very difficult times created by the pandemic.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our judges, elected and appointed officials and their staffs, the Probation Service, as well as those in the Office of Court Management and the Executive Office of the Trial Court. Our union partnerships and collaboration also were key in our success.

Everyone rose to the challenges presented to them and with innovation, hard work and resilience kept the wheels of justice turning. They inspired us by their teamwork and can-do attitude in serving the Bar and the public.

Whether working long hours from home or in the courthouse, staff tackled issues made more complex by the pandemic. The continuity of service delivery is also a testament to the great working relationships with our many justice partners. And we thank the Bar for your patience and understanding through these challenges.

As Chief Justice Carey often says: Teamwork Makes the Dream Work. It is hard work but, as a system, innovative ideas and thinking outside the box we kept the courts open throughout the pandemic.

We made many operational adjustments and took a cautious approach introducing policies and protocols to ensure the safety of all. Our Security and Facilities staffs implemented those safety measures daily under stressful circumstances.

Out of every crisis, opportunities emerge, and we took full advantage of them. In fact, the pandemic accelerated many strategic initiatives outlined in Strategic Plan 3.0. A major focus of last year was

finding ways to navigate the challenges the pandemic presented, but the fundamental work of the Trial Court never stopped.

Now, we continue to work just as hard to ensure that we continue building on the foundation of the great work the system did these past 18 months. The arrival of a new Chief Information Officer accelerates the work of the Department on several priorities. The support of the department during the pandemic was exemplary, and work to secure our infrastructure and enhance our network reliability continues full steam ahead.

A major technology focus continues to be the IT Bond Bill — a critical priority for the Trial Court. This bond bill aims to create a seamless, paperless court system, while enhancing the services available to the public.

Last January, we launched eDelivery, which will continue to grow to include case parties and additional document types. Since launching this initiative, electronic delivery has grown to over 9,000 documents a week via e-mail instead of traditional mail. eFiling options are also now available in six of the seven court departments.

In addition, we are in the process of launching a comprehensive Digital Case Flow planning to focus on identifying and establishing operational changes to achieve end-to-end digital case flow. This will create the roadmap for the upcoming IT Bond Bill, as it relates to the transition to a paperless system.

Chief Justice Carey and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Executive Office of Technology Services and Security for their vote of confidence in jump-starting the foundational work required by a digital court system.

Other recent management improvements include the Human Resources Department's work to transform business processes to be more transparent and responsive. We now have a Talent and Acquisition Team to recruit strong, diverse candidates, a new applicant tracking system, and a diversity recruitment strategic plan in concert with our new Office of Workplace Rights & Compliance.

Access to Justice and the User Experience have remained top priorities for the court system and in 2021, Massachusetts was rated 3<sup>rd</sup> in the nation by the Justice Index. During the pandemic, access to justice became even more urgent, as it was clear from Day One that the pandemic largely disadvantaged our largest cities and we needed to respond.

As a result, Virtual Registries, as well as Virtual Clerks' Offices, were created. Dedicated phone and email addresses were created for every court and Zoom rooms were created within courthouses to help those without access to technology. Additionally, the Office of Language Access has provided interpreter services for more than 100,000 court events annually and interpreted over 113 languages.

Court Service Centers provided services virtually to over 20,000 individuals during the pandemic and we are happy to report that a virtual Court Service Center will remain in place to expand the reach of our seven court-based centers, so we can assist individuals statewide.

In 2019, we established a Trauma Informed Task Force to develop a system-wide program. But the pandemic, racial reckoning across the nation, and the sudden death of Chief Justice Gants put the task force to the test. As part of the Task Force work, we hired a vendor to provide one-on-one clinician-led,

non-therapeutic support for jurors, post-verdict who may be struggling due to exposures associated with their juror service.

I am pleased to announce that, in partnership with the Institute for Health and Recovery, we will begin a pilot at Lawrence District Court to begin exploring ways to make that division a trauma-informed court. The results of this pilot program will guide our efforts to create a trauma-informed court-system that involves our partners in justice.

In Probation, work is underway to implement a new case management system. Probation's unique information management and data sharing needs are driving factors behind this major project. The Victim Services Unit has served nearly 4,000 victims and families this past year, which is essential to Probation's mission.

The Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2018 established comprehensive pretrial services as a top priority for the Massachusetts Trial Court and the Massachusetts Probation Service, which are committed to consistent, effective, and comprehensive pretrial supervision and services.

Last November, a text reminder system was launched to reduce the number of probationers who fail to appear for hearings. This program showed early success and has expanded to other court departments.

Chief Justice Carey earlier discussed various ways the Trial Court is actively working to eliminate racism and other barriers. As a person of color, this issue is very important to me and I trust we will continue to make real progress. Our courts must represent the communities we serve, and our commitment extends to the hiring and promotion process. Representation matters.

There is a lot of work to be done but as Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, "real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time." I am confident that we are on the right track but must remain patient, as we tackle these very challenging and complex issues.

Finally, as we wind down work on Strategic Plan 3.0, we are already starting to develop the next plan, to guide the next three years. As in the past, we will engage the broader justice community to make sure we get it right; we must listen to our judges, appointed and elected officials and staff; we must listen to our partners in justice; and we must listen to court users to make sure we get it right.

Only with genuine and ongoing collaboration with the Bar on the many initiatives I have highlighted can we succeed in our mutual goal to effectively deliver justice. This has been an unprecedented and uncertain time for all of us – with more uncertainty ahead – and I thank you sincerely for your continued partnership and support.