

Trial Court Chief Justice Jeffrey A. Locke
Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures
and State Assets Hearing Testimony
March 29, 2022

Good morning, Chair Gregoire, Chair Collins and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about House Bill 4499, the Judiciary Information Technology Bond Bill. My name is Jeffrey Locke and I have honor of entering my 10th week as Chief Justice of the Trial Court. Before this appointment, I served as a Superior Court Judge for 21 years and as Chair of Sentencing Commission since 2018. I also served as the Regional Administrative Judge for the Superior Court in Plymouth and Suffolk Counties, as Norfolk County District Attorney from 1997-1999, and as Commissioner of the Department of Social Services from 1999-2001.

I want to begin by thanking the sponsors of this bill, House Judiciary Chair Representative Mike Day and former Representative Sheila Harrington, for recognizing the need for this funding. Since filing this bill, Representative Harrington has joined us at the Trial Court as the Clerk Magistrate for Gardner District Court, and we are happy to have her with us.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, like nothing else could, the urgent need for the maximum flexibility that modern technology systems allow to support the public's remote access to government, as well as the need to leverage our workforce across the many boundaries and constraints of brick and mortar with access to justice locked in paper files. In short, we need modern, up-to-date information technology

capacity and systems. From my perspective as the Chief Justice and from 20 years on the Superior Court bench, this bond bill and the modernization it will bring is crucial and more than timely.

The bond funding provided by this bill will assist both court employees and judges. Having been on the bench hearing cases for the past two decades, I would like to provide a judge's perspective, and, from that view point, I can tell you, with great confidence, we are still very much a paper-based system. While we have made great strides setting e-Filing into place so that attorneys and self-represented litigants can file case related documents electronically, it is all for naught if the case file must still be printed out and brought physically into the courtroom.

This IT bond bill will provide what judges need to resolve cases in a quicker, more efficient manner. It will fund a digital judicial workbench, allowing judges to view all case filings and materials electronically. Clerks will not have to spend time and fiscal resources printing and compiling the case files which will free them up for far more important responsibilities. Judges and clerks will be able to enter notes directly into the case file and, with real-time docketing, judicial decisions will be available almost immediately to the parties.

This bill will also fund increasing bandwidth in courthouses. Moving forward from the pandemic, we are determining what proceedings we will continue to hold virtually and how to improve what we began, out of necessity, two years ago. Ensuring sufficient bandwidth means judges will be able to conduct proceedings virtually without worrying about disruption to the video feed while a witness is midsentence or while a judge is issuing a decision.

Bond funding will also enhance the Court's physical and cyber security systems. Ensuring the administration of justice and the integrity of the judicial process depends, in part, upon all of our courthouses having up to date, modern physical security. Without a doubt, courtrooms and courthouses are contentious places where judges make decisions with life changing consequences.

In Massachusetts, judges have been the targets of threats, harassment, and intimidating actions. Judges must feel safe to be effective. And it's not only judges who must feel secure; court users must also feel confident and safe in seeking access to justice and court employees must feel secure in the performance of their duties. With this funding, we will centralize security monitoring, install modern duress systems, and in-building communication to improve the effectiveness of our security department. In the event of a critical incident, court officers will be able to communicate directly with law enforcement. Our courthouses will be safer and more secure for everyone,

This funding will also assist us in making interpreters available through video remote interpretation. In Fiscal Year 2021, the court system handled over 100,000 language requests in 95 languages. The bond bill will amplify our ability to provide access to justice by making the courts better able to meet the language needs of court users. Centralized interpreters in other locations will be immediately available to provide services for many more languages, as well as American Sign Language. Cases will not have to be continued because an interpreter was not physically available, and cases will thus be resolved in a timely manner.

Finally, I want to convey to you how well-positioned we are to move forward with implementation. We have a tremendous team in place ready to go. I will now turn over

the virtual podium to Court Administrator Bello and then CIO Duncan to tell you more about the details of this proposed bond funding. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.