

TESTIMONY OF TRIAL COURT ADMINISTRATOR JOHN A. BELLO

HB1520 AN ACT TO IMPROVE AND MODERNIZE THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS AND CAPACITIES OF THE JUDICIARY

OCTOBER 29, 2021

Thank you, Chief Justice Budd and good morning, Chair Day, Chair Eldridge and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify in support of House Bill 1520, the Judiciary's IT Bond Bill. Here with me today is our new Chief Information Officer Steve Duncan who has certainly hit the ground running. He joins us from Harvard University and brings to the job a wealth of knowledge in Digital Transformation. Steve will get into more specifics regarding his approach to preparing for the IT Bond Bill. Chief Justice Carey could not be here because of a prior out of state speaking engagement but she is here with us in spirit in support of this bill and sends her thanks as well.

This bill a major priority for us, and I want to thank you, Chair Day, and Representative Sheila Harrington for your support on this bill and for agreeing to sponsor it and refile the bill this session. As you know, it was filed last year but the global crisis intervened.

Shifting an entire system to a virtual world during the pandemic meant that we were forced to kickstart some of our information technology initiatives to provide court users with access to the courts. Before Covid-19, we knew how crucial technology was to achieve a more efficient system with greater access to justice, but, as Chief Justice Budd told you, the pandemic truly highlighted it, especially, the significance of technology to an individual's ability to access the justice system - physically, virtually, and psychologically. Nineteen months later, we find ourselves in a better place technologically than nineteen months ago, which has greatly expanded our options for serving the public.

Throughout the pandemic, we continued to move forward on IT initiatives and to prepare for bond funding. We expanded our eCourts initiative through our eCourts Program Office. We expanded eFiling for the electronic filing of all documents to all Trial Court departments. We implemented ePay to allow people to pay criminal court fees and fines online and we implemented e-Delivery.

Additionally, 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. We have much more work to do to achieve our vision and H1520's bond funding will help us get there.

When we were in the planning stage of this, we looked, not just the IT needs of the court system, we asked ourselves: what do court users need to access justice?

Before coming to court, court users need the ability to file forms, pay filing fees, find information, and access guidance on the court process from their home. For many court users, coming to court means taking a day off from work or paying for childcare. Not being able to miss work or get childcare could mean a default judgment or even a default warrant.

What if a court user does not have access to the technology to participate in a virtual hearing? They need a viable alternative that would permit them to have their virtual hearing and not have to be in court all day.

When a courthouse visit is necessary, court users need to know where they are going once inside a courthouse. They need to know they are safe in a secure building and that the confidential information they have provided in their case is secure.

If litigants or witnesses speak a language other than English, they need to know their language needs will be met, so they can fully participate in the court process. Once someone has had their court hearing, whether virtual or in person, we also know they need access to information as soon as it is available.

Our IT Bond Bill responds to all these needs. If enacted, this bill will provide:

- A way to virtually access the court system that eliminates the need to physically travel to a courthouse unless necessary, so a litigant isn't forced to make the choice between coming to court and taking care of their child.
- An Access to Justice (A2J) portal to provide the necessary information and process flows to enable self-represented litigants to find the information they need, file the appropriate case material, and have access to online dispute resolution (ORD) and mediation services.
- Increased bandwidth ensuring that virtual hearings take place in a secure virtual space without a stop or stutter.
- A content management system to manage e-filed documents, forms, and evidence so they are immediately available to judges and clerks during court hearings without having to hunt down paper and prolong court processes.
- Real time docketing will ensure that critical information about court events, such as judges' decisions, is immediately accessible to everyone who needs it.
- Wayfinding and digital signage so court users can look at a map of the courthouse, see their case on the docket, and find the right courtroom.
- Video remote interpreting will ensure that no matter what language a court user speaks, interpreter services will be available without requiring a continuance to find the right interpreter.
- Updated security systems with additional cameras, centralized security monitoring, duress systems, in-building communication, and improved communication with law enforcement, creating safer and more secure courthouses.
- A modern Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Phone System which will improve a litigant's experience when they contact the courts and improve operational efficiency.

We see the court's IT infrastructure and this bill as an access to justice issue and I look forward to working with you on this important and critical initiative. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today.

I will now hand this over to our CIO Steve Duncan unless there are any questions.