

FY2025 Budget Testimony:
Joint Committee on Ways & Means Budget Hearing

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Worcester State University

Worcester, Massachusetts

Remarks by

Kimberly S. Budd

Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court

Representative Blais, Senator Moore, members of the Joint Committee:

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the Judicial Branch.

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for the Joint Committee's unwavering support of the Judiciary over the past few years. The FY2024 budget, FY2023 Close-out supplemental budget, and additional support through the IT capital bond bill are recent examples of the Legislature's commitment to strengthening access to justice for the people of the Commonwealth.

In a few moments, Chief Justice Mark Green, Chief Justice Heidi Brieger, and Court Administrator Thomas Ambrosino will provide you with details of the Fiscal Year 2025 budget requests of their respective courts. Because you will hear from many others from the Judicial Branch today, my remarks will be brief and provide just a few highlights of the overall Fiscal Year 2025 Judiciary Budget request, and then I will discuss the Supreme Judicial Court budget in more detail. Of course, my staff and I are available at any time to provide you with any additional information you may need.

I recognize the scope of the fiscal challenge confronting this committee as you craft the FY2025 Budget. I want to assure the Committee members that the court leaders are committed to continuing our strong partnership with you and your staff during the development of the FY2025 budget. As is the case every year, our

goal for the coming fiscal year is simply to receive a budget that provides the funds needed for the courts to operate at a level of services the people of the Commonwealth expect and deserve.

Considering the changing fiscal climate, the FY2025 Judiciary Budget Request is largely limited to maintenance funding with a few targeted investments offered for your consideration. It is important to note that the major cause of the maintenance increase in FY2025 is the annualization of the recent FY2024 Local 6 and NAGE Collective Bargaining Agreements adjustments funded by the legislature in late 2023.

The Justices and I fully support the FY2025 Budget Request submitted by the Trial Court. The Trial Court's maintenance budget of \$925,579,148 supports a workforce of 6,570 FTEs, including the annualized and inflationary costs of personnel and non-personnel items. The FY2025 Request does not include expected CBA increases for court union and confidential employees that would begin July 1, 2024.

The Trial Court FY2025 budget request, in addition to the maintenance request just discussed, includes funding for *Access to Justice* initiatives that the Judiciary would like the Committee to consider funding. These initiatives, which will be detailed in a few moments by Chief Justice Brieger and Court Administrator Ambrosino, include reimbursement for jurors' reasonable

transportation expenses and the elimination of after-hours bail fees for arrestees. For a relatively modest investment, the Commonwealth can greatly enhance access to justice for our residents.

The Governor's FY2025 H-2 Budget recommendation funds the Trial Court maintenance of \$925.6M but did not include funding for the two *Access to Justice Initiatives*.

There are several non-judicial and non-affiliate organizations that, for budgetary purposes, are included within the sequence of accounts associated with the Supreme Judicial Court. You may recall that the Supreme Judicial Court has no control over the budgets of these agencies, and we do not oversee their spending. Consequently, our general practice has been merely to forward the budget requests of these agencies without formal recommendations, and we do so again this year.

We note, however, that included in this budget proposal is a \$6 million increase for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation for Fiscal Year 2025 to support the critical work of legal aid programs in addressing the needs of some of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable residents.

Finally, I'd like to turn to the specific request of the Supreme Judicial Court. For Fiscal Year 2025, the Justices have requested \$11,956,282 in the Supreme Judicial Court administration account and \$2,434,402 dollars for the Clerk of the

Supreme Judicial Court for Suffolk County. These requests provide base funding for court operations, Appellate Court IT expenses, and the funding necessary to maintain an already small staff at a manageable level. The Governor's FY25 H-2 Budget recommendation of \$11,536,050 does not fund the Supreme Judicial Court at our basic FY2025 maintenance operational level. The H.2 number would make it difficult to support current staffing levels for operations as well as impact on-going Appellate Court IT projects in FY2025. We ask that you fund the Supreme Judicial Court at our requested maintenance funding levels.

I want to thank the Joint Committee Chairs, Senator Rodrigues and Representative Michlewitz, the chairs of today's hearing, Representative Blais and Senator Moore, and all the members of the Joint Committee, for this opportunity to address the budgetary needs of the Judiciary, and to share the Justices' views on the Governor's FY2025 budget recommendations contained in H-2. I also thank you for the careful and considered analysis you have given to our budget requests in prior years, and I know that you will give similar care to this year's request. I also want to reiterate the continued commitment of the Justices and all court leaders to work cooperatively with you and committee staff as you prepare a budget that allows us to deliver justice in a fiscally prudent manner.