



## HONORABLE PATRICIA W. GRIFFIN

As we focus on the Judicial Branch's service to our community, I would like to begin by recognizing the many activities and achievements of the Administrative Office of the Courts this year that focus most directly on serving our community. The following are highlights of these activities.

### **Self-Represented Litigants/Procedural Fairness**

Over the past year, the Delaware Courts: Fairness for All Task Force embarked on a concerted effort to learn more about the needs of self-represented litigants in civil cases and how to best meet them, including how to increase procedural fairness and the perception of procedural fairness. Using public hearings, meetings with agencies who serve self-represented litigants, as well as surveys of self-represented litigants, judges, attorneys, and court staff, the Task Force prepared a draft report making recommendations for promising ways to meet identified needs. It is anticipated that the draft will be submitted to the Supreme Court in early 2010 and that implementation activities will begin upon the Court's acceptance of the report. The Task Force, which was created by Chief Justice Myron T. Steele in June 2008, is staffed by the AOC, and I am honored to serve as co-chair along with Chief Magistrate Alan G. Davis.

The AOC has also continued to assist self-represented litigants in its limited pro bono assistance program through which self-represented litigants can obtain information regarding specific questions from volunteer attorneys.

### **Mental Health and Criminal Justice**

Another Task Force, the Mental Health/Criminal Justice Task Force, also staffed by the AOC, has been working

on identifying issues faced by people with mental illnesses and exploring ways to improve their treatment in the criminal justice system. Chaired by Justice Henry duPont Ridgely, the Task Force has brought together judges, legislators, members of the Executive Branch and nonprofit organizations to develop a strategic plan. An interim report was issued this year detailing the Task Force's projects and a list of preliminary issues. Work will continue over the course of the coming year on developing a strategic plan for addressing identified issues.

### **Racial and Ethnic Diversity**

In support of the branch-wide racial and ethnic fairness initiative chaired by Justice Henry duPont Ridgely and Chief Judge Alex Smalls, the AOC sponsored a series of sessions in the fall for court staff to explore diversity issues. The sessions, which helped staff to understand some of the difficulties that persons from other cultures may have in dealing with the court system, were attended by close to five hundred court employees.

Language access issues were also an area of emphasis this year, with a revised language access plan having been developed and adopted by the Court Interpreters Advisory Committee. In accordance with the plan, which called for increasing translated materials, explanatory information regarding the adult and juvenile criminal processes was translated into Spanish and was placed on the Judicial Branch web site. Also, universal and Spanish signage was added in the New Castle County Courthouse. In addition, five orientation sessions were held throughout the state for potential new interpreters, and certification testing was held in Wilmington and Dover.

## MESSAGE FROM THE STATE COURT ADMINISTRATOR

### Community Outreach

During the past year, the Administrative Office of the Courts continued existing outreach programs and added new initiatives. A new effort, begun in the fall of FY 2009, was a youth forum held for middle school students to teach them about the court system and careers in the legal field. In December, the AOC assisted with the Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street performances (for elementary school students) led by local attorney Richard Herrmann and in February, the annual mock trial competition (for high school students) was held. In June, the AOC, in conjunction with the University of Delaware, began what is expected to be an annual event - a three day program for teachers, "From Classroom to Courtroom". The program provided fourteen teachers from throughout the state the opportunity to learn more about the court system so that they can take this information back to their students and fellow teachers.

In addition to its activities directly serving the community, the Administrative Office of the Courts performs many "behind the scenes" services which serve the community by supporting the operations of the court system. These include:

### Fiscal and Human Resources

With the fiscal challenges facing the State over the past year, the AOC has worked intensively with the courts, Judicial Branch agencies, and the other branches of government in the difficult process of finding areas in which to make budget cutbacks and reduce expenditures, while still maintaining the core services so vital to our community. As part of our cost-cutting process, the Judicial Branch also initiated a hiring review process through which the Chief Justice reviews hiring requests from courts and Judicial Branch agencies to ensure that only the most mission critical vacancies are filled during this time of fiscal crisis. The AOC has taken an active role in coordinating this process with the courts and Judicial Branch agencies.

### Payment and Collections

The Office of State Court Collections Enforcement continued to increase amounts collected with total collections for Fiscal Year 2009 reaching \$4.2 million - which exceeded the previous year's total by 11.1 %. This included a record \$1.15 million in Department of Correction supervision fees, representing an increase of 169% over a two year period, as well as a record \$141,000 for Justice of the Peace Court collections - a 119% increase over a two year period. Payment of current fines was

made easier as new processes were implemented in the Filing and Payments Center in the New Castle County Courthouse, permitting individuals to pay fines there that are due anywhere in the state. The Filing and Payments Center was also instrumental in handling collections during the Fugitive Safe Surrender Project this year.

### Continuity of Court Operations Planning

During the past year, the AOC has continued to make progress in planning for continuity of operations in the event of an emergency as the AOC and Family Court were among the first organizations to complete the State's fully automated statewide continuity of government planning system (known as the Living Disaster Recovery Planning System). It is anticipated that all courts will complete this process in Fiscal Year 2010. Each court has also continued to update its individual continuity of operations plan. A related effort was completed this year when legislation clarifying the authority of the Judicial Branch to make crucial operational decisions after catastrophic events was enacted on May 19, 2009.

### Court Security/Facilities

This year, plans for several vital security related improvements for the New Castle County Courthouse were approved for implementation during FY 2010 using special funds from the court security assessment. Court security was also enhanced with Red Cross certification of court security staff throughout the state conducted by the AOC staff trainer.

### Technology Management and Support

The COTS case management project continued to be the major focus for the Judicial Information Center this year with civil implementation in the Court of Common Pleas in Kent and New Castle Counties taking place in November 2008 and work toward implementation in Superior Court in Kent and New Castle Counties, as well as later phases, moving forward. Other notable technology projects this year included revisions to courtroom assistant (a tool which enables judges and court staff to access case information), e-filing training and support for those using the new e-filing processes in the Court of Common Pleas and Justice of the Peace Court, provision of technology support to the Fugitive Safe Surrender Project, as well as work on a project to provide online access to trade names information for the Superior Court.