

# MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUSTICE COLLINS J. SEITZ, JR.

## 2022: Investing in Justice



In 2022 we emerged from the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions and started our journey back to normal judicial branch operations. We also worked to improve the Delaware courts for years to come. The other branches of government joined us and invested in justice like never before.

For more than 15 years, since significant safety and space issues were identified in the 2006 Southern Court Facilities Space Study, the courts have been working to make the new Kent and Sussex Family Court courthouses a reality. Safety is critical in all our court facilities, but it is of particular importance in Family Court where the judges and commissioners handle some of the most difficult and emotionally charged matters.



*Shovels at the ready before the ceremonial groundbreaking for the new Sussex County Family Court facility in Georgetown on June 28, 2022.*

On June 28, 2022, we held a ceremonial groundbreaking in Georgetown for the new Sussex County Family Court facility and less than three months later, on Sept. 22, 2022, we put shovels in the ground again in Dover to mark the ceremonial start of work on the Kent County Family Court facility.

These facilities will be larger, modern, safer, and more secure for litigants, Family Court legal practitioners, and for our court staff and judicial officers. The new courthouses will address longstanding issues with substandard detention areas; lobbies that do not provide adequate space for security screening and spacing between parties; and courtrooms that do not allow for sufficient space between litigants, those sitting in the gallery, and court staff.

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Each facility is about 107,000 square feet – more than three times the size of the existing Family Court facilities in each county – and each contains eight courtrooms, rather than the six courtrooms in the current buildings. And courtrooms in each are about twice as large as courtrooms in the current Family Court buildings in Georgetown and Dover.

In designing and building these new facilities, the Delaware Judiciary was aware of its responsibility to the communities they will serve. We were mindful of our duty to taxpayers, so we worked to save time and money by using a standard design for both buildings. We also worked to ensure that each

new courthouse was kept in the downtown core of those communities to keep them vital and to make visiting court convenient. The new Georgetown Family Court building is being built next to the Sussex County Courthouse, a block from its current location on the Circle. The new Dover Family Court facility will rise a block away from the Kent County Courthouse, putting it much closer to the main county courthouse than the existing building at 400 Court Street. In addition, that new courthouse is on a former brownfield, which had difficulty attracting development. It will return the land to active use and help spur business in that area. Each courthouse will include a multistory parking garage, helping to ease parking congestion in both communities. Lastly, in designing the buildings, we worked closely with both communities to ensure that their courthouse's facade reflects their unique historic nature and architecture.

Construction is now underway, and we look forward to seeing these state-of-the-art facilities open their doors to the public – in 2024 in Georgetown and in 2025 in Dover.

Our 2022 capital improvements do not end there. The Governor and General Assembly also agreed to invest in New Castle County at the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center by approving funding to renovate and expand the Custom House building. This historic structure, which dates to 1855 and was the home to the first federal courtroom in Delaware, will become the centerpiece of a new wrap-around

building that will house the chambers of Delaware Supreme Court Justices in Wilmington, the Arms of Court, and the Administrative Office of the Courts, all of which are currently located in rented space. This capital investment will keep the courts in one geographic



Courtesy TEVEBAUGH Architecture

*An architect's rendering of the expansion plan for the Custom House at the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center in Wilmington.*

location while also preserving an important piece of Delaware history. Community Court's Resource Center will also be expanding to office space in the building which will to give the program greater flexibility to operate after-hours if needed without the expense and difficulty of keeping the 12-story justice center opened and staffed. Funding for improvements to the Sussex County Courthouse's entrance and security checkpoints were also approved.

The Judicial Branch is grateful for the financial support from the Governor and General Assembly to make all these projects a reality. It is my hope we will continue to maintain this level of cooperation with the other two branches of government and continue to make investments in the State's judicial branch for the benefit of Delaware citizens.

There have also been investments beyond brick and mortar in 2022. With \$23 million in American Rescue Plan funding, the Delaware Courts have embarked on updating and enhancing the technology in our courtrooms and implementing a comprehensive

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electronic docketing and case management system. During the pandemic, our Judicial Information Center (JIC) employees came up with some brilliant, improvised solutions to hold remote hearings, ideas that were so impressive that the Governor recognized their initiative and ingenuity with the GEAR P3 Innovation and Efficiency Award in 2021. But the improvised solutions were just that – improvised. We are now making permanent upgrades and updates to our courtrooms that will better allow for remote hearings and other technology enhancements to help present cases, like improved audio and video displays.

Equally important – and something that the challenges of the pandemic also highlighted as a critical issue for the courts – is modernizing how we manage our caseload. While some of our courts, notably the Court of Chancery, have long had e-filing, other courts, like Family Court and criminal cases in Superior Court, are still operating on an antiquated paper-and-manila-folder filing system. Moving all courts to a unified electronic case management and e-filing system will reap countless benefits for operational efficiency, securely sharing data and improvements in generating needed data to evaluate court programs and performance. Eliminating paper files will free up needed space in all our courthouses.

We also launched a different kind of investment in justice in 2022, with the release of our Strategic Plan on Improving Diversity in the Delaware Bench and Bar. Diversity is a priority for the Judicial Branch to ensure our courts reflect the community we serve. The Supreme Court requested the study to provide us with a list of concrete steps we could take to improve diversity in our Bench and in our Bar.

The final report contains over 50 recommendations and takes a comprehensive approach to addressing diversity. It starts with the creation of programs to get students of various backgrounds interested in the study of law early, in elementary school and high school. It follows through to the college-level and sets forth ways to create a pipeline program to get diverse students into law school. And beyond law school, the report has recommendations for changes to the Bar exam, including the potential for an alternate path to admission to the Delaware Bar through

an intensive apprenticeship program. There are also recommendations for law firms to help increase diversity in their upper ranks. Finally, there are recommendations for the Judicial Branch itself, including improved outreach to diverse candidates for judicial positions, enhanced transparency about the judicial selection process and the creation of mentorship programs. One of the key recommendations for the Delaware Judiciary, and the one from which many of the other recommendations will flow, was the creation of a statewide Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Officer for the branch to oversee and implement the initiatives in the Strategic Plan. I am pleased to report that on Oct. 10, 2022, the Delaware Judiciary welcomed Kaelea Shaner as our first DEI officer.



*The Delaware Judiciary's first Diversity Equity and Inclusion Officer, Kaelea Shaner, who was named to the position on Oct. 10, 2022.*

Prior to joining the Delaware Courts, Kaelea was the Diversity Equity and Inclusion Program Manager for the Herndon, Virginia-based Strategic Education Inc., an education services company. We are thrilled to have Kaelea as a member of our team in the Administrative Office of the Courts and again want to thank the Governor and General Assembly for recognizing the importance of this position to the Judicial Branch by establishing it through the Budget Act.

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These are some of the triumphs of 2022, but like in any year there were also disappointments. We were saddened by the loss of one of our own, retired Justice Randy J. Holland. He was our court historian, a well-respected colleague whose well-reasoned rulings will endure in the law for generations to come, a friend and a dedicated public servant. He also holds the twin distinctions of being, at the time he was appointed, the youngest person ever named to the Supreme Court and, at the time he stepped down, the longest serving justice in the court's history. You can read more about Justice Holland's life and legacy elsewhere in the Annual Report.

We also faced the continuing challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the judicial emergency ended in July 2021 and a re-imposed mask mandate was lifted in March 2022, some of our courts continue to dig out from under the massive backlog of cases that were paused or slowed in the interest of health and safety during 2020 and 2021. Great progress has been made in eliminating that backlog and we fully expect to have our court calendars back on track in the coming year.

It is worth noting that some measures that were adopted for safety reasons ended up being blessings

in disguise. We are now using them as more efficient ways of conducting court business. This includes more use of videoconferencing and teleconferencing for certain proceedings and continued remote work by some employees that do not need to be in the courthouse or office to do their jobs.

For example, as our Judicial Information Center is moving to new workspace in New Castle County, they have found they will not need as much room in their new offices. During the pandemic, supervisors found that allowing some employees to continue to work remotely was just as effective as having them work from the office, reducing the need for in-person office space.

We continue with a cautious approach toward COVID-19, and are hopeful that the worst is behind us. My sincere thanks to all Judicial Branch employees for your resilience and dedication through these difficult times.

With the dawn of a New Year comes the hopes for a brighter future. I hope to build on the many successes we had in 2022, learn from disappointments how we can do better, and continue our mission to provide Delawareans with equal justice under the law. ♦



*Photo courtesy of the White House*

*Chief Justice Collins J. Seitz, Jr. (right) with President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (center) along with former students from the former Hockessin School 107C and Claymont High School and other dignitaries at the May 12, 2022 bill signing for S.270 recognizing two Delaware sites as Brown v. Board of Education national landmarks.*