

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JUSTICE COLLINS J. SEITZ, JR.

One Branch One Vision



I am pleased to report that in 2023 we finally emerged from the pandemic and resumed normal operations. With some exceptions, case backlogs have been cleared out, court operations are back at full strength and strict health safety measures have been eased.

We have emerged stronger from the pandemic through better use of technology, smarter ways to work and streamlined procedures. Equally important, we have felt a sense of optimism now that we can once again focus on ways to enhance, improve and modernize the way the Delaware Judiciary does business.

In 2023, we put into action many of the recommendations from our Strategic Plan to improve diversity in the Delaware Bench and Bar. We are making sure that the plan does not simply sit on a shelf and gather dust or exist only as a lofty goal in the distant future.

At the same time and along with that effort, we undertook an in-depth review of how we do business. Working with the State Justice Institute and the National Center for State Courts, we surveyed our 1,400 employees and sought their input, guidance, and suggestions for improvement. The effort pro-

duced the *2023 Delaware Judicial Branch Strategic Campaign* or “One Branch, One Vision.” It focuses on six key areas for the Judicial Branch:

- Our workforce,
- Technology,
- Facilities and security,
- Access to justice,
- Public trust and communication, and
- Strengthening the administration of justice.



Chief Justice Collins J. Seitz, Jr. meets with Master of Public Administration students from the University of Delaware in October 2023.

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE

We describe this effort as a “strategic campaign” rather than a strategic plan. It will serve as a guide to keep us focused over the next three to five years.

As a part of this campaign, new mission and vision statements for the Judicial Branch were adopted. Our updated mission is “to provide access to fair and effective justice in a safe and transparent environment through a diverse, inclusive and dedicated workforce.” Our vision is “equal justice through transparency, integrity, innovation and Judicial Branch independence.”

Many of the items in the report involve measures that are already underway, but the report helps better articulate the Judicial Branch’s vision, focus those efforts and ensure we join together as one branch of government.

Starting with our first focus area – our workforce – the Administrative Office of the Courts worked with the General Assembly and the Executive Branch to unify our court employees under the Judicial Branch’s rules for personnel administration. Our unified system of personnel administration will give our managers greater flexibility to build and maintain our workforce. Our long-term goal is to work with our partners in the other branches of government to reaffirm the Judicial Branch’s need, as a separate, coequal branch of government, to establish a Judicial Branch compensation and classification system — unique to the courts — which is necessary for the courts to attract and retain a quality workforce. We will also enhance employee training, to give our employees more opportunities to advance in their jobs and to help us promote and keep our best people from leaving to pursue careers elsewhere.



The July 2023 Administration of the Delaware Bar Exam at the University of Delaware. Starting in 2024, the exam will be administered twice a year.

On technology, our Judicial Information Center (JIC) is responsible for Project CASCADE to bring our court filing, docketing and case management system into the 21st century. Once it is complete, all parts of the Delaware Judicial Branch will be on a unified, modern electronic case management system. The JIC has also been working on a multi-year project to modernize all our courthouses and courtrooms by improving Wi-Fi access, updating computers and improving document-sharing technology.

For facilities and security, we will undertake a comprehensive security survey of our facilities. This will help us identify areas to enhance the safety of our buildings. Once this is complete, we will also, over the next five years, look at undertaking a new space assessment study so we can maximize the space we have – including the two new Family Court facilities that

will be coming on line in the next two years – and plan for future growth of the courts.

Construction is underway on the new courthouses for Family Court in Georgetown and Dover. The court is also starting a renovation and expansion of the historic Custom House property in Wilmington directly across from the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center. When complete, the Custom House will provide a new home for the New Castle County chambers of the Supreme Court, the Arms of the Court, and the Administrative Office of the Courts. It will also house a Community Resource Center to serve City of Wilmington residents.

Continued on next page

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE

Our fourth focus area, access to justice, revives our Access to Justice Commission and related efforts. The strategic campaign directs that our access to justice efforts examine physical barriers in our court facilities and services (like internet access) that may need to be upgraded to meet the needs of those with disabilities, physical limitations or limited English proficiency.



Graduates, their managers, and others in key leadership positions at the August 17, 2023 Judicial Branch Supervisor Series Certificate program graduation ceremony. Pictured from left to right; Jacquetta Livingston (JP Court), Ashley Grantham (JP Court), Lisa Robinson (Superior), Tammy Schofield (Family), Liz Petrick (JP Court), Jennifer Allen (Family), Stephanie Parker (JP Court), Lisa Dolph (Supreme), Allison Gallo (AOC), Chief Magistrate Alan Davis (JP Court), Jessica West (Court of Common Pleas), Toni Orem (Chancery), Levette Williams (Chancery), Tammy Burton (Chancery), Valerie Predeoux (JP Court), Faith Brown (Family), Lisa Vanish (Superior), Jennifer Brokus (Superior), Lois Sampson (Court of Common Pleas), Stephanie Fitzgerald (Court of Common Pleas), President Judge Jan Jurden (Superior), Courtney Mackey (Court of Common Pleas), Gayle Lafferty (AOC), Jennifer Figueira (AOC), Lori Moritz (Family), Chief Judge Michael Newell (Family), Angela Willin (JP Court) and Michelle Hoffman (Family). Pictured in the front: Nicole Gosa (Family) and Chief Elvira Cruz (JP Court).

The Justice of the Peace Court held two Safe Surrender events in 2023, which encouraged people with outstanding warrants and capiases to resolve their matters with the court system. The events proved an unqualified success as 449 people attended the Wilmington Safe Surrender on May 12, 2023 – clearing

more than 875 capiases and warrants. In Dover, 137 attended the event, clearing an additional 203 capiases and warrants on November 3, 2023.

Several other access to justice changes took place stemming from the Delaware Bench and Bar Diversity Project. First, we made significant changes to the bar exam by reevaluating subject matter areas, reducing costs, and offering the exam twice a year. The Delaware Law Related Education Center (DELREC) has been revamped from the ground up to expand its mission. Long known for the annual Delaware High School Mock Trial competition, DELREC now has a new, diverse Board of Trustees, who will work with the Delaware Judiciary to teach civics education in the schools and encourage students to pursue legal careers.



Architect's rendering of the renovation and expansion of the historic Custom House in front of the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center in Wilmington.

Image courtesy TEVEBAUGH Architecture

The Delaware Judiciary also offered paid summer internships to high school students in 2023 by working in partnership with the Future Leaders Internship Initiative (FLii), a Department of State initiative operating with Leading Youth Through Empowerment (LYTE). Twenty Delaware students, all rising juniors or seniors,

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE

worked in jobs across all of the Delaware Courts and in the Administrative Office of the Courts. Students were able to observe court proceedings, interact with judicial officers and meet with practicing attorneys.

Finally, there is strengthening the administration of justice. This focus area calls for creating performance measures to help gauge the effectiveness of our ongoing projects and establishing the Judicial Branch identity as a separate and independent branch of government.

The Judicial Branch also will continue to work collaboratively with the executive and legislative branches. For example, in 2023 the Delaware Judiciary partnered with the Department of Health and Social Services to host the first ever Delaware Behavioral Health Criminal Justice



More than 500 legal, law enforcement and social service professionals and community members attended the first-ever Delaware Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice Integration Summit at the Chase Center on the Riverfront, organized in partnership between the Delaware Judiciary and the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services.

Integration Summit. The two-day conference at the Chase Center on the Riverfront brought together more than 500 legal, law enforcement and social service professionals along with members of the community to address the challenges posed by those with mental and behavioral health issues in the courts.

We achieved a great deal in 2023 and are rightfully proud of our work. But there is always much more to be done. With our One Branch, One Vision initiative, we look forward to the coming year and even greater achievements. ♦

LEGISLATION

The Judiciary’s legislative team brings together representatives of the Courts and the Administrative Office of the Courts to enhance the effectiveness of the Judicial Branch’s relationship with the General Assembly by serving as the main Judicial Branch contact for legislative matters and by monitoring and analyzing legislation for impact on the Judiciary. The following legislation supported by the Judiciary Branch was passed during FY 2023 by the 152nd General Assembly:

BILL NUMBER	DESCRIPTION
SB 133	Allows those with a VAC payment plan to be able to process matters such as license or tag renewal at DMV. The previous law required a VAC ticket to be paid in full before DMV can process.
SB 179	This Act replaces references to “Masters” in the Court of Chancery with “Magistrate.” The title of “master” carries negative connotations due to the use of the term as the title of owners of slaves. Although the title “Master in Chancery” has no link to that historical context, the Court of Chancery is sensitive to the title’s negative connotations and so has proposed a new title, “Magistrate in Chancery.”