

2026 Condition of the Judiciary
Chief Justice Susan Christensen, Iowa Supreme Court
Message to the Legislature
January 14, 2026

Thank you. And please be seated. Madam president, speaker of the House, members of the General Assembly, Governor Reynolds, I think the worst seat in the House. Looking at my behind. And Lieutenant Governor Cournoyer, there you are.

State officials, colleagues, family, friends, and importantly, all Iowans. Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to speak at this joint convention of the 91st General Assembly on the condition of the judiciary, as introduced, I am Susie Christensen and I am honored to stand here before you as your Chief Justice.

I continue to live in Harlan with my husband, Jay of 44 years, and the person I count on the most in life. He is here today with our five children, Nick, Adam and his wife Erin. Reese and his wife, Kara. Sadie and Cass. Also joining me for the first time today is my niece, Rachel, and my mom has perfect attendance. And once again, I'm keeping my dad in spirit by wearing his robe for this very special day. And for those of you who wait all year long to hear Grammy give a shout out, Logan, Emily, Carson, Jack, Connor, Levi, Grace, Hunter, and Mason, all of them are here but two. One is too old that he has a scheduling conflict, and the other one is too young to be trusted.

To my six colleagues, thank you for your confidence in naming me as your chief. I may carry the title, but I never, ever carry this work alone. I rely heavily on each and every one of you for your judgment, perspective and friendship. The strength of our judiciary does not reside in one judge or one court. It is built across the state with judges who lead every day in our trial courts and in our court of appeals, and whose work shapes justice, where it's delivered in our in our courts. I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize leadership within our own judicial branch.

As far as my own court, in addition to writing opinions, I'd like to share just a snippet of what each of our justices do some critical work. Would you please stand as I call your name and remain standing?

Justice Tom Waterman from Davenport. He provides oversight of the business Specialty Court and co-chairs the Bar Conduct Committee for lawyer, Discipline and Regulation. He is liaison for the seventh Judicial District, which means he works closely with Chief Judge Henry Latham from the seventh, and Henry lives in — I thought it was going to be the Quad Cities, but technically it's Eldridge. It's got to be close.

Justice Edward Mansfield he's also from he is from Des Moines, and he chairs the task force on fairness and jury selection, which includes a cross-section of prosecutors, defense attorneys and trial judges who are examining possible changes to the rules governing peremptory strikes and jury selection. He also serves as the only state Supreme Court justice on the Standing Committee for Federal Rules of Procedure. He is liaison of the Fifth Judicial District. That means he works very closely with Chief Judge David Porter from Des Moines.

Justice Christopher McDonald, also from Des Moines, is leading the judicial branches. Artificial Intelligence Working Group, which helps determine how A.I. should be used and regulated to ensure our courts remain both efficient and fair. He is liaison to our Court of Appeals, working very closely with Chief Judge Mary Tabor, who is also from Des Moines. Thank you for the other eight members from the Iowa Court of Appeals who are here today in attendance. Justice McDonald is also liaison to the First Judicial District, so he works closely with Judge Kelly.

Chief Judge Kelly Ann Lee Carr. She's from Waterloo, Justice Dana Oxley from Swisher, most recently headed a task force to update the rules of appellate procedure to make the process more efficient in light of changes that happened when we began electronic filing a few years ago. She is liaison to the Sixth Judicial District, which means she works closely with Chief Judge Larz Anderson of Iowa City. She's also joining the grandparent club this year. In July. That's five of seven of us are now grandparents. That's changed a lot.

Justice Matt McDermott from Des Moines chairs the Access to Justice Committee, which works to identify and remove barriers to fully accessing the civil justice system for all Iowans, regardless of income. He is liaison for two judicial districts the Second Judicial District, led by Chief Judge Amy Moore from Ames, as well as the eighth Judicial District led by Chief Judge Sean Showers from Washington.

Justice David May is from Polk City. He chairs the Supreme Court's Committee on Judicial Technology and is liaison for the Third Judicial District, working closely with Chief Judge Patrick Tott from Sioux City. He is also liaison for our state treatment courts, something near and dear to my heart. Notice there's only one chief left seated. I saved the best for last.

The Fourth Judicial District is home to me and so as liaison, I have the honor of working closely with Chief Judge Craig Meyer. He is from Council Bluffs. Thank you all. These are the leaders of our judicial branch in the state of Iowa. Trial court, Court of Appeals and Supreme Court, thank you for the work that you do.

[APPLAUSE]

You may be seated. We never know when to stop clapping. We always watch the governor and it gives us our cue. Each year I choose a theme to frame my remarks. In my first five speeches, I spoke about hope, peace, listening, building connections, and commitment. This year, my theme is leadership. You may have picked up on that by having all of these individuals be recognized. I'm not talking about leadership as a title, but leadership as action. The willingness to make difficult decisions.

And let me tell you, our court this past year, we have done exactly that. I'll go into detail in a few minutes, but there were two decisions in particular that were not easy. I know they were hard for some of our employees and judicial officers, people who are deeply committed to this work and who we respect and care for. As I travel frequently between Des Moines and Harlan, last summer, I was grappling with the weight of those most difficult decisions facing our judicial branch, and I found myself asking some hard questions. I seriously said, "Susie, if everybody is

so unhappy and they're so upset about these issues, am I doing the right thing?" Wouldn't it be easier just to accept the status quo and avoid the disruption of change? Of course, it would be easier, much easier. But I knew that's not the right thing to do, and it made me wonder how have others who've gone before me handled situations like this.

That was going to be my theme. Leadership. I started close to home within the judicial branch. Former Chief Justices Lou Lavorato and Marsha Ternus were kind enough to join me for lunch. Justice Turner served 17 years on our court and was the chief from 2006 to 2010, when I began presiding in juvenile court. In 2007, she was chief and she spearheaded a profound shift in how we handle the juvenile justice docket in Iowa. Under her leadership, juvenile justice became apriority, not something that waited for its turn, but work that demanded timely, thoughtful attention for the sake of children and families. I am thankful for her unwavering dedication to juvenile justice, which helped shape this branch. It is a legacy I have been proud to continue. Justice Lou Lavorato served as a district court judge for seven years before joining the Supreme Court in 1986. He served as chief from 2000 until his retirement in 2006. I am deeply honored that he is with us today. Chief, would you please stand and be recognized?

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Justice Lavorato's legacy is the judicial branch building across the street. During his years as chief, he worked tirelessly to secure the funding for that building and to collaborate with its architects for the design. That building, with its striking floors and imposing columns, stands as a powerful example of what can be accomplished when all three branches work together. Chief, your efforts are deeply appreciated because the work of leadership in Iowa does not belong to just one branch.

I turn to the leaders in the other two branches from the executive branch. I spoke with her. Governor Reynolds. I also spoke with some former governors, Branstad, Culver and Vilsack. And from the legislative branch. I spoke with current and former leaders in both chambers and from both parties in an effort to gain insight in their experiences with leadership in Iowa. I shared some of the recent challenges facing the judicial branch and the decisions that followed, and in return, they spoke about some of the challenges that they faced in office and how they worked through them as leaders, across every conversation.

The message was unmistakable do what you believe is right, even when it's not popular, and when difficult decisions must be made. Explain yourself. So that's what I'm going to do today. I'm going to explain myself. I want to walk through some decisions made by our court this past year and talk directly about what this branch needs from you to meet its responsibilities to the people of Iowa. One of the key decisions our court made this past summer sent ripples throughout the branch class, and it probably just sent ripples across those six people's spines.

By that, I mean we reexamined how every job is defined in our branch and how we pay the 1,500 people who fill them. Aside from the fact that a comprehensive class and comp review had not been done for more than 40years for our branch, we were having a heck of a time attracting and keeping qualified people, especially in our entry level positions. This sparked a lot of grumbling. I toyed with that word. That's not a strong enough word so you can fill in the blank, but it was

not pretty. I am not afraid of tough conversations, and I knew that I owed it to our hard working staff to explain not only the changes we made, but why we were going to make those changes. So over the summer, I traveled the state for 22 meetings with at least one of my fellow colleagues accompanying me to explain these decisions. I started every single meeting saying this.

The decision to move forward with class and comp changes was not made lightly, but it was made deliberately. I want them to know we're not changing our minds on this. We'll fix boo boos, but we're not backing out. This is the right thing to do. Change can be uncomfortable, and for some it feels personal. But we could no longer ignore a long standing pay practice that unintentionally favored some, while others who are just as dedicated were underpaid for years. That's a that's very difficult to sustain, particularly in a publicly funded system. If we were going to change a system that affects people's livelihoods, we had to do it fairly and based on evidence. As a court, we gave court administration after careful and repeated consideration, to have an independent review and hire a consultant.

After that, consultant reviewed the job classifications, minimum requirements and pay grades, they made recommendations for how do we move forward? We learned a lot. Overall, our total compensation was quite competitive for most positions, but we also learned that about a quarter of our staff were underpaid based on comparable government jobs, not just out there in the market. Government jobs. Those are called green circles, a term of art used by human resource professionals.

We also learned that about 10% of our staff were paid at or above what the data supports for their particular job duties. Those are called red circles. Several recommendations were made by the consultant, but we could only afford to implement some of them. For example, we reduced the number of job classifications from 140 to 82. We standardized pay grades and reduced minimum job requirements where appropriate. Most notably, we raised the floor for those left behind the green circles. We raised them to a minimum salary, competitive with similar public sector jobs. In some cases, new hires now start at pay levels similar to long serving employees.

You can imagine that was not appreciated by some. That's why the judicial branch has budget request includes funding to address what's called salary compression. We need to work on that. Experienced staff is just as important as recruiting new talent. The changes we made for class and comp were effective July 1, and almost overnight, the number of applicants for judicial positions soared. I'm not exaggerating. They soared. It cannot be a coincidence.

We are better at clearly defining the roles and responsibilities for the jobs we're posting, and we are setting the starting pay at a more competitive market rate. So while a quarter of our staff was ecstatic about having a pay increase to get them to the new minimum, others were deeply disappointed by shortened pay ranges or the loss of automatic reclassification based on years of service. I get it. If I was still a trial court judge with colleagues directly affected, I might very well say stay out of our biz. Des Moines.

But in this role, as the leader of the judicial branch, I can't say that I have a responsibility to all Iowans to be a good steward of their hard earned tax dollars. Now, for the second monumental

decision, our court has been dealing with this past year, a decision that goes to the heart of how we operate, the modernization of our magistrate system. In a nutshell, this plan makes us more efficient and turn up your bell tones saves the judicial branch at least \$2.5million a year. How often do I come and tell you how to save money? I usually say, can you give me more? This is a savings, a significant savings, and I want to help you understand how we got here.

Magistrates do incredibly important work on behalf of the judicial branch. After an arrest for something as simple as an assault or as serious as a murder, who is typically the first judicial officer, a defendant will see a magistrate. And the first thing that magistrate does is to conduct an initial appearance by informing the defendant of the charges, appointing counsel. If the defendant qualifies, and making a very important determination whether the defendant will remain in jail or be released until trial.

Other important duties of magistrate include issuing arrest warrants and search warrants. They preside over civil small claims actions like landlord tenant disputes. They preside over traffic violations and criminal simple misdemeanors such as assault or trespass. They also preside over involuntary commitment proceedings for Iowans who are alleged to be in need of mental health or substance abuse treatments, given the importance of their work, it's worth pausing to take a look at how their role is structured in Iowa, magistrates are part time judicial officers. They are expected to devote about one third of their professional time. That's roughly 13 hours a week to the judicial branch. During the other two thirds of their professional time, they are free to practice law or earn additional income in another way, such as substitute teaching or running a small business.

In contrast, judges must serve on the bench full time and cannot engage in the practice of law in any way, shape, or manner. That structural difference matters. When we talk about salary and benefits. Currently, all magistrates are paid \$46,611 a year, which is 31% of a district associate judges salary. When you add in the benefits of IPERS and health insurance, their total compensation is approximately \$65,000. So why revisit an important role that our magistrates are performing honorably and well? They're doing a great job because this change strengthens the entire judicial system. It improves efficiency and it reduces costs to taxpayers and brings our structure into better alignment with the work that magistrates actually do. We cannot fix this problem ourselves. Trust you? Me? If I could have, I would have. That's where you come in.

Current law dictates about how many magistrates we must maintain. One statute says you have to have 206 magistrates statewide, another one says, oh, and you have to have at least one in every of your 99 counties, and each one I've been unable to identify the origin of the 206 figure, but I am confident at one time. It certainly served a purpose, but today it no longer reflects the workload. Reality. In fact, we have perhaps 60 more magistrates than the work requires. This is not sustainable. As you can imagine, our proposed bill has been applauded by some magistrates and denounced by others. So I know this will not be an easy decision.

If you haven't already. Many of you may hear from a magistrate you know and respect in your own community. I certainly have, but this cannot be decided one county at a time. It must be decided with the entire state in mind. As stewards of taxpayer dollars, we have a responsibility to

make choices that serve all Iowans, even if our coffers were overflowing. And don't for a minute think they are. But even if they were, the way we pay magistrates doesn't make sense.

In one judicial election district with nine counties, current law requires that there be at least one magistrate in each county. That's nine magistrates I'm talking about. But the combined workload of those nine counties equals 86% of a single full time position. That means we are paying nearly \$600,000 each year in salary and benefits for work that does not equal one full time position. In other words, taxpayers are paying over a half \$1 million for work that could be done by less than three part time magistrates. Even when taking travel time into consideration. The way we pay magistrates and distribute their work doesn't make sense. And more importantly, it's not fair. All magistrates are paid exactly the same, even though there is a huge disparity in workload.

As I said, in exchange for salary and benefits valued at about \$65,000, it's anticipated that a magistrate will devote about 13 hours a week to the judiciary. Recent data shows some counties only need a couple hours a week the entire year. Each week, a couple hours will do at the other end of the continuum, there are counties bumping up to 20 hours a week throughout the year. Those numbers are particularly concerning when you consider magistrates in 92 counties, 92. We all know how many we have. Have workloads that demand less than one third of their time. Whether magistrates work 2 or 20 hours a week, is completely out of their control. I don't want anyone to say, oh, magistrates aren't doing their job. Yes, they are by statute. They perform the work that's necessary for their county, not their district. Like trial court judges. If a county has less civil disputes getting filed or less crimes being committed, this translates into less work for magistrate. That's generally a good problem to have. And frankly, that's a big reason why I live in a rural community and I have no intention of moving.

We need your help to address this imbalance as set out in our proposed legislation, the judicial branch would no longer be required to employ 206 magistrates, and we would no longer be required to have at least one in each county. Instead, magistrates would be assigned to a judicial district rather than a county, just like trial court judges. How many magistrates we need in a particular district or subdistrict would be determined by state court administration based on county case filings and our recent time study. Just like trial court judges to ensure magistrate coverage for every county in every district, a magistrate schedule would be created by court administration, and they would go to the county where needed. Just like trial court judges.

If a magistrate is required to go to another county within the district, mileage would be reimbursed at the state rate. Think you know what I'm going to say? Just like trial court judges, we can do this. We've been doing it for a long time. Instead of expecting magistrates to devote 33% of their work to the judicial branch, that percentage would increase to 40%, which is about two days a week. And for the additional workload expected of magistrates, their salary would be increased from 31 to 40% of a district associate judge. They would continue the on call rotation as established by the respective chief judges, which means no magistrate is on call 24/7 365. No magistrate, that's not happening now and it won't happen then.

Here's something the Magistrates Association requested and is included in our bill to strengthen continuity, experience and coverage within the system. A senior magistrate position would be established, by the way. Yeah. District court has senior judges to. This is not an effort to

minimize rural counties. I've said it before and I'll say it again. Those are fighting words for me. Not to mention absolutely untrue. I'd like to use rural Audubon County as an example. There is no resident district court judge or district associate judge who lives in Audubon County. So if there's a will contest or a divorce or a child reportedly being abused or God forbid, a murder, does that mean they're out of luck? No judge, no court? Absolutely not.

Court administration is really good at juggling district wide schedules and dispatching judges to all 99 counties for any situation which demands the attention of our judicial system. We can do the same for magistrates. This plan brings alignment between workload and compensation. We would be paying magistrates on the same principle as judges equal responsibility, equal expectations. How can that be wrong? And as we make responsible use of technology in our courts, I want to be perfectly clear with you and the people of Iowa magistrates will continue to appear in person in all 99 counties. I didn't type it twice, but I'm going to say it twice. Magistrates will continue to appear in person in all 99 counties. When face to face proceedings are needed. Court administration will send a magistrate where and when they are needed, just like we do with trial court judges every single day during the week.

Change is never easy, but I am confident that this is the right step for our courts. With your support, we can streamline and right size the magistrate system. Improve how the work is administered, and save a minimum. You can hold me to that. A minimum of \$2.5 million a year for the judicial branch.

I'd like to now turn to two issues you've heard me raise before, and not because they are crowd favorites, but because they remain unresolved judicial pay and indigent defense. I am committed to bringing up these issues until we move beyond discussion and see meaningful progress. I continue to worry about the decreasing number of applicants for judicial openings, and you should too. When I was a young lawyer, it was common for a judicial opening to draw 20 or more experienced applicants from both private practice and government. And I'm from a smaller district, not anymore. In 2025, the average number of applicants was five. For district judge and 6.5 for district associate judge.

This is not tomorrow's problem. It is today's reality. Just in October, district five C, which is made up of only Polk County, had an opening for a district court judge. Applicants are required to be licensed lawyers and live in either Polk County or a county that is contiguous with Polk. Together, these counties are home to about 860,000 people, and of those, about 3,600 are licensed lawyers. That's a pretty good size pool from which to draw. Out of those 3,600 attorneys, how many applied? Six.

The numbers are even more troubling in other districts. District 8A, which is in the southeast corner of the state, had an opening for a district court judge this past April. District 8A and its contiguous counties are home to about 540,000 people, and of those, about 940 are licensed lawyers. Want to guess how many applied for that job? Two.

Now keep in mind the job of a judicial nominating commission is to review all applicants and send the two most qualified candidates to the governor. But when there's only two candidates or two applicants, it is a guarantee they're both going to the governor regardless of their resume,

regardless of their experience, regardless of their temperament. Mark my words, we are a whisper away from being having a judicial opening with one applicant. At that point, how can the commission or the governor meaningfully evaluate the qualifications, the experience, or the temperament? They can't.

Judicial pay is already shaping the way government agencies across Iowa compete for legal talent. Under current law, counties with a population under 200,000 are prohibited from paying their county attorneys more than a district court judge. County attorneys continue to advocate to eliminate that cap. I understand why, and I do not blame them one bit by requesting relief from this statute. County attorneys are telling you in big crayons that tying their salaries to the judicial pay is preventing them from attracting qualified attorneys. We're holding them back.

The same is true at the state level. Assistant attorney generals and assistant public defenders are in pay grades that allow them to exceed the salary of a district associate judge. Keep in mind, as judges and lawyers, we have long accepted that once we say we want to do this job, we're going to become a government employee. We know the salary will not compete with the private practice. And if anyone says otherwise, they're lying. We know that. But it should alarm us that judicial salaries can no longer compete with other government legal positions.

Here's something that truly frightens me. Just last month, an experienced district associate judge stepped down from the bench to take a job as a county attorney. Her salary immediately grew by \$15,000. For years, I've used this podium and this opportunity a captive audience to say, who's going to apply for our judgeships in the future? I had no idea that my warning would become so urgent, so quickly. Today. I must also ask, can we even hang on to the judges we have?

When experienced judges leave the bench for other public sector jobs that pay better, we no longer have a recruitment problem. We have a retention problem. Serving as a judge in Iowa is becoming economically unsustainable. I stand here today and say out loud, the sky is falling on judicial pay for Iowa's judges. Last year, we asked you to consider linking a district court judge's salary to 75% of a federal judge's salary, which would have amounted to an increase of about 10.2%. Now, we recognize that 10.2% bump would be a big step in a single year. But couldn't we begin to close that gap? That is why we're asking for an increase of at least 4.3% in fiscal year 2027. That would cover the cost of living and also help us recover at least a portion of the purchasing power judges have been losing over the past several years.

This brings me to another urgent issue the low rate for contract attorneys who provide indigent defense, low income Iowans charged with crimes, and facing imprisonment, possibility of imprisonment have a constitutional right to a defense attorney at state expense. So do children in juvenile proceedings, and if they qualify, their parents or guardians. Indigent defense is not part of the judicial branch budget, but the underfunding has a profound impact. Profound on our courts. Fewer and fewer private attorneys are willing to accept court appointments at the hourly rates paid by the state. Like any professional, they must earn enough to cover the costs of operating a business and supporting themselves, often while burdened by crushing student loan debt.

Just like judges, Iowa contract attorneys get paid less than their counterparts in every state that touches Iowa, those in criminal and juvenile practice are telling me, sometimes with tears in their eyes, that they simply cannot afford to continue. Now, keep in mind when you think of contract lawyers, I don't know what you generate in your mind what that looks like. These are not marginal lawyers. They are committed, highly skilled, and exactly the people you want standing beside you or someone else you love who is in a legal pinch. I understand that criminal defendants are not always the most sympathetic bunch. It might be easier if contract attorneys represented only our most vulnerable children and families. But keep this in mind if we fail to meet our constitutional obligation to provide counsel to all who apply, including criminal defendants, we cannot keep our communities safe.

An indigent defendant cannot be prosecuted or held accountable unless counsel is appointed when required. When no attorney is available, critical deadlines are missed, leading to the dismissal of cases. Defendants can avoid prosecution altogether. I'm sure no one wants that except criminal defendants like judicial pay. This is not tomorrow's problem.

It is today's reality. On June 1, according to a criminal complaint, an individual was driving the wrong way down a street in Davenport. The arresting officer noticed watery eyes, slurred speech, slow movements, the odor of alcohol. When he looked in the car, there was an open bottle of beer, an open container of whiskey. The driver had a prior OWI conviction and he was driving without a license. After arrest, the defendant requested and qualified for court appointed counsel, but there were no attorneys available in Scott County to represent him. After his case languished in the system for two and a half months without the appointment of an attorney, his case was dismissed. The judge's order said this. The court determines this case must be dismissed due to the state's failure to coordinate legal representation for indigent defendants charged with a crime.

Facing the possibility of imprisonment. Could that happen in an OWI that resulted in a death? Or maybe a sexual abuse case involving a child? Of course, it could. If we cannot hold criminal defendants accountable, Iowans are at risk and we are playing with fire. I've spilled a lot of ink on the challenges within our system, but now I'd like to speak to the human side of our profession. When I was a practicing attorney, I used to explain my job as brickwork. Clients would come into my office carrying bricks. Bricks made up of fear, anger, uncertainty, and they would set them down on my desk. I could tell by the look in their eyes that they felt lighter when they walked out of my office, and before long I was carrying a load of bricks. I didn't walk in with that morning.

That experience with my clients taught me this. If we aren't careful, those bricks don't just wear us down. They change how we practice and in some cases, whether we can keep practicing at all. Data tells the same story. Studies by the American Bar Association show that 1 in 5 lawyers have engaged in problem drinking, the highest of all professions, and we are experiencing depression and anxiety rates higher than most other professions as well. This is a trend that demands attention and should never be accepted as normal. The Iowa State Bar Association's well-being committee is doing just that, shining a light on the trend. They are offering an eight part wellness masterclass based on self-care, fitness, mindfulness, alcohol use, workplace culture and habit building, all aimed at helping lawyers and judges thrive, not just survive. They're also taking simple, practical steps, such as launching a new wellness club to encourage members to build

healthier routines. I haven't started yet, but I enrolled because I don't think it's enough to talk about something from this podium if I'm not willing to back it up with my own actions.

This attention to wellness is also emerging in the private practice. Law firms across the state are becoming are beginning to approach this issue in meaningful ways. In West Des Moines, the law firm of Goodhue, Colman and Owens has dedicated space for the attorneys and staff for stress relief and recovery in Sioux City. The Hough law firm has an on site gym and offers an eight week sabbatical each year to one shareholder, with the expectation of fully unplugging from the practice of law. Doesn't that sound awesome? Different approaches, same message. This work is demanding and we have got to give people room to stay well while they do it. And sometimes taking care of ourselves means asking for help. When someone in this profession is dealing with mental health or addiction issues, they need a place to turn without fear or shame.

This is precisely what the Iowa Lawyers Assistance Program provides. We call it elap at no cost. Elap offers confidential support to judges, lawyers and law students who are struggling. Joe Quinn is the new executive director of Elap. He is an attorney in long term recovery himself and certainly understands the demands of our work and the courage it takes to ask for help. Now, behind every program like this, there's a person who needed it.

True story. Once upon a time, there was a girl from Fort Madison named Emily. She had a charmed childhood growing up in a happy, loving, secure home. After she graduated from law school, she practiced law in her hometown with her dad. She was married, had two beautiful sons, and a few years later she became a district associate judge. Seems like a storybook life, doesn't it? You probably see it coming, but there's a plot twist. Emily is an alcoholic. Her story is difficult to hear because it portrays a woman's fall from grace and a family ravaged by her addiction. Her first marriage ended in divorce. Her two sons at times wanted nothing to do with her, one refusing to have any time quality time with her unless she blew into a breathalyzer that he bought himself on Amazon. The other son, believing he just watched his mom die when she suffered a serious withdrawal seizure. Two different times, Emily went through 28 day inpatient programs, as well as three hospital detoxes. Yet she continued to drink following each of these treatments.

One day in March 2000 and excuse me, May 2012, the ground gave way beneath her. Emily, I should actually say judge Dean walked into the Henry County Courthouse for work. She has absolutely no memory of her court reporter driving her to work that day, or walking into the courthouse that day. Her court reporter recognized the situation for what it was and stopped her from taking the bench. Emily conducted no official business on that day when she was blacked out. Thank goodness, but she certainly sensed her career was ending.

It came as no surprise when she received a certified letter from her chief judge, indefinitely relieving her of all judicial responsibilities. She spent the next three days in a psychiatric ward with no phone, no shoes, no clothes, no family, all alone except for that suicide sitter who stayed with her all three days. That's when it finally hit her, and she realized I am an alcoholic. And I cannot do this alone.

Upon release, she dove head first into AA and worked the 12 steps of the program with her sponsor. She became good friends with a fellow AA participant, Brant, who is also an attorney in her hometown. The friendship grew into a relationship and they've now been married since 2018. After serving her formal suspension by the Supreme Court, Emily dusted off her robe and took the bench again. That took real courage. She knew her reputation was in tatters and she worked hard to regain her colleagues and attorneys trust and respect.

Through this journey, Emily came to realize that her problem had become her purpose. In her own words, I'm an alcoholic. I didn't ask for this disease, but today I take responsibility for managing it. I talk about it because while pieces of my past are shameful, recovery is not. Tomorrow. It will be 5,000 days since Emily made the front page news as the drunk judge who reported to her job in a blackout. That's about 13.5 years ago, which happens to also be her sobriety date. Emily is here today with her husband, Brant, another judge. Dean, I have no idea where you are. Where are you? Judge Dean, please stand so I can find you. There she is.

[APPLAUSE]

Stay up.

[APPLAUSE]

As judges, we're used to people standing up when we enter the room. But that kind of stand up is very, very different. That was cool, judge Dean, thank you for trusting me to tell your story. It began with Once Upon a Time, but it didn't end when things fell apart. You chose to keep writing, and after 14 years, you've been writing something honest, brave and hopeful. Judge Dean has served on the on the Elap committee since 2013 and shared her compelling journey from addiction to recovery at various professional conferences. Because she speaks so openly about her recovery, attorneys and judges see her as the initial touchpoint for people who need to know, how do I take that first step, whether it's for themselves, a colleague, or someone who is suffering in their family. I tell Emily's story today because we have too many lawyers and judges suffering in silence. I want everyone, not just lawyers and judges, to know that recovery is possible and redemption is possible. This seems like a really good time to squeeze in a couple of updates that I am often asked about.

During my first speech five years ago, I told you about Sean Williams, a success story that has become a part of my annual speech. When I met him as a judge in family treatment court, he was addicted to meth and was at risk of losing his parental rights over Rylan. I honestly wasn't very optimistic, but Sean never gave up on himself through grit and determination. He turned his life around and is proudly 2858 days sober, which is almost eight years. Sean, would you and your son Rylan please stand?

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you Sean, thanks for allowing me once again to to share your story and remind people that change is not only possible, but it's contagious. Also attending today is Luke Guthrie, an attorney from Bremer County. You may remember that I told his story three years ago how his license to

practice law in the state of Iowa was revoked for five years due to misconduct, mostly related to substance abuse issues. Through hard work and commitment to a new way of life, Luke clawed his way back to become a licensed attorney again. He continues to practice law in Waterloo, and as of today, he has been sober for 4049 days, which is over 11 years. Luke, I have no idea where you are. Would you please stand? Where's Luke? There he is. Front row.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you, Luke, for letting also giving me permission to tell your story again about recovery and redemption. But I also want to give you personally a really big thank you for your continued work as a contract lawyer for indigent defense.

Last year I talked about Youth Justice Council, made up of young people who have directly experienced Iowa's juvenile justice system. You may remember I focused on their talking wall, which provides them with an opportunity to confidentially share what's in their hearts by writing on a on post-it notes. This year, a new question was posed to them. What is one thing you need that you've been quietly hoping someone would notice? Pretty simple. What's one thing you need once again not want? And quietly hoping somebody will notice the number one answer from over 500 youth from every Iowa shelter group, home and detention center was this. I think you're going to be gobsmacked. I was a hug. Doesn't cost money, doesn't need legislation.

That was an eye opener. We must care about the people who come before our courts, like Sean, or the youth in our juvenile justice system who yearn for a hug. We must also care about the lawyers who stand beside them, like Luke. And of course, we must care about the judges who we entrust to get it right. In moments that matter most. Like Emily, this is how we protect the integrity of our courts, because leadership, whether judicial, executive or legislative, means supporting the people whose work carries the public's trust.

All this brings me to my final thoughts. Over the past year, I spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to lead an institution like ours. What I learned is this doing what is right for the long term is rarely easy, and at the heart of every issue I've discussed today how we compensate workforce, how we modernize our magistrate system, how we address judicial pay, how we ensure indigent defense is addressed, and how we care for the people who work for us. Everyone of those issues involves a choice, not between right and wrong in the abstract, but between what is convenient and what is responsible.

I am asking for your partnership in choosing what best serves the people of Iowa. Even when the path is a little bit harder. And because that kind of partnership requires more than just this single morning, I want to keep the conversation going. I'll be having office hours again every Monday from 10 a.m. to noon, beginning January 26th through March 30th in the old Supreme Court chambers. It'll always be me. But if I can't make it for some reason, it will always be someone from our court. I promise you. I hope everyone will join us shortly. Downstairs in the historic Supreme Court chambers for coffee and cookies. Thank you to my esteemed colleagues for your dedication to our work and to the elected leaders in this room. Thank you for inviting me to speak today, and thank you for your partnership and willingness to lead. Even when the work is

hard, and to the youth who could not make it today, to those youth who jot down things on tiny pieces of paper, keep talking. We are still listening. Thank you.