

2025 State of the Judiciary: Your Indiana Judiciary
Chief Justice Loretta H. Rush, Indiana Supreme Court
Message to the Legislature
January 29, 2025

Governor Braun, Lieutenant Governor Beckwith, members of the General Assembly, Chief Judge Altice, colleagues, and fellow Hoosiers—welcome to the State of the Judiciary.

I am honored to be with you all today, fulfilling my constitutional duty to report to you on the condition of Indiana’s courts. And I am proud to say your Hoosier courts remain sound, steady, and strong.

Night Court

Last February, the Indiana Supreme Court enjoyed welcoming so many of you to the first Night Court for Legislators. I want to dispel the rumors that your leadership—Speaker Huston and President Pro Tem Bray—have applied to be our full-time court bailiffs. Seriously though, it was such a wonderful event and we look forward to hosting you again.

As Senator Buck told me on Organization Day, “Words matter.” And during that oral argument, you saw first-hand the precision with which we consider your words. The civil forfeiture dispute centered on whether the statute permitted cash seized during a search to be forfeited without the State proving a substantial connection between the cash and the crime. You had a front-row seat as our Court applied the very laws enacted in these chambers.

An argument, like the one you saw, is just a small part of the Indiana Supreme Court’s work. We review 800 cases a year and oversee the administration of justice in all trial courts. But before any case gets to us, it starts in your community.

Our Charge

Today, I want to pull back the curtain a bit and demystify the judiciary’s role in the 1.1 million new cases filed in our courts last year. Resolving those cases fairly and efficiently is crucial to our state’s success. Please join me in thanking our hardworking trial court judges who are doing just that. We have a record number in attendance today.

This often surprises people, but 98% of the cases in our country are filed in state courts. In fact, more cases were filed in Indiana’s trial courts last year than in all federal courts in the country combined. Our judges hear cases touching on every aspect of Hoosier life—from felonies to foreclosures, evictions to expungements, and delinquencies to divorces.

Our work is not done in isolation, but in partnership with you, our legislative colleagues, the executive branch, legal professionals, and the people we serve. We are active in our shared mission to promote justice, safety, and stability for all Hoosiers while steadfastly anchored within our constitutional authority.

Because of our partnership with you, you have asked us to take on duties crucial to public safety and the success of our state. And we have. To mention just a few of those duties: overseeing probation, establishing problem-solving courts, working with the VA, developing a protective-order registry, building case-management systems for the public defenders and Administrative Law Judges, leading both the Youth Justice Oversight Committee and the Justice Reinvestment Advisory Council, establishing CASA, preventing ephedrine from easily getting to meth-makers, and setting child support.

Today, we only have time to talk about a few. And I will begin by emphasizing where our courts have a direct and transformative impact—strengthening children and families.

Strengthening Children & Families

Over 100,000 cases involving children are pending in our courts. As a former juvenile court judge, I experienced the unique position courts are in to protect and nurture children. Every day too many Hoosier children, through no fault of their own, are brought into courtrooms where the judge is often the only constant in their lives. Caseworkers, service providers, and even living situations may change, but the judge remains steady.

I invite all of you to my chambers, just next door, to come see the photographs I still proudly display of the children who passed through my courtroom. They are reminders of our duty to protect and support the most vulnerable among us and the crucial role we all play in shaping their future.

Families are the cornerstone of a thriving society. And those Hoosier families include over one-third of kids living in single-parent households, more than 50,000 being raised by grandparents, over 150,000 having at least one parent or guardian who has been incarcerated, and many children entering our courts through divorce and paternity cases.

Hoosier families depend on us to set workable and fair Child Support Guidelines. You tasked us with creating, updating, and enforcing them. And we have. Court-ordered child support last year resulted in over \$770 million dollars in payments for children.

We updated the support guidelines last year, marking the most significant changes since they were established in 1987. The revisions reflect a modern understanding of the economic realities families face. And they were the result of an exhaustive review process that included numerous meetings, public comments, intensive research, case evaluations, and economic analysis. I'd like to thank Lake County Judge Tom Hallett and the Domestic Relations Committee for their hard work in ensuring children and families receive the support they require.

CASA

As another layer of protection for Hoosier children, you asked us to develop, train up, and implement a program to give a voice to abused and neglected children coming to court. We did. Our Court Appointed Special Advocate or CASA program is one of the best in the nation. Just last year, 3,000 volunteers devoted 300,000 hours to nearly 20,000 children. I would like to

express my deep gratitude to our CASA volunteers and to all of you for supporting this essential child-safety program.

Adoption Day

Our legal system struggles every day to ensure safe homes for neglected and abandoned children. But I am proud to brag that Indiana shines as an adoption-friendly state with 4,600 adoptions last year.

As an adoptive mom, along with my husband Jim, to our son Jacob and an adoptive grandmother to Elijah and Evelyn, I know firsthand the joy and security these adoptions bring.

One of our awe-inspiring judges, Morgan County Judge Dakota Van Leeuwen says, “There are enough bad days in court, Adoption Day is going to be fantastic.” And it was. She wanted to offer each child a special gift and enlisted the help of her community. Wow, did they come through! Parents and grandparents will know what Squishmallows are, those plush stuffed animals. Thanks to community donations, Judge Van Leeuwen now has a closet full of 500 so that each adopted child leaves her court with a cuddly reminder of how much they are loved. Thank you, Judge Van Leeuwen.

The Elderly & Adults with Disabilities (VASIA)

In addition to safeguarding children, courts have a duty to protect endangered adults. Beyond “liberty and justice for all,” one of society’s most sacred tenets is to “honor thy father and mother.” Yet many elders suffer from abuse, neglect, or isolation, and some just have no one in their corner. Last year, Adult Protective Services received over 21,000 reports of elder abuse. And our courts receive about 7,000 new guardianship cases each year.

Your laws require accountability from those who serve as guardians to endangered adults. Like you, we are committed to safeguarding these fellow Hoosiers.

Similar to the CASA program, the VASIA program provides volunteer advocates for over 800 elder and incapacitated adults. One court volunteer, longtime Johnson County resident Linda Krueger, started volunteering after she helped her own mother who was moved to a nursing home due to dementia. Linda saw that even with extensive family support, it was really tough. She could not imagine how a person with no family could navigate, and she felt compelled to act. Linda has been a dedicated court volunteer for 9 such endangered adults. She says, “They deserved dignity and they needed someone to care about them and their needs.” Linda was that crucial someone, and she was recognized as last year’s Volunteer Guardian of the Year. Her work, and that of more than 260 other court volunteers, embodies the highest ideals of compassion and justice. Please join me in thanking Linda and all the VASIA volunteers for their work.

Enhancing Public Safety

In 1816, our founders made it clear through the Indiana Constitution— embedded in Article 1, Section 18— that Indiana’s criminal justice system promises reformation, not vindictive justice.

Over 250,000 new criminal cases were filed last year. That means every day we count on our judges to make firm, fair sentencing decisions to protect public safety while honoring the constitutional mandate of reform.

And one of the single most powerful ways we are meeting that pledge is through problem-solving courts. Your insightful legislation enables these courts. Thank you.

Our nationally recognized problem-solving courts offer a proven path to rehabilitation. They address what are often the root causes of criminal behavior—substance abuse, mental health, and family challenges.

Through a comprehensive, evidence-based approach, our judges’ work is informed by a team of community justice partners including prosecutors, attorneys, case managers, and service providers. Nationally, the truth of the matter is, the criminal justice system has become a primary source of referrals to treatment.

And when you asked us if we would allocate the resources to build up more of these powerful courts, we said “yes!” In the past decade, we have almost tripled the number of problem-solving courts, including Drug Courts, Veterans Courts, and Family Recovery Courts—which will include the Safe Baby Courts your legislation created last year.

Through our Family Recovery Courts, we are seeing more and more babies born drug-free as their mothers complete the program with success. This has immeasurable long-term value to our communities.

The number of problem-solving court graduates directly translates to safer communities. Temple University published an independent study last year that found 93% of our treatment court graduates were not rearrested.

Thank you not only for the legislation that enables these courts, but also for so many of you taking your time to attend these life-affirming treatment court graduations.

I want to share one more example of why these courts work from a graduation I recently attended. This one from a Veterans Court in my home county, Tippecanoe, under the leadership of Judges Sean Persin and Dan Moore. Graduating from this court is not easy—it takes 1 to 3 years. And success is not guaranteed. But veterans who are ready for change enter a tough program wrapped in services. These high-risk, high-need veterans respond to the rigors of a rule intensive program.

Since 2017, 80% have graduated. And their community embraces them because they are thriving, working, paying taxes, and reconnecting with family. At graduation, they are physically wrapped in a quilt of valor—handmade by community members to symbolically show their restored honor. Joining Judges Persin and Moore today is recent graduate, Mark. Mark is

working full time, was just named employee of the month at a large Lafayette manufacturing plant, has his own home, is reconnected with his family, and has been committed to his sobriety for the last 3 years. He treasures his quilt of valor, which he brought for all of you to see. Mark, could you and your judges please stand?

We all know lower recidivism rates increase community safety and reduce taxpayer costs. The same is true when our courts order community-based sentences for low-risk offenders. Our state should be proud of our 1,500 trained and certified probation officers who supervise over 100,000 adults and children.

One of those officers is Lake County's Kevin Elkins, who was recently named Probation Officer of the Year. Kevin has been a juvenile probation officer for 30 years. He said it is "work done from the heart. It's not to get rich, but to enrich my community." Kevin believes we are doing a better job today than ever by using evidence-based practices and robust data to guide decisions as to who needs to be detained, and who can safely remain in the community with proper supervision. With all the tools at his disposal—and he admits there are many—guess which one Officer Elkins has also found to be effective for many kids? Sometimes it's just as simple as sending the child home from intake with a community-donated box of food. Join me in thanking Kevin and all our hard-working probation officers.

Technology & Public Safety

Part of enhancing public safety includes embracing technology. We have 30 data-sharing applications. Last year, you asked us to create an application to allow law enforcement to search multiple state databases so they could quickly determine whether a person is legally permitted to have a firearm. We did. And today, 23,000 officers have access to our safety application. We are proud to help protect our Hoosier law enforcement officers.

Another application resulted from your Jail Overcrowding Task Force recommendations. There are 20 different jail management software systems throughout Indiana. So we're creating a single integrated system that will collect and report accurate statewide jail population data, share fingerprints, streamline and connect justice system operations. We remain committed to working with you all to improve public safety throughout the state. Please join me in thanking our hardworking sheriffs—represented by the President of Indiana's Sheriff's Association, Steve Luce—for their leadership in these important public safety endeavors.

Enhancing Access To Justice

I often get asked, "What's the most important case you've heard?" The judges in here are nodding because they get that question as well. Here's the answer: it is the case before me right now. Because I guarantee you, for the people involved in that case, it's the most important matter to them.

Access to justice means resolving matters with transparency, impartiality, and in a timely fashion. Our courts are designed to provide a level playing field for all people and businesses. You can see for yourself. The public can often access court calendars online or watch live-

streamed hearings. We recently introduced cameras in the courtroom, allowing judges to grant news reporters access to capture court hearings like never before. And through MyCase, all Hoosiers have 24/7 free online access to courts, which reduces costs, speeds up cases, and saves taxpayer money. Indiana court records were accessed 71 million times just last year. How's that!

Disputes in our courtrooms are resolved based on the law, not on influence. This objectivity fosters an environment where entrepreneurs can innovate and grow without fear of arbitrary decision-making. And when people and businesses know they are operating in a state with a fair legal system, they are more likely to invest here. A shining example is our ten commercial courts that have handled 2,500 business disputes. Thank you for funding these business courts.

Efficiency is crucial. Everyone is on a timeline, looking to meet a deadline, or working in a fast-paced environment. We've embraced remote hearings; last year saw more than 310,000 participants. And we're piloting emerging technologies like AI. For example, Marion County has used AI to reduce both the time and cost it takes for a court transcript to be available in certain hearings. Where it used to take weeks or months to get that record, it now takes only minutes. You heard me right, minutes instead of months.

But not everything can be done by a bot! We are committed to staying connected to our communities. Our judges consistently take part in Constitution Day events, mock trials, Statehood Day celebrations, and other civic activities. The 15 judges on our Court of Appeals are everywhere with their "Appeals on Wheels" program. Having already held over 700 traveling oral arguments across all 92 counties, they've made civic engagement a cornerstone of their outreach like no other court in the country. I'd like them to stand and accept our gratitude.

Conclusion

Your judiciary is truly blessed to enjoy such a collaborative and collegial relationship with the executive and legislative branches of this great State. And with so many new faces in the chamber today, I feel as if reinforcements have now arrived. We have the governor and his new administration, the lieutenant governor, newly elected senators and representatives, and 68 new judges! Will all newly elected and appointed officials stand and accept our heartfelt welcome to the team?

Though we are separate branches with separate responsibilities, we are a team because we have all been called to public service to build a stronger state for all Hoosiers. Our work can be difficult, and yes it has challenges and even setbacks. But we draw sustenance from that divine spark in each of us. One that prompts us to serve as instruments of protecting children and families, enhancing economic stability, strengthening public safety, and promoting access to justice.

Thank you and may God richly bless this State that we so love.