

State of the Judiciary, "Building a Sustainable Future for Kentucky's Courts"
Chief Justice Debra Hembree Lambert, Supreme Court of Kentucky
Message to Interim Joint Committee on Judiciary
November 6, 2025, at Capitol Annex, Room 149, Frankfort, Kentucky

Chairman Storm, Chairman Elliott, members of the committee and guests ... GOOD MORNING. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am honored to deliver my first State of the Judiciary address as Chief Justice of the Commonwealth. I also want to thank my fellow justices, judges, circuit clerks and other court employees who have joined us here today in the audience and on KET.

As many of you know, the past year has been one of transition and renewal for our Judicial Branch. In December, Zach Ramsey came on board as the Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts and I came on shortly thereafter as Chief in January. I hired Eric Finke as my Chief of Staff and Andrew Hartley as my Deputy Chief of staff. They work very well together and divide primary responsibilities very efficiently. Together, we are looking at our operations with a fresh set of eyes and a shared commitment to strengthening how Kentucky's courts serve the people. We are examining each component of the work of our branch and creating new guardrails where needed and focusing on working smarter where we can do so.

In June, just like the other branches, we had to leave our home and move out of the Capitol, but Chamberlin is serving us well temporarily.

Speaking of Chamberlin, I toured the building in March to see how the renovations were coming. I asked about lease costs and was told that for both the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, the rent was \$660,000 per year. I asked how much the building was listed for and was told that it was 2.8 million. Having learned we might be out of the Capitol for several years, I began to work on the details of how we could go about purchasing the building! First, I learned that I can only spend \$1 million without legislative approval. I needed permission from the General Assembly to spend anything more Who knew?

And let me take a minute to brag on our AOC folks who quickly got me the numbers I needed to plead our case for buying the building and negotiated the purchase, contingent on approval. You approved the purchase of the building, saving the taxpayers significant sums in lease payments that retain no value in the end. Thank you again!!! I very much appreciate the nimble response of the General Assembly to make this transaction work so well. I know that I couldn't have closed this purchase without the willingness of several legislative members who took my perhaps overly excited "HAVE I GOT A DEAL FOR ALL OF KENTUCKIANS" call over those last days of the session.

Like many of you who have taken on new leadership roles, I have quickly learned that change and challenge often arrive together. The relocation of the entire Supreme Court, including the Supreme Court Clerk's Office and State Law Library has been a challenge. Much credit should be given to our Clerk, Katie Bing and her staff for coordinating much of that from her office.

As I stated earlier, our office space at Chamberlin is serving our needs for now. However, the Supreme Court is without a courtroom and we are travelling about the state for oral arguments. We may place signage at the Chamberlin building with the slogan, "Have Gavel, Will Travel!" Even though we may appear to be stodgy from afar, each Justice and their staff, have been very flexible and have made this modern-day Circuit riding work well!

Additionally, we have dealt with historic flooding in Frankfort that forced the closure of the Franklin County Courthouse for several months and their operations had to be relocated. Our courts in Hardin County and other areas of the state faced similar disruptions from severe weather conditions and system failures. Through all of it, I have been encouraged by the resilience, professionalism and compassion of our judges, circuit court clerks and AOC employees. It is a tremendous task to manage 5.5 million square feet of office space and this change in the season makes me particularly nervous about very old, expensive-to-replace HVAC units. Zach and Deputy Director Jason McGinnis and all the dedicated folks at AOC seem to have a real handle on what keeps justice moving forward even in the toughest of conditions.

BUDGET

Now, let's talk budget. It is clear that our ability to meet the needs of Kentuckians depends on how we plan and fund the work ahead. I was called to preliminary budget meetings in December of last year. The General Assembly has asked that we take a new approach to our budget and our budget folks are working overtime to share fully and transparently what our budget history has been and the critical place where we find ourselves now. We must ensure that our courts remain strong, stable and accessible for generations to come.

But great optimism does not mean we can ignore a harsh reality. The central theme of my remarks today is our need for a better approach to how we fund and maintain our operations, one that ensures the long-term sustainability of the Judicial Branch.

Historically, the Kentucky Court of Justice has been careful and conservative in its funding requests. We take pride in being good stewards of public funds. We have consistently sought only what we felt was necessary to fulfill our constitutional and statutory responsibilities. That became our baseline for funding. And we do more with less than any organization I know!

But today I must be candid: The tools that have allowed us to stretch our resources as far as possible are no longer enough to meet the demands of our courts.

We have immediate needs for FY2026. We have a projected shortfall of approximately \$14.3 million without supplemental support. We will request that the legislature give us access to the reserve account so we can cover obligations and prevent operational disruption. That isn't new spending expansion, it is accessing our existing funds. In years past we've had access to those monies already appropriated to us but with funding of Chamberlin, the Bill also locked those funds out of reach.

We will ask that the base appropriation align with actual 2025 operational costs. And we need to have room for projected cost increases and inflation and non-discretionary obligations. We will

ask to replace restricted funds with real funding. We began all this work with an early budget submission on May 1 and an official submission on October 1. Meetings and committee appearances have been ongoing.

Since 2010, General Fund appropriations for the Judicial Branch have not kept pace with the basic baseline cost of court operations. To bridge those gaps, we have relied on vacancy credits and agency-generated revenue, including the carryforward from our restricted funds. Those temporary measures allowed us to keep courthouses open, pay our people and meet our obligations to the public.

However, with the passage of Senate Bill 25, the majority of that restricted fund carryforward was transferred to a reserve account. Access to those funds now require an explicit legislative appropriation. Thus, the financial flexibility that once allowed us to manage shortfalls internally has been significantly reduced. We will ask that those limitations be lifted, giving access to use of our own funds, at least to a greater extent.

We have reached the limit of what can be achieved through vacancy credits, reallocations and short-term fixes. Current projections show that these methods will no longer cover operational needs by Fiscal Year 2026 or in the next biennium.

Accordingly, we will be seeking an increase to our base appropriation, not to expand the courts and overall operations but to sustain them at current service levels.

Salaries

- We all know that our branch employees are not paid in parity with other state government branches.
- Judicial branch salaries average 17 percent lower than executive branch comparable positions.
- Court designated workers and case managers make 35 percent less than comparable social workers.
- Chief Deputy clerks earn 13 percent less than executive branch administrative managers.
- Pretrial specialists earn 12 percent less than probation and parole officers
- Elected Circuit clerks earn 11-15 percent less than elected county clerks
- Our Judges, who graciously take on extra, unpaid responsibilities have gone from ranking 20th nationally in salary 20 years ago to ranking 48th, earning \$30,000 per year less than the national average for state court judges.

We face serious challenges in attracting and retaining qualified people. Judicial Branch salaries have fallen well behind those in the Executive Branch by an average of 17 percent. Not only has our pay fallen behind, but we all know about the retirement changes over the years. Successful attorneys may have previously chosen to take a cut in pay to serve as a judge in the past because of retirement benefits, that doesn't happy anymore.

We are asking for a funding increase to support pay raises of 15 percent, across the board in addition to whatever amount of salary raise is budgeted for the other branches. While we are

incredibly grateful for the small increases over the last few years, they don't change the fact that Judicial Branch salaries have not kept pace with the rising cost of living over the last 20 years.

These are not luxury requests. They are about fairness, stability and maintaining the quality of justice Kentuckians expect. The people who devote their careers to public service in our courts deserve compensation that reflects both their level of responsibility, their education and their skill.

In addition, working with the National Center for State Courts, we have begun a comprehensive classification and compensation study to review all job specifications, pay grades and scales across the branch. We intend to share the results of this study at the beginning of the year as we head into the 2026 general session. This will drive a plan to ensure every employee is classified and paid appropriately for their position.

Modernizing Court Technology

A strong court system depends on modern tools and the ability to sustain them with steady funding. For the first time, the Judicial Branch has proposed a dedicated revenue request to support its long-term technology needs. This new approach covers both our subscription-based software and our courtroom audio and video systems.

For more than 40 years, Kentucky's courts have partnered with Justice AV Solutions, a Kentucky company that designs and builds recording systems made specifically for courtrooms. Every courtroom in the state, from District to Supreme Court, uses this system as the official record of proceedings instead of court reporters. Showing our innovation, KY moved away from court reporters and written transcriptions many years ago and now rely completely on this AV system as part of the official court record. This early innovation is the envy of most all states. For the first time, we are establishing a dedicated funding line to regularly upgrade and replace these systems so that all 432 courtrooms remain equipped with reliable, high-quality digital recording and video conferencing.

Our partnership with JAVS is one of the longest vendor relationships we have and a point of pride. The company began in Jefferson County in the early 1980s and continues to design its own hardware and software for use in courts across the world. By committing to predictable funding, we are investing in both our courts and our local economy.

This same forward-thinking approach guides the development of our new statewide case management system through Tyler Technologies. It is the largest technology project in the history of the Judicial Branch, coming as we commemorate our 50th year.

The move to a fully electronic court record will transform how Kentucky's courts operate. Over time, this transition will reduce our reliance on paper files and physical storage, lessen disaster recovery costs and influence how future court facilities are designed and built. It will also help us focus our resources where they matter most, supporting judges, clerks and the people we serve rather than maintaining paper files and aging systems.

Together, these efforts reflect what we mean by a new approach to budgeting. They are about planning wisely, investing steadily and ensuring that Kentucky's courts have the technology they need to serve the public well into the future, saving taxpayer dollars along the way.

Court Facilities and Disaster Recovery

The courts cannot function without safe, accessible buildings. The Judicial Branch currently occupies more than 5.5 million square feet of space, most of it in county-owned facilities.

Since 1996, the General Assembly has authorized 106 courthouse construction or renovation projects! It has been a tremendous investment in our infrastructure. The legislative decision last session to create a 47-million-dollar asset preservation fund has already proven critical.

Thanks to ongoing support, projects are underway in at least 15 counties addressing issues like roof replacement, HV AC systems and structural repairs. We are deeply grateful for that partnership.

Looking ahead, we will be requesting an increase to the Local Facilities Fund to help counties operate these facilities. By law, the Judicial Branch is responsible for reimbursing counties for the operating costs of the court facilities it occupies, including insurance, routine maintenance, repairs, utilities and janitorial services. This state-county partnership is fairly unique to Kentucky and places significant responsibility on both the counties that own the buildings and the Judicial Branch that keeps them running. These increases are necessary to maintain safe, functional and accessible courthouses across the state.

As I mentioned earlier, we have suffered several natural disasters over this past year that have hit two courthouses particularly hard. We will also seek onetime funding to offset more than 8.5 million dollars in flood-related damages in Franklin and Hardin counties. Additionally, both Lincoln and Bell counties have significant and dangerous black mold issues. While Lincoln County is in our budget request for a new courthouse, we now hope to be able to repair the existing building at a lower cost. These are just a few examples of unexpected expenses that we have faced this year.

We are also seeking authorization for a capital project to upgrade security systems in court facilities across Kentucky. Many of our buildings are operating with cameras, monitors and access controls that have reached the end of their service life. This request includes 3 million dollars to begin replacing and modernizing these systems to ensure the continued safety of the public, judges, circuit clerks and employees who work in our courthouses each day.

Programs That Change Lives

Through the Office of Statewide Programs, Kentucky's courts provide innovative services that address real-world challenges that our communities are facing.

The Citizen Foster Care Review Board program provides a direct service to judges by reviewing the cases of children in foster care and offering findings and recommendations to the court.

There are 171 boards operating in all 120 counties. In Fiscal Year 2024, 720 volunteers conducted 19,565 reviews involving 11,301 children. These volunteers play a vital role in promoting safety, permanency and well-being for some of Kentucky's most vulnerable youth.

As part of the child welfare reforms established by House Bill 1 in 2018, the CFCRB program also hosts regional public forums that allow citizens to share concerns about the foster care system. The findings from those forums help identify barriers to permanency and are used to inform annual legislative recommendations shared with the chief justice, governor and the Child Welfare Oversight and Advisory Committee.

Family Recovery Courts serve parents who are working to overcome substance use disorders and reunite with their children. There are 12 active Family Recovery Courts in Family Court jurisdictions across the commonwealth. Participants in these programs are more likely to achieve reunification and show improvement in family stability and overall well-being. The program is a collaboration among the Administrative Office of the Courts, Volunteers of America Mid-States and the Department for Community Based Services.

The Court Designated Worker Program continues to play an essential role in keeping young people out of the criminal justice system. In Fiscal Year 2025, the program processed 16,561 complaints and successfully diverted 5,917 youth from formal court involvement. That means nearly 6,000 youth offenders completed educational, counseling and community-based programs and upheld their commitment to not re-offend. The CDW program reduces recidivism and encourages personal responsibility and positive decision-making.

Our Specialty Courts - including Drug, Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Courts and the previously mentioned Family Recovery Courts serve nearly 3,000 Kentuckians across the state. Adult Drug Courts operate in all 120 counties and serve more than 2,600 participants each year. Mental Health Courts now operate in 17 counties, reaching more than 200 individuals, while Veterans Treatment Courts operate in eight counties and serve more than 100 veterans and service members.

Over the past year, 10 new Mental Health Courts were established through a structured, data-driven process that included community engagement, training and accountability measures. These programs promote recovery, reduce recidivism and strengthen communities across Kentucky.

In 2024, we also introduced behavioral health liaisons to improve coordination between the courts and mental health providers. Eight regional liaisons are now serving across the state. They work with judges, law enforcement and treatment professionals to ensure individuals with behavioral health needs are connected to the right services at the right time. This early intervention model helps prevent unnecessary incarceration, reduces costs and saves lives.

Overall, our Specialty Court judges have volunteered hundreds of hours and cases to their workload on their own time to continue these vital services well above and beyond their required duties.

The Kentucky Judicial Commission on Mental Health

We are also leading reform through the Kentucky Judicial Commission on Mental Health, which continues to advance meaningful change through law, practice and collaboration. The commission now includes more than 500 partners from across the state who share a commitment to improving how Kentucky's justice system serves people with mental health needs. Looking around this room, there are so many of you that I could thank individually, however I would surely miss someone. Many of you sit on the commission or work on subcommittees.

Thank you for your volunteer efforts to reach across branches to break down silos and help us find common sense, cost-effective solutions.

Over the past year, the commission convened 14 statewide forums focused on involuntary hospitalization under KRS 202A. We heard a consistent message from communities across Kentucky. Our system is strained, but it can be repaired and improved. Participants described challenges such as transportation that leave some counties without coverage, and communication barriers that make coordination difficult. We also discovered shortages of qualified evaluators which delay access to the emergency care individuals in crisis need. We all agree that the rules surrounding regional mental health hospital assignments often mean that a suicidal individual doesn't get taken to the closest appropriate hospital as would a person suffering a heart attack or other medical emergency. We can take better care of our citizens in such distress.

These regional conversations reinforced the need for greater consistency, improved coordination and quicker access to treatment. What we have learned will guide our work and strengthen the 202A process in ways that protect liberty while ensuring safety from those persons found in a mental health crisis.

We have already seen significant progress through past legislative efforts by the Commission. Seth's Law modernizes guardianship and competency practices, reducing the evaluation of criminal defendants competency waitlist by 90 percent. Thank you, Representative Moser, for sponsoring this bill your support and work on this was much appreciated. And Senator Storm, thank you for sponsoring Senate Bill 26 which safeguards the rights of parents with disabilities in adoption and termination cases. Looking ahead, our 2026 recommendations will focus on KRS 202C, civil commitment reforms.

The work of the commission shows what can happen when partners come together around a shared purpose. The challenges are real, but so is the progress. Together we are building a system where compassion and justice walk side by side, and where every Kentuckian can see that change is not only possible but already underway.

Closing: Partnership and Purpose

Section 110 of the Kentucky Constitution places the responsibility of managing the judicial budget duties on the Chief Justice as the executive head of the branch. And under the Constitution, statutes, and case law, particularly Ex Parte Auditor of Public Accounts, which recognized that the buck stops with the Chief Justice in setting salaries, other than Judges, within

our entire branch. I do ask, that with the budget granted us, we are funded as requested. I can and will promise you that I will implement a 15% across the board raise; shared evenly and equally, with no class of employee being lifted above and no class of employee left behind without a raise. I cannot and would not do otherwise.

I am very proud of how far we have come, and I am grateful to each of you for your continued partnership and trust. The work of justice does not belong to any one person or even branch of government. It belongs to all of us who serve the people of Kentucky.

We all are bound in many ways by the rulings of the U.S. Supreme Court. But that court only considers about 8,000 cases and renders about 80 to 100 cases per year. In contrast, our trial judges and clerks in Kentucky process over 800,000 cases! Every day in every courthouse, Kentuckians come seeking fairness, safety and legal solutions! It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the courthouses stay open, the lights stay on, and the people inside have the resources and tools to deliver justice.

With your support, I am resolved to build a stronger, more sustainable future for Kentucky's courts.

Thank you for your time, your partnership and your continued commitment to justice.