

State of the Judiciary
Chief Justice Natalie E. Hudson, Minnesota Supreme Court
Message to the Bar
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Conference Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Good afternoon, members of the Minnesota Bar.

Thank you for the invitation to join you for this year's Annual Convention, and thank you, as always, for your ongoing partnership with our state's judiciary. It is a pleasure to be with you all today.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the horrific events that occurred here in Minnesota a little more than a week ago. The assassination of Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband, and the shooting of Senator John Hoffman and his wife, were acts of unspeakable violence – and painful reminders of the risks facing public servants in today's climate.

We hold their families in our hearts. We are grateful for the swift response of law enforcement. And we reaffirm, as a legal community, our shared commitment to public service, to democracy, and to justice.

I also want to offer a word of appreciation to the leadership of the MSBA.

To Samuel Edmunds, thank you for your dedication and support over the past year. And to Thomas Pack, congratulations on your new role. We look forward to working with you in the year ahead.

I understand that many of you will be joining them later today for the Passing of the Gavel Ceremony, and I hope you'll join me in thanking both Sam and Tom for their service.

I know we say it often, but it bears repeating: The relationship between the bench and the bar in Minnesota is something special. It is built on mutual respect, open communication, and a shared commitment to justice. And it has never been more important than it is today. Because we find ourselves in a moment that demands clarity—and courage—about the role courts play in a democratic society.

Courts are not just a place where legal disputes are resolved. They are the guardians of liberty, the protectors of rights, and the final safeguard of our constitutional system. In times of division, courts ensure due process. In times of uncertainty, courts hold steady to the rule of law.

But even institutions built on stability are not immune to the pressures and uncertainties of our time.

Across the country, we've seen growing efforts to politicize the judiciary, to inject partisanship into judicial elections, and to erode public trust in our courts. And we should not assume that our courts will automatically maintain themselves. No —this is a time for the profession to stand up boldly and protect what we know is right. A time to demand that the rule of law be followed, demand due process; demand basic fairness; and to remember the ethics and civility we all swore an oath to uphold when we raised our hands and became officers of the court. As attorneys, we are ambassadors to the court system. The public's trust in our courts must be earned every day by our ongoing and enduring commitment to the rule of law every time we set foot in a courtroom, a boardroom, a mediation session or a classroom.

And we face other pressures as well—pressures that are more familiar, but no less consequential. As the state continues to navigate significant fiscal challenges, the impact on the courts is real. The funding decisions being made today will shape our courts' ability to serve the public, support our workforce, and meet rising demands in the years to come.

And yet, here in Minnesota, the state of the judiciary remains strong. Not because we are immune to these pressures, but because we are prepared to face them, together.

Our state has long enjoyed a judicial system that has been heralded as among the most well-managed, innovative, and accessible in the country. And that reputation was not earned by chance.

The progress we've made—and the standing we now hold—are the result of deliberate planning, bold reforms, and the daily efforts of judges, staff, attorneys, and justice partners across our state. We have built a court system that leads not only in how we work—but, more importantly, in how we serve.

And in the time we have together today, I want to share what that leadership has looked like over the past year, how we are preparing for the challenges ahead, and why your voice—your advocacy—has never been more important.

Over the past year, that leadership has taken tangible form—in bold reforms, in system improvements, and in new efforts to meet the evolving needs of the people we serve.

If there is one change that best captures what it means to lead in this moment, it is the adoption of our new, statewide district court hearing framework.

This framework, which took effect on February 3 of this year, is the culmination of nearly three years of work under the oneCourtMN Hearings Initiative.

Built on feedback from more than 5,500 judges, court staff, justice partners, and court users, it reflects a careful balance between what can sometimes feel like competing values: consistency and discretion, statewide alignment and local flexibility, tradition and innovation.

At its core, the framework answers a fundamental question: how should our courts use in-person and remote hearings to deliver justice in a post-pandemic world?

It reflects lessons learned over the past four years, including from the thousands of Minnesotans who told us that remote hearings are often more convenient, more accessible, and easier to attend—especially for those facing challenges with transportation, work, or caregiving.

We recognize that certain hearings are best held in person—where the formality and setting of the courthouse support the gravity of the proceeding—while others benefit from the flexibility and accessibility of remote appearances.

Under the new framework, every type of hearing—criminal and civil—now has a standard setting: it's either in-person or remote by default. Those statewide standards help ensure consistency and equal access to justice across Minnesota.

At the same time, we know that one size doesn't fit all. That's why the policy includes built-in flexibility. Judges can make exceptions for individual cases when it makes sense to do so. And if a county or district has broader needs—maybe due to geography or how legal services are delivered—they can request a more tailored approach.

The result is a hearing model that offers greater clarity, consistency, and predictability—without sacrificing the judicial discretion and human judgment that are essential to fair and responsive court proceedings.

It is not an overstatement to say that this is one of the most significant operational reforms our court system has made in a generation. And states across the country are looking at Minnesota as a pioneer for how to best leverage remote hearings into their permanent court operations.

Even as we improve how hearings are held, we're also focused on who is being heard—and who may still be left behind. That commitment continues to guide some of the most impactful work across our Branch.

One powerful example: earlier this year, the Supreme Court made permanent the Legal Paraprofessional Program—a bold step forward in expanding access to justice. Launched as a pilot in 2021, this program allows trained paraprofessionals, working under the supervision of licensed attorneys, to provide legal advice and represent clients in a growing range of civil matters.

With the Court's recent order, the program is now permanent, and its scope has expanded to include housing court statewide, as well as additional case types such as criminal expungement, conciliation court, consumer debt, and even certain administrative proceedings. This innovation expands access to justice and helps close the civil justice gap.

At the same time, we are working to ensure that one of the cornerstones of our justice system—the jury—remains fair, representative, and accessible.

That's why the Judicial Council created a new Jury Taskforce this year to identify barriers to jury service and improve participation across the state. The taskforce is supporting legislative efforts

to increase the juror per diem, revising outreach strategies, and evaluating whether current jury selection methods may unintentionally limit participation—especially for underrepresented communities. Over time, this group will help shape data-informed reforms to ensure that our jury pools reflect the full diversity of Minnesota.

In addition, the Minnesota Supreme Court has taken significant steps to make our jury system is more inclusive and equitable. In one order, the Court adopted changes to the Rules of Criminal Procedure to help reduce the impact of implicit bias during jury selection—especially in how peremptory strikes are challenged and reviewed. And in a separate order, the Court expanded jury eligibility to include individuals with felony convictions who are no longer incarcerated, restoring civic participation for thousands of Minnesotans across the state.

Taken together, these efforts reflect our commitment to building a jury system that not only upholds constitutional rights—but lives up to our highest ideals of fairness, inclusion, and equal participation.

In another example of thoughtful reform, our Court has launched an effort to reimagine how we assess attorney competence in Minnesota.

In August 2024, we appointed members to the Alternative Pathways Implementation Committee, tasked with developing a curricular-based pathway to licensure—as an alternative to the traditional bar examination—and exploring a potential post-graduation supervised practice pathway.

This work builds on a two-year study by the Board of Law Examiners, which examined licensure models across the country and recommended Minnesota pursue these alternative approaches while also adopting the NextGen bar exam. The committee’s first action was to identify a set of core competencies that should guide any assessment of attorney readiness, and that list is now publicly available for comment.

This summer and fall, the committee will be reaching out to attorneys statewide to share more information and, most importantly, to invite feedback and engagement. The goal is to ensure that licensure remains rigorous and continues to protect the public—while also being inclusive and responsive to the diverse pathways through which candidates may develop professional competence.

You can find additional details, including the list of core competencies and project timeline, on the Minnesota Board of Law Examiners website. We encourage you to learn more and share your perspective, because these pathways have the potential to reshape how we prepare and evaluate the next generation of Minnesota attorneys.

One of the defining qualities of the Minnesota Judicial Branch is our ability to embrace technology in order to better serve the people who rely on our courts.

In January, we reached a major milestone when the Minnesota Digital Exhibit System (MNDES) became mandatory statewide. MNDES lets users securely upload exhibits from anywhere,

modernizing evidence submission while easing administrative burden and ensuring statewide consistency.

This spring, we also launched eCheck-In in nearly every county. eCheck-In allows parties in eligible case types to check in for their hearing in advance—using a personal device or courthouse kiosk. It's a simple but powerful tool that reduces wait times, streamlines hearing-day logistics, and offers a more predictable experience for court users.

And, thanks to support from lawmakers during this most recent legislative session, we are beginning work on a long-overdue overhaul of our justice partner access systems—the tools used by law enforcement, prosecutors, public defenders, and others to securely access court records and information. This is an investment that will strengthen the justice system as a whole—not just the courts.

While technology continues to improve the way we serve the public, it can't address every challenge. Some of the most critical work we've done this year focuses on the human side of justice—areas like mental health, family support, and attorney well-being.

I am pleased to share that the Judicial Council has launched a new Mental Health Justice Initiative—a statewide, collaborative effort to improve outcomes for individuals whose mental illness is central to their involvement in the justice system.

Modeled after our Children's Justice Initiative, this effort brings together stakeholders to identify gaps, recommend reforms, and promote coordinated, effective responses.

We've also launched the new Council on Child Protection and Maltreatment Prevention, chaired by Justice Anne McKeig. This group is examining how courts can better support children and families—particularly in cases involving neglect, foster care, and generational trauma. Their work will explore both systemic improvements and opportunities to strengthen coordination across agencies and jurisdictions.

And in another example of leadership rooted in empathy and sustainability, the Supreme Court this year adopted a new personal leave rule for attorneys, allowing attorneys to request a 90-day continuance in civil cases for events like childbirth, bereavement, or caregiving responsibilities.

It's a small change with a big impact—especially for solo practitioners, younger attorneys, and those balancing demanding caseloads with family responsibilities.

The progress we've made over the past year is something we should be proud of. It reflects the very best of what our courts can be: responsive, equitable, innovative, and people centered. But none of this progress is guaranteed. Even the strongest court system can be tested—by political pressure, by public skepticism, or by a lack of resources. And right now, we are being tested on all three fronts.

The tragic events in Minnesota this past week are a heartbreaking reminder of the risks facing public servants in today's climate. While we may not yet know every motive, we do know this:

threats against judges and other public officials are rising – and not just in far-off places, but here at home.

And these threats are rarely spontaneous. They are often seeded by rhetoric that seeks to delegitimize the judiciary – rhetoric that portrays judges as political operatives, decisions as partisan wins or losses, and courts as just another battleground in our polarized landscape.

This is more than just troubling language. It undermines public confidence in the rule of law. And in the most extreme cases, it can fuel real-world violence.

That’s why this moment demands clarity – and courage. Clarity about the role of an impartial judiciary. And courage to defend it.

Across the country, we are seeing efforts to politicize the courts and erode the legitimacy of judicial decisions. In some states, judicial campaigns now mirror political races, with candidates backed by party platforms and national funding sources – blurring the line between impartial justice and partisan politics, and weakening the public’s trust in the courts.

At the same time, it is now common to hear judges described as “partisan actors,” their rulings framed as political maneuvers rather than interpretations of law. And while criticism of judicial decisions is part of a healthy democracy, dismissing courts as rigged or illegitimate threatens the very foundation on which that democracy rests.

When people lose trust in the courts, it isn’t just an abstract concern – it affects families seeking safety, tenants facing eviction, defendants awaiting trial. And it leaves the judiciary – which holds neither the purse nor the sword – vulnerable.

As Chief Justice, I take seriously a truth first articulated by Alexander Hamilton: the judiciary depends not on force, but on judgment and on the public’s belief that our decisions are grounded in law, not ideology. That trust must be earned. And it must be defended.

That challenge is compounded here in Minnesota by an increasingly difficult fiscal environment.

This year’s legislative session was, by all accounts, a tough one. While we are grateful that the courts avoided deep cuts—and that a few important investments were made—the final FY26–27 budget provided no salary increases for judges, and only modest, mostly one-time funding for employee compensation.

It’s a decision with very real consequences. We are already seeing signs of strain.

We’re seeing it in a decline in judicial applicants, especially in Greater Minnesota. We’re seeing it in staff departures and growing workloads for those who remain.

These challenges threaten our ability to deliver timely, high-quality service to the public. And we’re not out of the woods yet. Even after all of the difficult budget decisions made this legislative session, Minnesota is still projected to face a multi-billion-dollar deficit in the

following biennium, FY28-29. The road ahead remains uncertain—and we know from experience that the judiciary is not always spared when budgets tighten.

Thus, the question before us is not whether we will be challenged, but how we will respond.

In the Minnesota Judicial Branch, we are not standing still—we are planning forward. Because we know from experience that the only way to preserve access to justice during difficult times is to act early, think long-term, and lead with purpose.

For those of you who can remember back to the Great Recession, you'll recall what a trying time that was for our justice system. Budget cuts and freezes pushed our courts to the brink—to the point we were closing service counters and considering what types of cases we may not be able to hear any longer.

During that difficult time, the Minnesota Judicial Council understood that we could not simply sit back and wait for the system to break down—we had to try to reimagine how we could continue to deliver justice with fewer people and fewer resources.

We formed several statewide committees—dubbed the Access and Service Delivery, or ASD, committees—and charged them with rethinking core parts of court operations. The lasting result of those efforts included our digital transformation throughout the eCourt initiative, and statewide centralization efforts, such as the launch of the statewide Court Payment Center.

Now, with another fiscal challenge on the horizon, we're returning to that same proactive mindset.

This spring, the Judicial Council launched a new Access and Service Delivery Committee—ASD-3, a statewide committee tasked with reexamining how we deliver core court services and recommending smart, sustainable reforms.

Led by Judge David Knutson, who helped lead similar work during the Great Recession, the ASD-3 Committee includes representatives from every district and appellate court. Their charge is clear: help the Judicial Branch plan ahead—not just for cuts, but for smarter, more responsive operations that serve Minnesotans more effectively.

That same forward-looking mindset is guiding our broader planning efforts.

The FY26 Operational Plan, now in development, focuses on strengthening access to justice, increasing efficiency, and building capacity for the years ahead. It draws on the lessons of the pandemic and aligns closely with the goals of ASD-3. The plan is also grounded in the Branch's long-term values: equity, innovation, public trust, and user-centered service.

Planning for the future also means embracing new tools—and using them wisely.

That's where our Artificial Intelligence Response Committee, or AIR, comes in. Formed in 2024, AIR is helping us explore how AI can support court operations—while upholding ethics, equity, and public trust.

This work is already underway. Across the Branch, staff are already applying generative tools to make public materials clearer, meetings more productive, and communications more efficient. Judges and attorneys are engaging with AI-powered legal research platforms. And we are actively exploring development of an AI virtual assistant to help self-represented litigants navigate court processes more easily and access information 24/7.

Together, these efforts reflect a simple but urgent goal: ensuring our court system remains strong, nimble, and responsive to the people we serve, no matter what lies ahead

But, as always, planning alone is not enough.

Preserving a strong, independent judiciary takes more than internal resolve.

It takes partnership.

It takes advocacy.

And it takes all of us—inside and outside the courts—standing together for justice.

In this moment, the courts cannot be the only ones defending the courts. And that's where the legal profession comes in.

As members of the legal profession, you are not just practitioners—you are protectors of the justice system. And in this moment, that role is more important than ever.

We need you to advocate for the courts—in your communities, networks, and at the Capitol. Public trust doesn't just depend on courtroom outcomes. It also depends on what people hear outside of it. When you talk to your neighbors, your clients, or your legislators, tell them what you know to be true: that Minnesota's judiciary is not partisan, not political, not for sale. That we are committed to fairness, access, and the rule of law. That the decisions we make are grounded in precedent and guided by principle—not by polls, donors, or party affiliation.

In an environment where misinformation spreads faster than fact, and where judicial rulings are increasingly spun as partisan wins or losses, your voice matters. Not just as attorneys, but as people who have seen this system up close.

And if there was ever a time for the legal profession to stand up for the cause of justice, the time is now. Regardless of legislative funding, our advocacy cannot stop. Because one of the greatest risks we face isn't just a budget shortfall—it's a legitimacy shortfall.

We've all seen what's happening in other states. Judicial races that resemble political campaigns. Attack ads. Party endorsements. Out-of-state money flooding in to sway the outcome of what are supposed to be impartial, nonpartisan elections.

Here in Minnesota, we've been fortunate. We've maintained a nonpartisan judicial selection system grounded in merit, integrity, and public service. But we should not assume it will stay that way.

That's why we need the legal community to not only resist efforts to politicize our courts—but to actively defend what we've built here. To speak up for judicial neutrality. And to protect the integrity of a system that still serves as a model for the country.

So yes, we are planning. Yes, we are adapting. But we are also asking for your partnership. Because defending the justice system isn't just the job of judges—it's a shared duty for everyone who believes in the rule of law.

We are in a defining moment—for our courts, our communities, and the rule of law.

And with your partnership—with the voices and values of the legal profession behind us—we can be the line. We can defend what makes our courts strong. My friends, we have built a court system that leads with vision, integrity, and a commitment to justice for all Minnesotans.

Together, let's defend what we've built—and ensure it endures.

Thank you.