

State of the Judiciary  
Chief Justice Mary R. Russell, Missouri Supreme Court  
Message to the Legislature  
February 26, 2025

Lieutenant Governor Wasinger, Speaker Patterson, President Pro Tem O’Laughlin, statewide office holders, members of the General Assembly, judicial colleagues, and my fellow Missourians: It is an honor and privilege to serve as Missouri’s chief justice and to share with you this 51st state of the judiciary.

First off, I want to say I appreciate the sacrifices you and your families make so you can be here. My late husband Jim spent many years working in this incredible building, including four terms representing northwest Missouri in this very chamber. But he used to tell me, if I ever ran for office, he’d run for the state line!

Our families are important to all of us. So I’d like to introduce you to the members of my family here today – there’s quite a list, so give me a minute! We’ll start with my favorites – my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren, Nick, Alex, Avery, Evan, Isabelle, Claire, Harper, Miles and Dawson – plus their families, Kim, Allen, Heather, Tom, Laura and Allison. I love you all; please stand and be recognized!

When I first gave this speech, one of my young grandkids – in an otherwise quiet moment – blurted out “Mimi sure does talk a lot!” I hope my little ones keep their comments to themselves today!

Last year marked my 20th anniversary on the Court, but it feels just like yesterday when I first put on my robe across the street. It’s something this northeast Missouri farm girl never thought possible, even in her wildest dreams.

Through the years I’ve learned: as important as the work we do here in Jefferson City is, it is equally important to understand the impact of our work on people throughout our state. So, during this term as chief justice, my goal has been to visit all 46 judicial circuits. I’ve been to 36 so far, with just 10 to go!

Many of you have joined me to tour your local courthouses to hear from all your constituents who work there. By showing our gratitude to our “frontline court heroes” for their dedicated service to the people of our state, together, we have learned a lot.

We are the Show-Me State, and these tours have shown us that investing in our courts is an investment in our local citizens. Every day, more than 3,400 judges, court clerks, bailiffs and other court employees perform critical functions on behalf of – and for the benefit of – all Missourians. Day in and day out, these local court staff diligently work to provide vital services to the people we *all* serve.

This morning, I don't want to talk to you about the work we do that makes headlines. Our courts are about so much more than the handful of litigants, issues or cases that might attract your attention. Today, I want to tell you "the rest of the story" – how the daily activities of our courts matter in the lives of everyday people in all our communities, large and small.

In every county, work begins before the courts open. Staff show up early, unlocking doors, turning up the heat and – quite a few times so far this year – shoveling snow.

In the 8 o'clock hour, courthouses across Missouri are opening for business, from Rock Port to Kahoka, Caruthersville to Neosho, and all points in between. Court clerks are firing up their computers to start processing overnight filings. Last year, there were more than 6.4 million filings. Case.net averaged more than 5 million hits per day – some of those might have been from you! And people made more than 250,000 payments online totaling more than \$32 million.

Thanks to your ongoing support for court technology, information that was once on paper is now electronic. This saves counties, municipalities and people millions of dollars in postage, supplies and storage. Your support allows us to continue providing the high level of online services Missourians expect and deserve.

Last summer, an electrical event dramatically impacted our servers. But our amazing staff had all our courts back up and running within days. Although we continue serving the day to day technology needs of our courts and your constituents, more is required to bring us back to full functionality. Please consider funding to restore our data systems to capacity and help protect them against future problems.

By 9 a.m., court staff are greeting potential jurors gathering in anticipation of jury trials, most of which are in criminal cases. Right now, there may be trials involving a burglary in Bethany, forgery in Fulton, or stealing in Salem.

During my travels to your local courthouses, staff express concern about the low compensation for jurors, who are missing a paycheck or time with their families to perform this important civic duty. Last year, you considered changing jurors' compensation, in part by tying their mileage rate to that of state employees.

Currently, the statute provides jurors just 7 cents a mile. This year, please send these changes to the governor's desk. Doing so will demonstrate respect for our jurors.

But the day is only just beginning. In the 10 o'clock hour, in our associate divisions, judges may be hearing cases ranging from contract disputes in Columbia to landlord-tenant actions in Liberty to small claims in Ste. Genevieve. By 11 a.m., they are handling arraignments for charges such as trespass in Trenton, vandalism in Versailles, or possession in Potosi.

There is plenty of work outside the courtrooms too. All morning, clerks are helping Missourians in a number of ways. Someone in Fredricktown needs to file a court form. Another person in Grant City wants to establish a garnishment. In Hermann, the circuit clerk – who also is the recorder of deeds – is helping a couple locate a property title.

Things don't stop over the lunch hour, when our municipal divisions may be the busiest, as clerks from Ava to Butler to Lancaster help people understand how to pay their traffic tickets.

Juvenile detention centers across the state are busy as well. Staff in St. Charles and St. Louis city are preparing to help students with afternoon school lessons so they don't fall behind, while employees down in Bloomfield are dishing up lunch for the teenagers detained there. These facilities operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Their staff are always at work, through snow days and holidays alike. Their focus is steadfast on serving the youth.

Let me introduce you to Demetrius Evans, whose passion for juvenile justice stems from hard learned lessons. He was in and out of our St. Louis County juvenile system starting at age 7. As an adult, he reached out to staff and mentors whom he had met while in juvenile detention. He was determined to share his story with at-risk youth. He wanted to help *them* avoid the same mistakes *he* had made, to change the course of their lives.

Now he works as a deputy juvenile detention officer in Clayton. His boss says Demetrius has faced things in life that would break most people, but he has found a way to thrive and now channels his energies into improving his community "one kid at a time." Everyone, please join me in thanking Demetrius for investing this second chapter of his life in serving our youth. Demetrius, would you please stand to be recognized?

The increasing number of children in our juvenile detention centers continues to be a challenge. We have too few staff serving too many youth ... with too few beds available statewide. For example, it may be the middle of the night when a juvenile officer in Bowling Green gets a call to immediately find a bed in detention for a young person accused of a serious crime. After reaching out to several facilities, it turns out the closest bed may be several hours away, which puts a burden on the family and is not a very effective use of taxpayer dollars.

We are grateful for the opportunity to work with you this year to increase bed capacity in two central Missouri detention centers, while increasing our security and mental health services and maintaining juvenile detention staff throughout our state.

During the 1 o'clock hour, courthouse proceedings are starting up again. In the circuit division, a judge in Ava is getting ready to handle his favorite kind of case – an adoption. Meanwhile, a person is seeking a divorce in Doniphan, while another is hoping to modify child custody in Charleston. There may be an abandoned infant in need of court intervention in Independence, while children in Chillicothe may need protection from abuse or neglect. And in Tuscumbia, there is a hearing involving a preteen who has been truant.

Many of these cases involve juvenile officers. One such "frontline hero" is Jenn Willis, whose boss calls her "a phenomenal asset" to the team serving the counties around Macon and Shelbyville. She mentors others; attends home visits with children and their families; hosts birthday lunches for kids on her case load; and often drives long distances to visit local youth who are in residential facilities far from home. Jenn is here with us today; please give her a well earned round of applause!

A lot of work is also happening in our probate divisions, from Palmyra to Pineville. For example, at 2 p.m., parents in Galena are seeking letters of guardianship over their child, who is turning 18 and has serious intellectual disabilities. In Gallatin, a brother and sister are seeking to become guardians of their grandmother, who is suffering from dementia. And in Camdenton, the probate clerk is helping a man file an annual report in his elderly uncle's conservatorship.

By 3 p.m., judges from Edina to Eminence are finalizing probate estates for families who have lost loved ones. In Warsaw and West Plains, individuals are presenting evidence in disputes over wills. Meanwhile, from Marshall to Mount Vernon, courts are holding emergency hearings to determine whether individuals having a mental health crisis need to be hospitalized or can be treated as outpatients.

During my travels, your constituents express concern about mental health issues impacting people in nearly every type of case, from juvenile to criminal to civil. To continue addressing these issues, we want to expand our treatment court divisions to include mental health courts and grow our pretrial services programs. Over three decades, our treatment courts have built a track record of success, helping people stay out of our criminal justice system and find new beginnings as both loving members of their families and productive community citizens.

Last year, you approved funding to expand pretrial services from two pilot sites to programs now in more than nine circuits. Not all defendants charged with a crime need to be detained before trial. We should reserve our county jails for those who are assessed as dangerous or a flight risk. But pretrial services involve more than just assessment and supervision. They also connect nonviolent defendants with community resources to help them find housing, jobs or transportation, or to stay free of substance abuse.

Connecting all of these resources with defendants saves counties money while ensuring public safety. But it also makes it more likely that defendants will actually show up in court and helps close their revolving door into our criminal justice system. Pretrial services are a promising tool to achieve positive results. Together, we can expand these programs to more circuits next year.

While the working day is drawing to a close, much activity continues. At 4 p.m., court clerks from Osceola to Plattsburg are helping women apply for orders of protection. In Springfield, the comfort dog, Derby, is taking a last lap around the courthouse, offering sniffs and snuggles to some children whose parents are getting divorced. Up in Unionville, a judge is performing a wedding for a local couple while the bailiff serves as a witness.

Meanwhile, things remain busy in Kansas City, where one municipal judge is working through an afternoon housing docket online. Another is hosting a walk-in docket in the courtroom for those who signed up to have their cases heard. A third municipal judge is preparing for virtual arraignments. In an effort to accommodate people's lives, these judges and staff have utilized a variety of scheduling options to make court appearances more convenient, so litigants don't have to miss work or family obligations.

By 5 p.m., most local courthouses are closing, but the day is far from done. Judges all over the state continue to electronically sign warrants at all hours of the night or review case files for the next day's proceedings. Here in Jefferson City, our information technology staff are implementing a scheduled update with local IT professionals.

These examples reflect a typical "day in the life" in courthouses throughout Missouri. I hope they show you how vital our courts are to your constituents. Most of the work does not generate headlines or go viral on social media, but ordinary duties create extraordinary results for citizens across our state.

From the frontlines, our local court staff experience first hand how their everyday work impacts the people in their communities. They see the worry on the faces of their neighbors who come to court, seeking resolution of a legal problem. They hear the anxiety in the voices of people who call with questions. They can't help but internalize some of the traumatic stories shared in the courtroom. They understand how important *every* case is ... to the individuals involved.

Perhaps you'll find it corny, but I consider our 3,400-plus employees across the state to be one large court family ... a family brought together by a common purpose – to serve people in all corners of the state, to ensure the fair and effective administration of justice for all. I am grateful my judicial career has allowed me to get to know so many incredible members of our court family who make a difference every day.

Our courts are woven into the fabric of our daily lives. There is a reason our courthouses were built in the heart of every county seat in Missouri. If you haven't recently, please go watch a court proceeding, experience it first-hand, and thank the court staff for all they do, day in and day out, to serve everyone in your community. Don't take my word for it! Let our "frontline heroes" show you how strong and vibrant the state of Missouri's judiciary is.

As you tackle important issues this session, remember we stand with you, ready to assist, as your constitutional partners. Together, we can strengthen community safety, enhance the efficiency of our courts, and serve our citizens well. Together, we can leave a strong legacy for Missourians for years to come.

My very best wishes to you all, as you continue this legislative session. God bless you, and this great state of Missouri!