

State of the Judiciary
Chief Justice Debra L. Stephens, Washington Supreme Court
Message to the Legislature
January 22, 2025

Thank you, Mr. President.

Members of the Washington state legislature, elected officials in the executive branch, colleagues in the judiciary, and people all across Washington.

Good afternoon.

I come before you as the Chief Justice of the Washington State Supreme Court, representing the dedicated individuals who serve the public in the judicial branch of our government.

We are the many judges and other court professionals who work every day in communities large and small to uphold our collective commitment to equal justice under the law.

Thank you for receiving our annual state of the judiciary report and providing this opportunity to highlight some of our work.

Today, I will focus on efforts to build what we call the courts of the future, reflecting the judiciary's continued push toward innovation, responsiveness, and inclusivity in service to the people of Washington.

The past few years have tested all of us profoundly.

We are still filling the impacts of a global pandemic with immense personal and social losses.

The resulting disruptions in judicial operations have underscored the urgent need for systemic improvements to deliver timely and equitable justice.

But the challenges have only strengthened our resolve, and we arrive in 2025 with the benefit of lessons learned and of having more diverse voices at the table.

Much of the work I will share today was accomplished under the leadership of Chief Justice Stephen Gonzalez.

And I ask you to join me in taking this opportunity to thank him once again, Justice Gonzalez, for your vision and your passion for justice.

APPLAUSE

Working together with leaders across the judicial branch and with our partners, we have achieved milestones that evidence the judiciary's resilience and commitment to constant improvement.

Courts continue to offer remote proceedings and alternative approaches to dispute resolution, employing new technologies that have greatly increased access to justice in unprecedented ways.

Developing solutions tailored to their specific needs, courts are working through backlogs, improving access while protecting public health and safety, and delivering critical services to our most vulnerable communities.

We've learned that when it comes to innovation, one size does not fit all, and improved communication among courts across Washington is key to on the ground success.

Successful communication couldn't happen without the dedication of our volunteer judges and court administrators who serve in the leadership of their trial court associations.

And I want to recognize today with us, Judge Kristin Ferreira of Shalam County Superior Court, who is president of the Superior Court Judges Association, along with Judge Carl Williams of the Pierce County District Court, president of the District and Municipal Court Judges Association, and representatives from our associations for court management and administration, Frankie Peters from Thurston County District Court, and TJ Bull from Pierce County.

Please join me in thanking them for their efforts.

Let me highlight just a few examples of the successful court programs we've been working on across the state.

First, therapeutic courts with support and technical assistance from our administrative office of the courts, or AOC, innovative therapeutic court programs have nearly doubled across the state.

These provide vital alternatives to traditional sentencing, through a focus on rehabilitation and services for individuals struggling with mental health, substance use disorders, and other challenges.

The expansion of therapeutic courts reflects the vision of the judges and court staff who lead them and their dedication to innovative justice solutions that are reducing recidivism and fostering community healing.

Court interpreter services.

With your support and assisted by the leadership of our interpreter and language access commission, services have been significantly expanded to ensure access to justice for non-English speaking and limited English proficient individual statewide.

Courts are finding creative ways to deliver services and stretch our limited resources.

We will continue to work together to enhance language access programs because we know they are essential to the ability of every individual to use our legal system.

Just as we strive to literally hear more diverse voices in our courts, we've launched through the AOC, a new equity and access webpage that provides tools and resources for courts to implement diversity and inclusion strategies effectively.

This aligns with the judiciary's broader strategic plan to ensure that every individual, regardless of background, experiences equitable treatment within our judicial system in every court across the state.

In our written report and at the Washington courts website, you can learn more about other court initiatives that we've recognized through our board for judicial administration with innovating justice awards.

These awards emerged as part of our COVID-19 pandemic response to highlight the many ways courts adapted and responded to better serve the people in their communities and they continue to do so.

I want to recognize the board for judicial administration co-chair Judge Alicia Burton from Pierce County Superior Court.

Judge Burton, give it a shout out.

And I also want to recognize in our shared work the two judicial branch agencies that work closely with us on meeting the justice needs of people across the state.

With us today are Sarah Robbins, the director of the office of Civil Legal Aid and Larry Jefferson, the director of the office of public defense.

Please join me in thanking them.

Courts of the future must be aware of the historic inequities of the past.

And our judicial branch initiatives reflect an unwavering commitment to tearing down barriers, fostering inclusion, and building a justice system that truly serves all Washingtonians.

We have learned not to mistake what is normal for what is neutral and to recognize that what just is isn't necessarily justice.

I am proud that Washington's judiciary leads the nation in our transition from punitive justice to restorative practices.

The Board of Justice emphasizes healing, community engagement and meaningful accountability.

We see this in more effective approaches to criminal sentencing, juvenile justice, and child welfare system reforms.

At every level of court we are accelerating our work to eradicate systemic barriers and better serve vulnerable communities.

Ours was the first state to create Supreme Court commissions dedicated to equity and inclusion.

For over 30 years our minority and justice commission has spearheaded initiatives to address racial disparities, for example in jury selection and participation, in bail practices, and with respect to criminal fines and fees.

Our gender and justice commission has launched a new database of services for survivors of domestic violence that provides critical resources for those seeking essential safety and support.

The interpreter and language access commission continues to enhance access to justice by expanding training and certification for interpreters and ensuring that individuals with limited English proficiency can engage fully in legal proceedings.

And our commission on children in foster care focuses on improving the delivery of services for our most vulnerable youth, working collaboratively with state and local partners.

In addition to these commissions we have work groups and task forces that are focusing on urgent issues and today I want to particularly acknowledge our disability justice task force that is working to develop solutions that ensure individuals with disabilities can fully participate in our court system.

The ongoing work of these judicial branch entities is essential to elevating the voices of underserved individuals, convening important and sometimes difficult conversations and fulfilling the mission of the judicial branch to be not just a justice system but a system truly worthy of the name justice.

Branch-wide are efforts to implement the Blake decision, our gaining momentum.

Collaborative initiatives by the AOC, local courts, public defenders, prosecutors, impacted individuals, and advocacy groups have significantly expanded the outreach.

Highlights this year include the first ever in-person Blake vacate and refund clinic at the Sonoma County Court House and extensive educational outreach in our prisons, community centers, libraries, and other public institutions.

As of this month the Blake refund bureau has issued over \$4 million in refunds for approximately 3300 qualifying cases and additional \$21 million is pending for nearly 63,000 cases submitted by over 127 courts and meanwhile 55,000 Blake convictions have been vacated, benefiting more than 37,000 individuals in Department of Corrections custody.

Our outreach and relief efforts are set to continue throughout 2025.

Across Washington, courts are closely watching the launch of the Pierce County jury pay pilot project which increased juror compensation by 900%.

Big percentages reflect small numbers because juror compensation started at \$10 a day, a rate that has as you know not increased in decades.

By increasing juror compensation we address long-standing economic barriers and enhanced jury diversity.

That project involves vital data collection and analysis and represents an important first step in making jury service possible for more people.

Much of the success of the project is due to the tireless work of talented individuals in the Pierce County courts and I want to express our appreciation to court administrator Chris Gaddis and to superior court presiding judge Susan Adams who is with us here today.

Thank you for setting the stage.

Research confirms what we know from our nation's history.

Jury service is the bell of our justice system.

It enriches civic engagement for those who serve and removing economic barriers to service is essential to fulfilling the constitutional promise of a jury of one's peers.

Sticking with Pierce County for a moment, let me also spotlight the Pierce County district courts pre-trial pathways program.

This program helps demystify the court process and connect participants to essential resources such as housing, behavioral health support, and vocational training.

With 60% of participants identifying as people of color initiatives like this address systemic inequities while fostering self-sufficiency and enhancing community safety by reducing recidivism.

Innovative work is also being done in new self-help centers that provide support to unrepresented litigants.

The courthouse clinic in Yakima County stands as a testament to the power of collaboration, addressing the challenges faced by pro-state individuals in family law cases.

Commissioner Shane Silverthorne, along with Quinn Daelyn and Wendy Winfield of the Central Washington Legal Aid Clinic, have launched a program that has already served over 250

individuals and families, helping them finalize, agree, or default orders, and eliminate court delays.

Self-help centers in Spokane and Grace Harbor counties are similarly providing resources for families that cannot afford a lawyer to help them navigate a range of complex legal issues and get their cases resolved.

These are the type of services we need to expand as we build courts of the future.

They foster equity and access to the judicial system and help build public trust and confidence.

As we focus on courts of the future, of course, technology is front and center.

Our courts continue to embrace new technologies that streamline and unify judicial operations.

The Court of Limited Jurisdiction Case Management System pilot project represents a major step forward in modernizing case management systems for our limited jurisdiction courts.

As you know, these are the courts that most people visit when they experience our court system.

And this user-friendly platform replaces antiquated stand-alone systems and improves efficiency.

As we implement the, what we're calling the CLJ CMS program in courts across Washington, we need ongoing state support of that system to ensure its success.

The recent cyber attack on the Washington Court's network brought into sharp focus the critical importance of effective cybersecurity measures.

Thanks to the swift and decisive actions of our administrative office of the courts, major systems were protected and restored to operation within 18 days.

This response time among the best in the nation underscores the value of the response systems we've put into place and more importantly, the resilience and professionalism of our AOC team and branch partners.

Moving forward, we are investing in advanced cybersecurity protocols that safeguard sensitive information and ensure the public's trust.

We also continue to focus on artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, carefully evaluating their role in our justice system.

Courts have piloted technology tools that have the potential to enhance efficiencies and improve court access while ensuring several core values.

Judicial decisions will always be made by judges.

Human bias won't be compounded and private data will secure.

The board for judicial administration continues to engage stakeholders and work with the Washington State Bar Association, AI task force and other justice partners.

We know artificial intelligence presents both promises and perils and we will work openly and collaboratively to address the appropriate role of emerging technologies in our courts of the future.

Across Washington, courts are busy as ever and the administrative office of the courts are AOC remains the backbone of our delivery system, providing vital support through technology, research, technical assistance and training.

We gain efficiencies and promote consistent adherence to best practices by serving courts through the AOC structure.

This is illustrated in recent initiatives such as AOC's Security Incident Reporting System which is enhancing safety, transparency and accountability across all levels of the judiciary.

We must support the continued ability of the AOC to maintain our IT infrastructure and provide timely training and program support because that is essential to the ability of local courts to deliver timely, and equitable services in every community.

I want to express the judiciary's appreciation to the legislature for your support of our courts.

Over the past three years you have worked to stabilize funding for the court statewide IT infrastructure.

You've funded more secure rural courts and enabled the work of dozens of therapeutic courts across our diverse state.

Stable judicial branch still a small part of the state's overall budget is necessary to maintain critical services, training and programs that benefit everyone who comes into our judicial system.

We look forward to working with you this session and beyond in the continuation of prior commitments, including ongoing funding of existing systems and programs that are essential to meeting the judiciary's promise to deliver equal justice under the law.

In closing I want to extend my deepest gratitude to colleagues across the judicial branch, to our partners in the legislative and executive branches, and to the many community members whose dedicated work makes real progress possible.

The author Cornell West expressed one of my favorite quotes.

He said justice is what love looks like in public, and we show our love and concern for one another when we work together to bend the arc of history ever towards justice.

We do this work because we love it, and working together we will continue to build a court system that not only meets the needs of today, but anticipates the challenges of tomorrow, one that is fair, inclusive, innovative, and accessible for all Washingtonians.

Thank you again for receiving our state of the judiciary report, and for inviting us here this morning.