

State of the Judiciary

Chief Justice Jill J. Karofsky, Wisconsin Supreme Court

Message to the Judicial Conference

November 12, 2025, at Meeting of the Wisconsin Judicial Conference, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin

Good afternoon, Wisconsin judges!

Every year, we gather to connect, to learn, perhaps to complain a bit, and hopefully, to be inspired. Being a judge is an awesome responsibility – what we do is important to our communities, and it is terribly important to our democracy.

Before I turn to the State of the Judiciary, I want to take time, as we do each year, to remember those colleagues we have lost:

David Prosser  
Margaret Vergeront  
John Albert  
Michael Guolee  
Larry Jeske  
Fred Kessler  
Charles Pollex  
Stuart Schwartz  
Lawrence Waddick

I also want to welcome all the new judges to the bench:

Samuel Berg  
Jessica Fehrenbach  
Whitney Healy  
Stephanie Hilton  
Gregory Jerabek  
Ben Jones  
Gordon Leech  
David Maas  
Jamie McClendon  
Emily Nolan-Plutchak Brian Smestad  
Joseph Veenstra  
K. Scott Wagner  
Chad Wozniak  
Zachary Wittchow

The tradition of naming each year reminds us that we are part of something larger than ourselves — one judiciary, connected across generations, across counties, and across every level of our court system.

I also want to take just a moment to acknowledge and thank my six colleagues on the Wisconsin Supreme Court:

Justice Annette Kingsland Ziegler  
Justice Rebecca Grassl Bradley  
Justice Rebecca Frank Dallet  
Justice Brian Hagedorn  
Justice Janet Protasiewicz  
Justice Susan Crawford

I am deeply grateful that I get to work alongside all of you. Every single one of you is a committed leader who wants the best for Wisconsin and works hard to follow the rule of law and uphold the constitution to ensure our justice system works for the people of this state. We don't always agree, but I would note for the record that it's pretty clear we agree much more than we disagree.

I want to especially thank former Chief Justice Ziegler for her grace and support as we've transitioned from her to me in this role. She's been open to every question, every discussion, every phone call, and every text, and all of us – not just me, but our state, and our judicial system – benefit from her experience and wisdom. Thank you.

So I'm glad to be here with my colleagues and with all of you.

When I first put on my robe, and even as I worked as a local prosecutor and as an assistant attorney general, I never lost sight of the fact that courts are not abstract institutions. Our courtrooms are places where real people come on some of the hardest days of their lives — victims of crime, families in conflict, businesses in dispute. And when they walk through the courthouse doors, they deserve a place that is safe, accessible, and fair.

Last week, I was at my local yoga studio, and a woman came up to me to tell me she had served as a juror in my courtroom in Dane County several years ago. She didn't remember much about the case, but she knew that I was the presiding judge, and she thanked me for my service. That interaction was a reminder to me of the influence and impact we have as judges. It was also a reminder of how our work touches real people.

As Chief Justice, I see the reach of our work in every corner of the state. The judiciary touches lives every single day. It is a responsibility carried by hundreds of judges and thousands of staff, and it is felt by every Wisconsinite who turns to the courts for fairness and resolution.

Today, I want to share where we stand — our challenges, our progress, and our vision for the future. Our work is taking place in a time of transition, when expectations of the courts are shifting and the pressures on our system are greater than ever.

So it gives me no pleasure to say this: the state of our judiciary ... is troubled.

In this moment, we see increasing attacks on judges and the judicial system. This is happening both at a personal level, with threats and attacks on judges rising. And in our political system, with a new willingness from some political leaders to actively undermine the rule of law.

I want to begin by addressing security.

People come to the courts to protect their freedoms and enforce their rights. They come seeking justice. And when they come to the courts to seek justice, they need to be able to find it without fear. We cannot have judges, jurors, courtroom staff, attorneys, witnesses, victims, or defendants coming to the courthouse in fear for their safety.

Here in Wisconsin, we carry the memory of Judge Roemer, who was murdered in his own home. A tragedy like that was once unthinkable, but sadly, it is no longer an isolated incident. Unfortunately, we are experiencing a troubling rise in hostility toward public officials, including judges.

I know from personal experience that the threats are real. And you do, too. In fact, several of you have contacted me about threats you have received simply for doing your jobs. That's inexcusable and unacceptable.

Every single person who walks into a courthouse deserves to be safe. And you deserve to be safe in your houses and in public places as well.

Local sheriff's departments and law enforcement work hard to ensure justice is administered in safe environments. And, Statewide, we currently have one sergeant and three officers, funded with state dollars, dedicated to the entire court system, to assess security and threats on a broader scope. Those four officers must coordinate with local agencies, and they are doing yeoman's work. Any of you who have received a safety assessment of your courtroom, courthouse, or personal residence knows how valuable this protection is.

However, we only have funding for those four positions through August of 2026. Less than a year. Only about halfway through the biennium.

I have been in conversations with both the Governor's office and leaders in the legislature. It is clear to me that safety in our court system is an issue that transcends partisan politics. And I believe our co-branches will do the right thing and invest the necessary funds to keep those four positions active through the end of the biennium and beyond.

And for my part, I am committed to doing all I can to make the case to ensure that funding for these statewide positions remains available.

But it's not just threats to our collective security that lead me to declare our judiciary is troubled.

It's not a partisan statement to say we are seeing attacks on the rule of law every day in this country. Especially when the attacks come from political leaders, castigating judges with whom

they disagree and seemingly ignoring court decisions they don't like. Those actions undermine the credibility of the judicial system, and they undermine our democracy.

That is damaging to all of us. And in response, we must work extra hard to build and maintain public trust, legitimacy, and confidence in the court system. We must speak up in defense of the rule of law. It doesn't matter which party's Governor appointed us, or which Party's adherents supported us in our campaigns. This goes well beyond Party. Ensuring the rule of law and respect for the judicial system go to the very heart of our democracy.

Despite these challenges, and they are grave, what I see around this state are judges doing their very best to serve the public. And so going forward, I don't want to dwell on this idea of being "troubled." I want to focus on what we are doing, and what we can do, to increase confidence in our system and ensure we meet the needs of the people of Wisconsin.

When the public thinks about courts, they often picture a single judge on the bench, making decisions alone. But all of you know that none of us truly does this work by ourselves. Justice depends on the collective effort of an entire judiciary - all working together.

That spirit of collaboration shows up when a circuit judge calls a colleague in a neighboring county to talk through a difficult issue. It shows up when an experienced judge mentors someone who is new to the bench. It shows up in the relationships built at conferences like this.

You can see the spirit of collaboration at the Supreme Court as well. While people often see headlines about division, what those headlines fail to show is that most of our cases are not decided 4-3. But unanimously, or 6-1 or 5-2.

It is not a secret that members of the court have deeply differing views on legal philosophy and constitutional theory.

We don't always agree, nor should we. But we are – and we must be – collegial towards each other.

We have all attended weddings of a court member or funerals for a justice's family member. When flowers are called for, we pool our money and, yes, even Venmo one another. We sometimes enjoy meals together and moments of levity during stressful conferences. And I will tell you that every justice on the Wisconsin Supreme Court is as deeply committed to the rule of law – as to the Brewers, Bucks, and Packers.

That same respect and collegiality is evident across our entire judicial system.

For those of you on the circuit court, this sense of mutual support is more than a value — it is a lifeline. You make decisions that affect families, businesses, and communities in immediate and lasting ways. Having colleagues who understand those pressures, and who stand ready to share wisdom and encouragement, makes the difference between isolation and resilience.

As Chief Justice, I want to model the kind of leadership that strengthens this culture. To me, that means treating others with empathy, fairness, and respect. It means treating colleagues the way I would want my own children to see a leader behave. True leadership is not about winning every argument or proving someone wrong. It is about listening, collaborating, and treating people with dignity.

So yes, we will continue to have differences of opinion. We will continue to write concurrences and dissents. But across our judiciary, the ties of respect and cooperation allow us to face challenges together. At a time when so much of public life is defined by division, our shared commitment to each other is something we can be proud of, something we can strengthen, and something that will carry us forward.

That's a good reminder — our courts do not belong to judges or lawyers — they belong to the people. Our responsibility is to make sure the public can see how justice is done, understand the process, and use the system when they need it. Transparency creates trust, and accessibility makes that trust real.

We do face challenges. Wisconsin residents speak dozens of languages, and every year, more people require interpreter assistance. In rural Wisconsin, shortages of attorneys make it harder for some to get timely representation. These realities can slow cases down and strain confidence in the courts. But they are not being ignored.

Across the state, judges, staff, and court leaders are working to close these gaps. Interpreter and court reporter work groups are exploring new ways to expand the roster of qualified professionals. A work group has been developing strategies to connect young lawyers with communities that need them most. We are working to allow new lawyers to transfer their bar exam scores to Wisconsin so they can practice here more easily. Technology has expanded public access and made it easier for people to participate in court without having to overcome insurmountable barriers.

And perhaps most importantly, transparency and accessibility are shaped by the way each of us runs our courtrooms every day. When you take the time to explain a ruling, when we make sure someone understands the next step in their case, when the Supreme Court takes justice on wheels to hear cases outside of Madison, and when we treat people with dignity even in difficult circumstances — we show that the courts belong to them.

So when we talk about transparency and accessibility, we are really talking about trust. And trust grows not just from the problems we solve, but from the way we carry out justice day after day. That is work happening right now in courtrooms across Wisconsin, and it is work that will continue.

So while the state of the Wisconsin judiciary may be troubled — we have what we need to make it strong. Not because our challenges are small, but because we are resilient. The threats are real, the shortages are real, but so is our commitment and resolve. Judges do not back away from hard problems. We face them head-on, together.

To my colleagues here today, especially those of you serving on our trial courts: thank you. You are the face of justice for most Wisconsinites. You are the ones who see people at their most vulnerable and who balance the law with the human needs in front of you. It is demanding work, and you do it with skill and integrity.

The courts of Wisconsin belong to the people of Wisconsin. Our responsibility is to keep them safe, open, accessible, and worthy of trust. That is our mission. That is our promise. And together, we will keep it.