

State of the Judiciary

Chief Justice Lynne J. Boomgaarden, Wyoming Supreme Court

Message to the Legislature

February 9, 2026

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Governor and First Lady, members of the 68th Legislature, elected officials, and citizens of Wyoming—thank you for the honor and opportunity to address you for the first time as Chief Justice. I stand before you as the representative of 340 public servants who keep 72 Wyoming courtrooms open each day. We are the Wyoming Judicial Branch – a coequal branch of government – committed to making sure that well-qualified and unbiased judges resolve the people’s legal disputes fairly and quickly.

My message today is simple: The strength of your judicial branch is measured by: (1) the trust we share within the Branch, (2) the public confidence we earn, and (3) the working relationships we maintain with the other two branches of government. I’d like to tell you about our strengths and where we can improve.

The Judicial Branch continues to grow in collaboration and effectiveness. Under strong leadership, including former Chief Justice Kate Fox and retired trial court judge John Perry, your Judicial Branch has focused its management efforts on Excellence and Innovation, Public Trust, Stable and Predictable Funding, and Accessible Justice. Because these are the goals that focus our attention and use of resources, I encourage you to learn more about them by going to our website and looking at our strategic plan.

Focus and collaboration are important because each day our judges make thousands of decisions that affect the lives of ordinary Wyoming citizens – decisions ranging from minor traffic citations and landlord tenant disputes, to drug distribution and murder trials; and from major business disputes to gut wrenching decisions about which parent gets custody of a child in a divorce.

And this just scratches the surface.

Allow me to share a little bit about the ordinary people who have the extraordinary responsibility of making these decisions and keeping your courts accessible, efficient, and fair. First, I would like to introduce District Court Judge Dawnessa Snyder, from Rawlins, and Circuit Court Judge Sean Chambers, from Cheyenne. I serve with these talented judges on the executive committee to the Wyoming Judicial Council—the governing body of the Wyoming Judicial Branch. We are always available to you should you have any questions about Branch operations.

Our Administrative Office of the Courts, led by Court Administrator Elisa Butler, makes sure that the circuit courts, district courts, chancery court, and Supreme Court have the technology and support needed to deliver timely, fair, and impartial decisions. The workload for all our courts is heavy, but our judges and staff face each day with professionalism, intellect, and integrity.

Last year, the Wyoming Supreme Court decided more than 500 new matters, including appeals from the decisions of your Wyoming trial courts—the circuit courts, district courts, and chancery court.

We call our circuit courts the “people’s court” because that is where most folks will interact with our justice system to resolve traffic citations, misdemeanor criminal cases, and small claims cases. Last year, our circuit courts managed over 106,000 new cases. Representing the circuit courts here today are: Amy Knotts, chief clerk in Sublette County Circuit Court and the current president of the Chief Clerk’s association, together with Judges Sean Chambers, Toni Williams (Cheyenne), Paul Phillips (Gillette), and Susan Stipe (Rawlins). If you don’t know the circuit court judge (or judges) in your community, I encourage you to stop by their courtrooms and meet them!

At the center of the Wyoming judicial system are the district courts, which manage all felony criminal cases and civil trials with damages greater than \$50,000. The district courts handled almost 13,000 new cases last year. Representing those courts here today are Mara Sanger, Carbon County Clerk of District Court and President of the Wyoming Clerk of District Court Association, and Judges Dawnessa Snyder, Suzannah Robinson (Green River), and Darci Phillips (Sheridan). Again, if you haven’t yet met the district court judge (or judges) in your community, I hope you’ll try to do so.

In 2019, the Wyoming Legislature directed the creation of the Wyoming Chancery Court—a special business court to quickly resolve commercial and trust cases. Last January, Judge Ben Burningham was seated as the first full-time chancery court judge. He has been working hard to tell lawyers and Wyoming businesses about his court, and I’m pleased to report that since accepting its first case in December 2021, the Chancery Court has seen a steady and significant increase in new filings. Even with this growing caseload, Judge Burningham is still resolving cases in an average of 116 days.

This past year we’ve seen several experienced judges leave the bench, and talented new judges take their place. We said thank you and goodbye to Chief Justice Kate Fox and welcomed our newest colleague, Justice Bridget Hill, at the end of May. At the circuit court level, we said goodbye and expressed our gratitude to retiring judges Brian Christiansen, Wendy Bartlett, and Greg Corpening, and welcomed new judges Cindy Sweet, Greg Steward, Jackie Brown and Tom Deering.

At the district court level we said thank you to retiring district court judge Steve Sharpe and welcomed former circuit court judge Nate Hibben to Cheyenne to fill that vacancy. Sadly, we’ll soon be saying goodbye to Judge Rick Lavery who presides in Green River. Judge Lavery, I’d like you to stand and be recognized for your outstanding service.

Public trust in these courts remains strong. National polling shows that state courts have a 62% public confidence rating, well above that of the federal courts. A University of Wyoming survey showed state judiciary approval ratings three times higher than disapproval ratings. But we can’t be complacent. Public trust must be earned daily, through transparency, impartial judgment, and outreach.

When Judge Lavery wrote to me to acknowledge his upcoming mandatory retirement, he said:

People frequently ask me what I do. Often, I say I'm a professional listener, but most don't want to hear what I hear. I hear, and hopefully use my knowledge and wisdom, to resolve disputes. I hear strength and resilience, pain and suffering, anger and hostility, and occasionally love and tolerance. Trial judges have a front row seat for so many of our human conditions. It is a hard job, but I wouldn't have wanted to sit anywhere else.

These wise words so eloquently explain why judges do what they do and why the most effective way to show the public who we are and how we serve them is to have them come into the courtroom to watch us work.

Our message to legislators and the people of Wyoming remains the same: please come in and watch justice be done. Serving on a jury, visiting a courtroom, or attending an argument will show you exactly what judges do and why it matters.

Two groups, independent from the judicial branch, safeguard the public's interest in selecting qualified and impartial judges, and in making sure that judges behave ethically. The Judicial Nominating Commission reviews the voluminous materials submitted by each lawyer who applies to be a judge and, following interviews, forwards the names of the three most qualified applicants to the Governor. Because this constitutional process is merit-based, the Commission focuses on each candidate's relevant experience, work ethic, communication skills, impartial temperament, critical thinking and decisionmaking skills, commitment to service, and reputation for fairness, integrity and leadership. Political connection is not relevant nor discussed. Wyoming voters ultimately decide whether the Judicial Nominating Commission and the Governor chose well when they cast their ballots to retain or unseat judges at each general election.

The Judicial Nominating Commission recognizes the importance of transparency and is exploring ways to share more information with the public and the Wyoming State Bar. The Commission is cautious, however, about making changes that might reduce the number and/or quality of judicial applicants. We need more lawyers with diverse experience to apply. A recent survey of Wyoming lawyers showed that keeping the names of applicants confidential is important, and that salary, workload, and the isolation of the job are key factors that discourage lawyers from applying to be judges. We need to work on that.

I would like to recognize Devon O'Connell, a Laramie attorney who is completing her four-year term at the end of this month. Mr. Jason Neville from Casper will be taking her place. The Judicial Nominating Commission is equal part citizens and attorneys. The other Nominating Commission volunteers are Rick Fagnant, an accountant from Lander, Lisa Anderson, a retired teacher from Shell, Rocco O'Neill, a community development director from Evanston, and attorneys Clint Langer from Sheridan, and Mandy Good from Cheyenne. I serve as the seventh JNC member and vote only if there is a tie, which rarely occurs.

The Commission on Judicial Conduct and Ethics describes itself as the “quiet guardian” of judicial accountability. It consists of twelve volunteers: three trial court judges chosen by their colleagues, three attorneys appointed by the Wyoming State Bar, and six Wyoming citizens appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. The citizen volunteers include several educators, a retired social service provider, a retired doctor, and an oil and gas professional.

This Commission investigates and decides complaints from citizens, attorneys, and judges who report judicial misconduct, criminal wrongdoing, or disability. The Commission then recommends disciplinary action, as appropriate, and reassures the public that its judges are complying with their very strict ethical rules. I would like to recognize the Executive Director of the Commission on Judicial Conduct and Ethics, Wendy Soto. Wendy will be retiring at the end of July after 14 years of service to the Commission and 27 years as a state employee.

Wyoming judges take seriously their obligation to conduct themselves, both in and outside the courtroom, in accordance with the Code of Judicial Conduct. What citizens may not realize is that those same ethical rules prohibit judges from publicly discussing or defending their decisions. Remember, Judges don't get to pick and choose their cases. We take all comers. We decide the issues as they are presented—issues that are difficult, emotional, and fraught with all the failings of human beings. We do our best to consistently apply the law to the facts of each case and to provide well-reasoned decisions, but we cannot use television or social media to debate or explain why we decided a case the way we did. We may not like the outcome the law demands. But whether we like the result or not, we can sleep at night because we follow the oath we took to uphold the law, including the United States and Wyoming constitutions.

This is the only way the system can guarantee that every citizen who enters the courtroom will be treated the same and be subject to the same law as their neighbors, regardless of their politics, or the politics in the Governor's office or the Wyoming State Legislature. This is the Rule of Law, the load bearing wall that supports all three branches of government.

Historically, Wyoming's three branches have worked well together. Legislative support has strengthened statewide judicial operations, especially technology, which is now essential for evidence presentation, remote participation, and access to justice for those who have disabilities or who live in rural communities. Our budget request this session reflects the modest, necessary investments to maintain that progress and to keep all those who participate in the courtroom safe from harm.

I would feel cowardly and complicit if, at this point, I didn't address an uncomfortable reality. Recently the public has heard rhetoric suggesting retaliation or defunding of courts because of the outcome in one high-profile case. There is no greater threat to a stable system of government than weakening the Judicial Branch for political gain.

Wyoming's Constitution, art. 2, § 1, could not be clearer: The powers of government are divided into three branches, and NO branch may exercise the powers of another. Judges are not threatened by efforts to undermine judicial independence, but citizens who rely on fair and

impartial courts should be. Healthy tension between branches of government is useful and expected. Efforts to punish or politicize the courts are not.

Jobs that require making tough decisions invite criticism. But our founding fathers understood that anything less than mutual respect for each branch's decision-making roles, and the defense of those constitutional roles in the face of uninformed, or worse, spiteful detractors, will, in the end, hurt those who choose to live and work in Wyoming.

As we mark the 250th anniversary of our Nation's founding, I ask everyone in this room to recommit to constitutional respect.

Toward that end, let us:

- Listen with open minds
- Honor the distinct roles of each branch
- Debate vigorously, yet respectfully
- Recognize that the people bring cases, issues, and evidence to the courts; judges do not choose them
- Understand that judicial decisions are not political statements
- Avoid demonizing judges for unpopular rulings
- And finally, celebrate that the Legislature has the last word.

If a court has reached a result that is unpopular, the Legislature can make new law, amend existing law, or propose a constitutional amendment to the people. Therein lies the intended checks and balances between co-equal branches.

When we leave this room and continue the people's work, I hope each of us will look up in the rotunda and see the Four Sisters: Truth, Justice, Courage, and Hope. These are the virtues that reflect the values our State holds dear, and to which all public servants should aspire.

By these measures, your Wyoming judiciary is cohesive and strong. The justice we administer is guided by the pursuit of truth in the law, courage in our convictions to find that truth, and hope that we may foster confidence in all Wyoming citizens that the Judicial, Executive, and Legislative branches are working together, for them.

Thank you again for your service, your attention, your support of the Judicial Branch, and your commitment to the people of Wyoming. May God bless your work in this session and beyond.