



PRESS RELEASE

New York State
Unified Court System

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Chief Judge Lippman and Mayor de Blasio Announce Initiative to Modernize Criminal Justice System

*Immediate Reforms to Reduce Case Delays and Make
Summons Process Fairer and More Efficient*

NEW YORK — Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman and Mayor Bill de Blasio today announced immediate changes that will modernize the criminal justice system and improve the quality of justice in New York City. Two immediate steps aim to **improve the criminal justice system dramatically**:

1. To reduce the length of time that individuals spend in City jails awaiting trial, the courts have committed to clearing, within the next six months, 50 percent of the cases where the defendant is at Rikers Island and the case has been pending for longer than a year.
2. To overhaul how nearly half of all criminal court cases are processed in New York City every year, the courts and the City will make the summons process easier to understand and navigate with the aim of reducing future justice involvement.

Over the last 20 years, New York City has cut its jail population by half, in part through a focus on reform efforts throughout the justice system. New York City was able to reduce incarceration while also achieving extraordinary success in driving down crime, with murders

plummeting from 2,245 in 1990 to an all-time low of 332 last year. This program will reduce crime and unnecessary incarceration further while promoting fairness by streamlining coordination among criminal justice actors, and using technology to identify, track and solve problems in the City's criminal justice system.

“Improving the quality of justice and fostering public trust and confidence in our justice system are critical objectives that the courts, law enforcement and the defense bar all share,” said Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman. “The program we announce today is a collaborative, broad-based initiative to promote these goals. By bringing together all the key participants to tackle case backlogs, identify systemic problems and develop and implement effective solutions, this is a novel undertaking that will lead to a fairer, more efficient justice system in this city. I commend Mayor de Blasio and the courts' New York City criminal justice system partners for their leadership, cooperation and support in helping implement these much-needed reforms.”

This new program “is about rethinking the way we approach criminal justice in New York City,” said Mayor Bill de Blasio. “Unnecessary warrants and unnecessary incarceration can derail lives and cost our city money that could be better invested. Today, with a few smart and quick changes, we are continuing to bring the criminal justice system into the 21st century, safely drive down the number of people behind bars and make the system fairer. I want to thank Chief Judge Lippman, the courts, the district attorneys and the defense bar for being great partners in this effort.”

Moving cases through the criminal justice system more quickly will reduce the average daily population in Rikers Island jails. Defendants who are detained in City jails for extensive periods while waiting for trial are the single biggest contributor to the size of the jail population. Just five percent of all defendants released from Rikers last year spent over 270 days on Rikers — and these defendants filled 44 percent of the beds on Rikers in 2014. The vast majority of defendants spent much shorter periods in City jails. Immediate reforms will focus on clearing the oldest cases first while an ongoing focus on systemic issues will ensure enduring progress.

Steps to reduce case processing times include:

Commitment to clear 50 percent of the cases pending for longer than a year within the next six months. Under a program spearheaded by Chief Judge Lippman in 2013, judges, prosecutors, and the defense bar in the Bronx successfully cut the backlog of the oldest felony cases by more than half by

adding extra judges from other counties and processing cases before a special judge with a mandate to clear them. Yet average case lengths throughout the city have increased over the last 20 years. Building upon the lessons learned in the Bronx, today's announcement includes an unprecedented, citywide commitment from the courts, the Mayoral agencies, the District Attorneys and the defense bar — all of whom have a role to play in reducing case processing times — to schedule a court date within the next 45 days for all cases citywide that have been pending for longer than one year. At Chief Judge Lippman's direction, cases that cannot be disposed by plea will be assigned a fixed trial date.

Deep, analytical dives into borough-specific problems and solutions. To ensure swift implementation and accountability, each borough will have a dedicated team of representatives from the courts, Mayoral agencies, law enforcement and the defense bar. These teams, led by each county's Administrative Judge, will map the specific causes of delay in each borough, monitor the progress of the oldest cases, develop systemic reforms to institutionalize shorter case processing times and implement these reforms. These teams will be assisted by a team of research and operations experts.

A centralized coordinating body. Leadership from the Mayor's office, the Office of Court Administration, the District Attorneys' offices and the defense bar will meet regularly to review progress toward goals and make implementation decisions based on the borough teams' recommendations.

A sophisticated technological tool to track case trends in real time. To provide transparency and real-time information on case processing times citywide, the City will launch an online tracking tool. This tool will allow each part of the criminal justice system to assess specific causes of delays in individual cases, track borough-specific case processing timelines alongside volume and resource availability, prepare status reports to pinpoint bottlenecks, and help the Coordinating Committee develop solutions and ensure progress in implementing them.

A 21st century scheduling system. To minimize adjournments, which contribute to case delay, the case tracking tool will also include a centralized scheduling function that integrates the individual schedules of judges, prosecutors, corrections, the police and defense attorneys to allow courts to quickly and reliably set future court appearances.

Making the summons process easier to understand and navigate will change how nearly half of the criminal court cases in New York City are processed. While the number of summonses issued in 2014 was down 35 percent from a high of 544,541 in 2009, the total number of summonses issued citywide (359,252) last year was roughly equal to the number of arrests (351,511). Although half of all criminal court cases involve summonses, only 27 percent of the summonses issued last year resulted in a conviction. Another 38 percent of summonses issued resulted in a warrant for failure to appear in court, which may affect the likelihood of future detention. Immediate reforms will clarify the time, date and location of court appearances and provide a wider window within which to satisfy the summons. This will make the summons process more transparent and improve the quality of justice.

Steps to ensure that people who receive a summons appear in court include:

A redesigned summons form that makes the date of appearance much easier to understand. The City and courts worked with ideas42, a behavioral economics firm, to redesign the summons form, making information easier to understand in order to better prompt people to return to court. Additionally, the new form will collect individuals' phone numbers and include a phone number and website where recipients can access their cases, view when their court appearance is and determine whether they have outstanding warrants. The website will also have translated copies of the summons form. The new form will be operational this summer.

A reminder system to ensure defendants appear in court. The courts will test a number of different reminders citywide in May 2015, using both robocalls and text messages. The most effective method will be scaled up citywide.

Flexible appearance date and night court. Beginning with a pilot in Manhattan North this summer, individuals who have received summonses will be permitted to appear any time a week in advance of their court appearance. The court will also be open until 8:00 p.m., one night a week, on Tuesdays. If these pilots increase court appearances, the programs will be scaled up citywide.

Steps to ensure transparency and improve the quality of justice in summons court include:

Publicly available quarterly data. Beginning today and repeated each quarter, the City will post data showing summons activity broken down by charge and precinct. The police department's annual report will also include summons activity with details on demographics.

Real-time, electronic access to case files. Beginning this month, the courts will provide defense attorneys with tablets that provide them with all of the factual allegations for the cases that day to better advise their clients.

Online payment of fines. Beginning this summer, the courts will implement a new process of permitting people convicted of summons offenses to pay fines online.

Training on collateral consequences for 18-B attorneys. Beginning last month, public defenders are being trained in how to better advise clients about the collateral consequences associated with summons charges.

Training for Judicial Hearing Officers. Also beginning last month, Judicial Hearing Officers, who preside in summons court, are receiving increased training on issues relevant to their responsibilities.

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