

Record Academy Class Eases Strain From Cuts on Court Officers

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Students at the state court officers academy applaud during their graduation ceremony Friday at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. NYLJ/Rick Kopstein

Chief Judge Janet DiFiore swore in 152 new court officers on Friday, the largest-ever graduating class from the state court officer's academy.

She told the new officers that the courts' goal is to resolve conflict, and that their patience likely will be tested as they deal with "emotional litigants, sometimes disruptive litigants, and often-times just plain ordinary people who are stressed and confused and anxious."

"I ask you to remember this simple fact: You are the faces of our court system," DiFiore said. "You are often the very first people the public encounters and has direct contact with. ... It is absolutely imperative that you put all of your training and good sense to use as you interact with the public."

The new officers will be assigned to courts downstate, with Criminal Courts and state Supreme Courts in New York City getting the largest numbers of the new officers, Office of Court Administration spokesman Lucian Chalfen said.

Other state courts in the city, on Long Island and in Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties also will be assigned officers from the group sworn in Friday, OCA said.

Chalfen said the new graduates will bring the total number of uniformed court officers to 4,500. They will make either \$44,504 or \$46,301 a year at first, depending on the court where they are assigned.

Another class of 51 officers will enter the academy next month. When that class graduates in late October, the court officers' force will still be below where it stood before the serious budget cuts that befell the court system in 2010 and 2011.

"We will be hoping to continue to make up that gap," Chalfen said.

One court officer academy class was cancelled in early 2011 due to budget cuts. Union officials said the courts have never made up for the ground lost in that period, due to retirements and the loss of officers to other police agencies or to clerkships within the court system.

Still, Supreme Court Officers Association President Patrick Cullen said the graduation of the largest-ever class of officers is a good start.

"We are thrilled at the size of it," Cullen, whose union represents 1,540 officers, said in an interview following Friday's ceremony. "We are still lagging behind because of the [budgetary] shortages. But this is a huge step forward, and I think that Judge DiFiore, in a few short months, has already proven her commitment to the safety and security of the courts."

Dennis Quirk, president of the 1,650-member state court officers union, said he was impressed that DiFiore spoke at Friday's graduation ceremony. He said that while her predecessors were not unsupportive of court officers, she was the first to talk to a new graduating class.

"I think it sends a very strong message that she intends to try to be employee-friendly, and she wants the employees to know that she will do all she can do for them," he said.

Both Cullen and Quirk attended the graduation ceremony in the Tribeca Performing Art Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Counting the uniformed court officers and the approximately 2,000 non-uniformed peace officers in the courts, OCA said its force is the second-largest law enforcement agency in the state behind the New York City Police Department.

OCA trains new court officers during 14-week programs at academies in Manhattan and Castleton-on-Hudson in Rensselaer County.