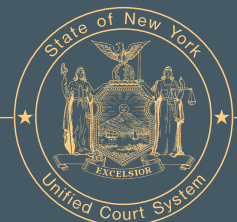


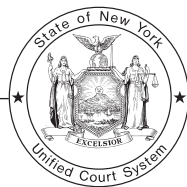


Reforming New York City Housing Court

— A One-Year Update —

February 2019





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Introduction

Guided by the Chief Judge’s Excellence Initiative, reinvigoration of the New York City Housing Court remains high on the list of reform priorities for the New York State court system. One year ago, in January 2018, the Special Commission on the Future of the New York City Housing Court (Housing Court Commission) issued its Report, setting forth a number of carefully-formulated recommendations that would become an effective blueprint to revitalize and strengthen Housing Court operations, improve efficiency and enhance the quality of the experience there for all court users.

The Housing Court Commission’s Report followed the New York City Council’s groundbreaking adoption in August 2017 of the “Universal Access to Legal Services Law” (Universal Access law), which provides full legal representation in New York City Housing Court for every tenant sued in an eviction proceeding with a household income under 200% of the federal poverty level, and a single legal consultation for every tenant over the income level. The law contemplates a five-year roll-out period, phased in by zip code, and is expected to cost the City \$155 million per year by the time it is fully implemented in 2022. The New York State Judiciary has likewise devoted significant funds annually to promote access to civil legal services. Due to the ongoing commitment of Governor Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, we again fully expect that funding of \$100 million will be approved in the Judiciary’s proposed budget for the next fiscal year for distribution to civil legal service providers across the State. That funding, awarded through a careful review and accountability process, has been a real game-changer, particularly in the New York City Housing Court, promoting a fair legal process and just outcomes for all litigants. As a result of this joint commitment of resources, the City reported that 30% of tenants sued in Housing Court city-wide had legal counsel as of June 30, 2018,¹ which represents a dramatic increase from the estimated 1% of tenants having legal representation in 2013.²

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1. Office of Civil Justice (OCJ), *Universal Access to Legal Services, A Report on Year One of Implementation in New York City*, Fall 2018, p. 4. OCJ reports that, while 30% of tenants were represented by counsel, an additional 4% of tenants received legal advice or other assistance through OCJ’s tenant legal services programs, amounting to an estimated total of 34% of tenants who appeared in Housing Court for eviction cases that received legal services.
 2. Testimony of Jordan Dressler, Civil Justice Coordinator, Office of Civil Justice, New York City Human Resources Administration, Before the Chief Judge’s Statewide Legal Services Hearing September 24, 2018, pp. 2, 3.

Enactment of the Universal Access law made New York City a leader nationwide in providing access to free legal services for those facing eviction, and the Housing Court needed to prepare for the anticipated shift in practice and culture. Mindful of the expected transformation of Housing Court litigation that would accompany the Universal Access Law, and cognizant that New York City's Housing Court is one of the busiest and most overburdened courts in this nation, handling, on average, a quarter of a million summary proceedings annually together with thousands of other housing-related cases, the Housing Court Commission set forth specific recommendations falling within ten broad categories – ranging from relocation and redesign of facilities, to changes in practice, staffing, training, technology and more – all aimed at creating a more streamlined and professional Housing Court experience.

This report documents the sweeping overhaul of Housing Court operations and practice achieved over the course of the past year as implementation of the Commission's recommendations proceeded, as well as the challenges that remain in achieving full realization of the Commission's goals. To date, the Housing Court team has carried out physical plant changes, redesigned facilities to optimize their use, made major operational and scheduling changes, increased staffing levels, adopted new court rules and revised legal forms, improved signage and upgraded and/or expanded the use of technology, ADR, and volunteer "Court Navigators" – all of which have strengthened the Housing Court's provision of services and optimized the experience for all court users, while enhancing access to justice.

The great progress made thus far could not have been achieved without the meaningful commitment of the Housing Court team – consisting of administrative, supervising and Housing Court Judges, court attorneys, clerks and other staff, court officers, members of the court system's Division of Technology, the Office of Justice Initiatives, and valued community partners and volunteers – who have employed swift and coordinated efforts to modify daily operations as they incorporate the Commission's recommendations and accommodate the new litigation landscape resulting from the Universal Access law. Likewise, the Housing Court bar – undoubtedly impacted by these changes – has been a cooperative partner, adapting to changes in practice and procedure that have already improved efficiency and have enabled justice to be administered with the level of dignity deserved by our litigants – both landlords, defending their livelihoods, and tenants, faced with the prospect of losing their homes.

Our implementation group – led by Chief Administrative Judge Lawrence K. Marks, driven by the contributions of Deputy Chief Administrative Judges George J. Silver and Edwina Mendelson, Honorable Anthony Cannataro, Administrative Judge of the New York City Civil Court, and Housing Court Supervising Judge Jean Schneider, and assisted by Chief Clerk of the New York City Civil Court, Alia Razzaq – has carried out the Housing Court Commission’s recommendations, overseeing, on the whole, an effective transition.

This Report contains a one-year update on the progress made in implementing the recommendations contained within each of the ten main categories of reform identified in the Housing Court Commission’s January 2018 Report. Many suggested reforms have been fully implemented, some with appropriate modifications. As with any large-scale operational shift, anticipated as well as unforeseen obstacles and outcomes delayed or required reconsideration and/or reformulation of some proposals that proved impractical or where initial results were unimpressive. Work undoubtedly remains to be done, and budgetary constraints, construction complications and space limitations have temporarily delayed some projects. However, the court system remains fully committed to the timely achievement of remaining goals. An overview of the major highlights and challenges in each of the ten categories of reform follows.

I. New Procedures Before Initial Court Appearances

Before Universal Access was implemented, Housing Court Judges presided mainly “over cases in which one side had experienced counsel and the other had none,” creating an inherent power imbalance in cases involving unrepresented, low-income tenants facing eviction that permeated the proceedings.³ To capitalize fully on the benefits of the Universal Access law, new procedures were created to advance the goal of providing counsel to those tenants as early as possible in the process, and tenants are beginning to avail themselves of this assistance. Providing litigants with counsel prior to the first court appearance is expected to expedite case resolution, improve the court experience and encourage fairer settlements – often without attendance in court – which will assist in achieving the additional goal of easing court congestion. As a consequence of the

3. Testimony of Hon. Jean T. Schneider, Housing Court Supervising Judge, Before the Chief Judge’s Statewide Legal Services Hearing, September 24, 2018, p. 1.

increasing number of represented tenants, pre-trial motion practice has begun to rise, but preliminary reports indicate that the Housing Court workload will remain balanced overall, as the number of post-judgment motions has begun to decline, and settlements are on the rise.⁴

A new plain language Notice of Petition has been drafted, is under final review, and is expected to be rolled out for use in Housing Court in every borough by mid-2019. In addition to converting the Notice of Petition to plain language and providing information in languages other than English, another purpose of this revised Notice is to clearly advise eligible tenants about the availability of counsel and provide them with instructions and encouragement to connect with counsel immediately to ensure that initial contact occurs prior to the first scheduled court date. Eligible tenants who appear in any Housing Court clerk's office in response to a notice of non-payment are also provided with a notice that helps facilitate assignment of counsel, and this process is being implemented gradually by zip-code. Litigants are also sent a postcard containing a link to a slideshow on the Housing Court page of the Unified Court System's website advising them about eligibility rules, how to obtain counsel if they are eligible and the types of services a lawyer can provide. Although tenant response to these notices is not yet optimal, and in most cases the first contact between eligible litigants and assigned counsel still occurs at the first court appearance, it is anticipated that the preferred pre-appearance assignment system will eventually become the norm.

II. New Court Structure and Practices

Housing Court structure and practices have been overhauled to reduce congestion and delay and restore the ability of resolution parts to efficiently and fairly resolve cases, without the need for trial, as they were intended to do. Reduced congestion will allow Judges and court attorneys to devote more time to conferencing and settling cases, in furtherance of another of the Commission's recommended goals.

The Commission made several recommendations designed to tackle the troubling fact that most litigants began their experience in New York City Housing Court by standing outdoors on long security lines for lengthy periods of time simply to enter the courthouse. Afterwards, it was common to then experience another long wait to file an answer, see a

4. Testimony of Justice Anthony Cannataro, Administrative Judge of the New York City Civil Court, Before the Chief Judge's Statewide Legal Services Hearing, September 24, 2018.

clerk, obtain information or communicate with opposing counsel. Focusing squarely on the goal of relieving these frustrating delays, two major scheduling changes have been implemented. First, staggered appearance times – 9:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. – have been implemented in all six resolution parts in Manhattan, in all four resolution parts in Queens and in two of the five resolution parts in Brooklyn Housing Court, successfully reducing a significant amount of the congestion caused by the prior use of a uniform 9:30 a.m. appearance time for all litigants. Staggered calendars will commence in four resolution parts in Bronx Housing Court on February 25, 2019, and in the remaining three resolution parts in Brooklyn by March 2019, with full implementation in all courts and parts expected by mid-year.

The second scheduling change designed to relieve morning congestion is the scheduling of all hearings and emergency orders to show cause in the afternoons in all resolution parts in all five boroughs. The matters raised by Order to Show Cause and reserved for afternoon calendars mainly involve post-judgment applications by tenants seeking extensions of time to pay rent or move. A smaller afternoon calendar is expected as tenants increasingly avail themselves of the assistance of counsel through Universal Access, promising earlier case resolutions, increased and more favorable settlements, and a reduction in stay applications and post-judgment matters.

Despite the introduction of staggered calendars and the scheduling of hearings and post-judgment matters in the afternoon, the long security lines that have especially plagued the Bronx and Brooklyn Housing Court facilities are not expected to be fully remedied until planned moves to different buildings occur. For a full discussion of the relocation plans, see section VI, *infra*. In Bronx Housing Court, insufficient space exists within the existing facility to accommodate the security line indoors. The area is also too constrained to allow an increase in the number of magnetometers, which would enable the line to move faster. In Brooklyn, the line had been moved indoors prior to the Commission's Report, and additional personnel have been deployed to assist the flow of people moving into the building in the morning. The main reason for the lingering bottleneck in Brooklyn, however, is the limited number of elevators available to move litigants off the first floor. Temporarily, those with disabilities are being moved to the front of the elevator line, and those who are able are encouraged to use the stairs to reach the second floor Clerk's office. The impending full implementation of staggered calendars in Brooklyn is expected to provide some additional relief.

To make more beneficial use of the time spent by litigants on security lines, non-attorney volunteer Court Navigators have been deployed in every borough to assist litigants by reviewing their papers and providing them with information and directions while they wait, reducing additional confusion and delay after a litigant advances through security. Supervised by the NYS Courts Access to Justice Program, the Court Navigator Program trains non-lawyers, such as college students, law students and others, to support and assist unrepresented litigants throughout the Housing Court process. All Court Navigators have been trained to serve as greeters and are readily identifiable by a button that reads “Ask Me! I Can Help!”

As the Housing Court Commission recommended, resolution parts now require attorneys to inform the clerk at check-in whenever they are covering matters in other parts and to identify a time certain when they will return. This practice enables the resolution parts to manage their calendars more effectively and to avoid needless defaults. Attorneys have been cooperative, resulting in less waiting time for litigants.

Implementing another of the Commission’s recommendations, Preliminary Conference Orders are now used in all cases City-wide. Although the initial plan was for the parties to complete a Preliminary Conference Order at the first appearance, practical experience led to a modified procedure of completing them at the second appearance, when a motion schedule and overall plan for the case could be better assessed. Judges have reported that the Preliminary Conference Order is a useful tool, especially for two-attorney cases, and preliminary conferences have become meaningful avenues for case resolution in Housing Court.

A new system has been implemented to streamline the function of the “Expediter Part,” known as “Part X,” so that it now serves purely as a trial assignment part. Under the new system, operational in Manhattan, Bronx and Brooklyn, and scheduled to begin in Queens at the end of February 2019, cases sent out of a resolution part for trial are immediately assigned by the Expediter Part to a trial part. In most cases, the Trial Judge conducts pre-trial conferences on the same day. Trial Judges are using pre-trial conferences and pre-trial orders to narrow the issues for trial and streamline the admission of documents and other evidence by encouraging pre-marking and stipulation of exhibits into evidence, making trials more efficient, and often leading to settlement. If no settlement is reached, the parties are given a date certain for trial. The process is predictable for litigants and the bar and eliminates the previous delay and uncertainty about the date a case will be reached for trial. On the scheduled trial dates, Civil Court Judges have been assisting Housing Court Judges by handling overflow trials. However,

this new system, while promising, has not yet been successful in clearing existing trial backlogs in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Manhattan is attempting to combat its trial backlog by using a dedicated Civil Court Judge to try older cases. Depending upon the success of this experiment, other boroughs may follow this model.

Although the Housing Court Commission recommended expansion of night sessions, they were underutilized and have been cut back instead. While night court was highly efficient, there was limited demand, and the recommended expansion would not have resulted in a prudent use of resources. Underutilized specialized parts for cooperative and condominium apartments, for cases involving military personnel or requests for a rent deposit have been eliminated, as recommended. Additionally, although the Commission suggested maintenance of the specialized parts handling illegal drug cases, the drug parts have been eliminated, as the low volume did not justify their continuation.

As recommended, New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) parts have been expanded to five days in the Bronx and Brooklyn, four days in Manhattan and two days in Queens to reduce congestion and create more manageable calendars to accommodate the demand. A new goal is to expand to other boroughs the very successful pilot program launched ten years ago in Manhattan in which a special housing part handles cases where the tenant requires appointment of an Article 81 guardian.

Overall, the most immediate and obvious impacts of the reported shifts in Housing Court structure and procedures have been the easing of court congestion and promotion of a more orderly, efficient and dignified experience for all court users.

III. ADR

The growing trend of employing mediation, a highly efficient alternative dispute resolution technique, as an alternative to litigation is ideal for use in Housing Court cases where both parties are unrepresented. Brooklyn has a significant volume of such cases, and has been utilizing existing mediation partners, including Community Dispute Resolution Centers such as the New York Peace Institute, to successfully reduce holdover cases on the docket. These cases usually involve owners of two or three family homes or disputes between roommates or family members sharing apartments. Mediators are also handling harassment cases in which neither side is represented. There has been some interest in extending the program to Staten Island, which will be explored. As litigants increasingly avail themselves of counsel under the Universal Access law, the

recommendation to expand the use of arbitration may be justified in the future, but, at this juncture, efforts remain focused on the use of mediation, which has been a proven method of case resolution in this area.

IV. Improved Interaction with Government Agencies

The Housing Court Commission also recommended development of a framework to improve interaction with government agencies that serve Housing Court litigants. New York City social services agencies, such as Adult Protective Services, have been very responsive, devoting significant additional human resources to Housing Court matters. This dedication of additional agency resources allows more prompt and frequent out-of-court resolution of issues facing some of the most vulnerable litigants, which previously clogged dockets, since cases that were complicated by other issues remained stagnant.

V. Implementation of E-Filing and New Technology

The transition to E-filing – a top priority of the Commission – is well underway with an anticipated timetable for completion by mid-2019. Wi-fi and internet connectivity has been improved in all courthouses, and public access computer terminals are available in Help Centers and Clerks’ offices. Teleconferencing and Skype are being increasingly used to allow remote testimony and for scheduling conferences, increasing convenience for litigants and witnesses and avoiding unnecessary court appearances. They are also considered as a last resort for accessing interpreters, as live interpreters are highly favored.

Other important technology innovations include the creation of a dedicated web page and automatic generation of emails (e-notification) to alert City Marshals when evictions have been stayed. These advances have obviated the burdensome need for Housing Court staff to place over 1000 daily telephone calls to City Marshals informing them of eviction stays.

VI. Relocation and Redesign of Housing Court Facilities

The pressing need for relocation and redesign of courthouse facilities, inadequate in size and design for the volume and needs of litigants, attorneys and court personnel arriving there daily, has been a cornerstone of the push for reform. The Commission made detailed recommendations for a coordinated effort by OCA, the landlord/tenant community, and Housing Court administrators to work with the City of New York – which owns and maintains the subject Housing Court facilities – to prioritize the pursuit of new space or refurbishment of existing facilities to accommodate present and growing needs, including full access for court users with physical disabilities. Many proposals have been successfully implemented to date, and others, scheduled for completion, will follow.

The plan to completely relocate Bronx Housing Court by moving it from its current location at 1118 Grand Concourse to a larger, existing courthouse at 851 Grand Concourse, which currently houses the Bronx Civil Court, and to move the Bronx Civil Court to 1118 Grand Concourse – an effective “swap” of facilities to more appropriately match their space needs – remains firmly in place, despite delays due to recently-discovered asbestos and other construction complications and accompanying increased costs. As a result, the timeline for this move has been extended by approximately 9 months, with completion now expected by mid-2020. Suggested signage, central location of Clerks’ offices and the Help Center and other suggested improvements for Bronx Housing Court will await relocation to the new building, to avoid duplication of efforts.

To ameliorate some of the persistent congestion in Bronx County in the interim, several remedial measures are underway. First, as explained above, staggered calendars will balance the workflow over the course of the day and reduce long wait times resulting from a mass call of cases at 9:30 a.m. Next, Court Navigators –the non-attorney volunteers who help direct Housing Court litigants – have been moved to the front lines, greeting court users and directing them to their destinations while they wait on security lines to make better use of their time. This service avoids the delay that previously resulted from court users seeking directions from court officers after advancing through security. Additionally, all three Housing Court trial parts have been moved to 851 Grand Concourse as of January 28, 2019. The space formerly occupied by the trial parts is now being repurposed to provide space for confidential tenant/counsel intake. These changes are expected to ease congestion pending full relocation to the new facility.

A planned relocation of Kings County Civil Court, including Housing Court, from 141 Livingston Street to the Brooklyn Municipal Building, to accommodate the large volume of court users, is scheduled to take place within the next two years. In the meantime, as recommended, space on the 9th floor of the existing facility has been put to immediate use as Universal Access provider space to hold confidential attorney-client conferences. New directory signage was also installed earlier this year in the lobby and elevator banks of the courthouse at 141 Livingston Street in Brooklyn. The signs are color-coded for case type (blue for housing-related offices and green for general civil offices). As in the Bronx, relocation of Clerks' offices and the Help Center, so they are centrally located, will await the move.

In New York County, the Housing Court facilities lacked sufficient space for trials, court conferences, settlement discussions and mediation, and the Commission recommended expansion into underutilized Civil Court facilities in the same building. Space has been reconfigured to allow the Housing Court to occupy two floors of the building, with space for Universal Access conferences now located closer to courtrooms. Additionally, recognizing that navigation of the Manhattan courthouse can be confusing, all-new lobby directories have been installed in 111 Centre Street, clearly highlighting the offices that are most important to Housing Court litigants, such as the Landlord/Tenant Clerk's Office, the Help Center, New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) Offices and legal service provider locations.

Queens County has recently converted and dedicated existing space in the courthouse to ensure the confidentiality of attorney-client conferences and conferences with court attorneys. Similarly, Richmond County Housing Court, which is situated in a historic building, previously used a small alcove on the second floor, which was not wheelchair accessible, for confidential conferences with court attorneys. The problem was resolved by reconfiguring space on the first floor, in a room adjacent to the courtroom, in an area that is fully accessible.

Universal Access signage, designed to inform tenants about eligibility for free representation and how to obtain a lawyer, has been produced by HRA and translated into more than fifteen languages. Signs are regularly updated and appear at key locations in all courthouses city-wide. An innovative proposal to improve directory signage in all courthouses by posting directories on LCD screens, allowing each courthouse to "scroll" a vast amount of information in multiple languages with the use of minimal space, has been slated for implementation, with funding for the purchase of LCD screens and related equipment recently approved for this purpose.

Recommendations to provide concession stands and family friendly areas in every Housing Court location, as well as to enhance décor, provide open space and improve maintenance remain on the list of pending upgrades. For practical reasons, many of these upgrades must await the physical relocation or redesign of court facilities.

VII. Increased Judicial and Staff Positions and Enhanced Roles for Volunteers

The Commission recommended increases in Housing Court Judges and court attorneys, the use of court attorneys to staff Help Centers, the addition of clerks, operational staff and interpreters, and placement of an Ombudsperson in every courthouse to assist litigants in navigating the Housing Court. Housing Court administrators determined that, until much-needed additional judgeships can be funded and created, the most cost-effective and immediately viable increase in human resources would be to fund the addition of court attorneys and clerks in the courtrooms to assist with scheduling and conferencing cases and conducting research and writing to ease the load on overburdened Housing Court Judges. The court system has committed additional resources for that critical staffing, resulting in restoration of twenty court attorney lines, which are fully filled, enabling staffing to return to the level of two court attorneys per resolution part, and enabling a small increase in the number of clerks. Although budgetary limitations have prevented an increase in the number of interpreters on staff, as recommended, new protocols allowing for earlier identification of the need for interpreters and enhancing access to approved interpreters are now in place.

The Commission's proposals to increase the number of Housing Court Judges and other identified positions, as well as the use of hearing officers, referees and magistrates to reduce backlogs are unfulfilled, but remain high priorities for the future, dependent upon budgetary developments.

The Commission also recommended expansion of the Court Navigator program, which is steadily progressing under the direction of Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Mendelson. The program is highly cost-effective and is currently operational in four boroughs – Bronx, Kings, New York and Queens – with Richmond County recently expressing interest in utilizing the program as well.

VIII. New and Additional Training

Acknowledging that interactions with unrepresented litigants call for use of skills not ordinarily employed by Judges, the Commission recommended that Housing Court Judges and court staff receive appropriate training not only in substantive housing law and civil practice, but additionally in handling matters involving unrepresented litigants, anti-bias settlement skills, civility and anti-harassment training, and in detecting elder abuse and domestic violence, with CLE credit offered, where available. The Housing Court has a robust training committee and continues to meet and exceed these recommendations. Judges and court attorneys attend regular two-hour programs on topics of interest on nine afternoons each year, as well as lunch-and-learn meetings at the borough level. The topics of elder abuse and domestic violence are covered annually in training sessions attended by Judges and court attorneys in each borough. Civility and anti-bias training sessions were conducted this past summer and will be repeated. Because ten of the fifty Housing Court Judges were newly appointed in 2018, a large component of the “New Judges” training offered at the Judicial Institute in January 2019 featured interactive sessions on settlement skills, evidence, courtroom management techniques and trial skills designed specifically for Housing Court Judges, including an all-day mock trial.

With the inception of the Universal Access law, newly-appointed lawyers frequenting Housing Court began reporting undignified conduct they observed in hallways. This led to a program for practitioners on civility and discrimination in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Bronx and Manhattan. Responding to this issue, local bar associations have developed committees devoted to Landlord/Tenant issues – a significant development that is having a positive impact and raising the level of proficiency, professionalism and civility in Housing Court practice.

IX. Help Centers and Other Services Designed to Assist Unrepresented Tenants and Small Landlords

The value of Help Centers, the volunteer Court Navigator program and the non-profit “Housing Court Answers” program cannot be underestimated, especially given that representation is not available to small landlords under Universal Access, and threshold

income levels for tenants to qualify for full representation under Universal Access are low. Thus, the courts remain tasked with making appropriate assistance available to fill the gaps for those litigants who cannot afford an attorney, but are ineligible for a free one. Help Centers – open in every courthouse – undeniably need more staffing, and this issue remains fixed on the radar of court administrators.

In addition to the impending roll out of the plain language Notice of Petition, Housing Court administrators are undertaking a comprehensive review of all court forms, notices and other informational material to ensure they are presented in plain language, and that translations are available, where appropriate.

X. Task Force on Implementation of Recommended Reforms

The Commission suggested that a standing Task Force be appointed to assess implementation of its recommendations, aimed at collecting and evaluating data on case length and volume, and identifying the reasons for backlogs. The implementation group has answered this call by holding monthly meetings to obtain candid feedback on new procedures and elicit suggestions for greater efficiency from the bar, the bench (including administrative and supervising Judges), members of our technology team, court employees, community partners and other stakeholders. These regular meetings have been an effective tool for assessing the impact of change, modifying the agenda for implementation, and ensuring that the implementation team remains vigilant and undeterred in achieving the mission to transform the New York City Housing Court into a model institution. With the assistance of the court system’s Division of Technology, the quality and collection of Housing Court data has improved, and the courts will soon have useful dashboards that will improve the ability to monitor case duration to ensure that cases are being brought to resolution as quickly as possible.

Looking ahead, the implementation group will continue to press forward with the completion of reforms outlined by the Commission that remain viable and outstanding. It will also employ mechanisms to collect feedback from the bar and community stakeholders and will continue to consider and adopt new and innovative measures to advance and harmonize the goals of the Chief Judge’s Excellence Initiative and the Special Commission on the Future of the New York City Housing Court.

Conclusion

While work remains to be done, significant strides have been made in advancing reforms in the New York City Housing Court as envisioned by Chief Judge DiFiore's Excellence Initiative and the Special Commission on the Future of the New York City Housing Court. In large measure propelled and assisted by the relief afforded to litigants by the Universal Access law, the changes in practice, protocol and culture implemented in Housing Court have already created a more efficient and effective forum to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants, while enhancing the caliber of the experience there for all court users.

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