



PRESS RELEASE

**New York State
Unified Court System**

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Governor Supports Chief Judge's Efforts to Simplify the State's Outdated Court Structure

NEW YORK—Governor Andrew Cuomo today in his State of the State committed to working with Chief Judge Janet DiFiore and the Legislature to overhaul the State's trial court structure.

New York's current state trial court structure is the country's most cumbersome, rendering it difficult to assign judicial and non-judicial resources quickly and efficiently to where they are most needed. No other state has as many separate trial courts. While the Chief Judge's Excellence Initiative has led to dramatic improvements in the delivery of justice in New York, the court system's fragmented, overly complex organizational structure continues to pose procedural hurdles to justice for judges, lawyers and litigants alike, contributing to inefficiency and delay.

To eliminate such obstacles, Chief Judge DiFiore in September offered a blueprint for a modern judicial system fully capable of delivering efficient, affordable and high-quality services.

Among other elements, the plan calls for: consolidation of New York's 11 different trial courts into a simple three-level structure consisting of a Supreme Court, a Municipal Court, and Justice Courts serving New York's towns and villages; preservation of the current means of selection and terms of office for all judges of courts abolished and merged into Supreme Court and Municipal Court, respectively (merger-in-place); elimination of the century-old constitutional cap (of one judge per 50,000 residents in a Judicial District) on the number of Supreme Court judgeships that can be established by the Legislature; and a five-year phase-in period to allow for any statutory, regulatory, administrative or other changes that would be needed to accommodate the new organizational structure.

To take effect, the proposed changes must be passed by the Legislature during its 2020 session, passed again during its 2021 session and subsequently approved by the State's voters.

"Governor Cuomo's commitment to support court consolidation comes as no surprise. The Governor works for the people, and our current trial court structure is simply not working for the people," said Chief Judge DiFiore.

Following are statements from leaders of some of the many organizations that support trial court consolidation, commending the Governor for his commitment to overhauling the State's trial court structure:

"In the 25 years I served on the bench in the New York State court system, I observed, firsthand, the striking inefficiencies stemming from this State's multiplicity of courts. As Executive Director of Sanctuary for Families, I have seen the catastrophic consequences this system creates for vulnerable victims. I applaud Governor Cuomo's support to simplify the trial court structure and am hopeful it will come to fruition soon," said Hon. Judy Harris Kluger, Executive Director, Sanctuary for Families.

"New York must have a court system that is accessible, navigable and trusted by all New Yorkers. Modern Courts lauds the Governor for his support to simplify New York's complex, fragmented trial court structure," said Amelia T.R. Starr, Chair, Fund and Committee for Modern Courts, and Partner, Davis Polk.

“Empire Justice Center applauds Governor Cuomo’s support of Chief Judge DiFiore’s efforts to overhaul New York’s outdated, complex court structure. We believe that court simplification is essential in providing greater equity, responsiveness and accessibility for all New Yorkers, particularly for marginalized communities and clients of civil legal aid providers, who will benefit from a simplified system and fewer barriers to justice,” said President & CEO, Kristin Brown.

“The high volume of cases heard in the under-resourced family court system creates and maintains significant delays in permanency and stability for young people. Simplifying our courts will improve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families, bringing better justice to all New Yorkers. I commend the Governor for supporting the Chief Judge’s efforts to modernize our courts,” said Hon. Ronald E. Richter, CEO and Executive Director of JCCA (formerly Jewish Child Care Association).

“The business community welcomes the Governor’s support for reforms that will reduce delays and structural inefficiencies in the State’s court system. We encourage the Legislature to adopt measures proposed by the Chief Judge in order streamline the system,” said Kathryn Wylde, President and CEO, Partnership for New York City.

“Our court system is so confusing and onerous to navigate that many of our clients have opted out of the system by the time we meet them. We commend the Governor for supporting the Chief Judge’s efforts to streamline New York’s trial court structure, which would give us the opportunity to break down unnecessary barriers and ensure that all New Yorkers have meaningful access to justice,” said Amy Barasch, Executive Director, Her Justice.

The original press release announcing the Chief Judge’s proposal to simplify the State’s trial court structure—which contains more details about the plan, along with statements of support from numerous leaders and a list of 100 organizations that support court consolidation—is available at:

<http://ww2.nycourts.gov/press/archive.shtml#2019>

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