

**MAINE JUDICIAL BRANCH
THE STATE OF THE JUDICIARY**

A Report to the Joint Convention of the Second Regular Session
of the 132nd Maine Legislature

Presented by Chief Justice Valerie Stanfill
February 12, 2026

Governor Mills, President Daughtry, Speaker Fecteau, distinguished Members and guests of the 132nd Maine Legislature, and people of the State of Maine:

I am very pleased to be here today to report to you on the State of the Judiciary of Maine.

You know that the Judicial Branch is a separate and co-equal branch of Maine government, but unless you are involved in Judiciary Committee or AFA you may not fully appreciate what that means on a day-to-day basis. Obviously, we are partnered with the other branches on many things, but we operate and manage our own buildings, negotiate and contract separately with employee unions, have separate departments for HR, IT, finance, and the like.

I mention that as a preface to thanking the members of the Judicial Branch who have accompanied me here today. They support me every day and are critical to the success of the Maine Judicial Branch.

Some of our administrative team present include

State Court Administrator **Amy Quinlan**, who is the non-judicial head of the Judicial Branch, in charge of all aspects of its management, and I am grateful for that wonderful partnership. She is accompanied by **Tom Hild**, our Chief of Finance and Administration; **Barbara Cardone**, our Director of Legal Affairs; and our new Chief Information Officer, **Chris Oberg**. And of course, someone you all know, Legislative Analyst **Julie Finn**.

The Justices on the Supreme Judicial Court not only comprise one of the most collegial courts to be found, but they also work like a Board of Governors in the operation of the Branch: Justices Andy Mead, Catherine Connors, Rick Lawrence, Wayne Douglas, and Julia Lipez.

The Chiefs of the trial courts, in addition to being sitting judges, operate like the Executive Committee of the Organization in conjunction with me and Amy Quinlan: Superior Court Chief Justice **Bob Mullen**, District Court Chief Judge **Brent Davis**, and District Court Deputy Chief Judge **Eric Walker**.

I wish I could name and personally thank every member of the Maine Judicial Branch – judges and staff alike - for their dedication to the people of this State every day. There is no better group of people and I am so grateful to them all.

As is the tradition for the State of the Judiciary address, I would like to highlight both where we have been and where we are going.

Since I became Chief Justice, I have focused on the importance of ensuring that the Maine Judicial Branch has adequate resources to fulfill the court's mission of providing fair and timely access to justice to all. Our ability to do that rests on three key components: (1) sufficient staffing, (2) reliable and secure technology infrastructure, and (3) safe and accessible courthouses. And we are making progress.

(1) Sufficient Staffing

The Maine Judicial Branch has been understaffed for years, and that won't change overnight. Some of you may recall that in 2022 the National Center for State Courts performed a limited study of our staffing, and among other things observed that we needed an additional 54 court clerk positions in our courthouses. You have been working with us to slowly increase these positions.

For some years we have struggled to attract and hire people into some of the positions, particularly marshals. Last year you agreed to reclassify the marshal positions, and I am pleased to report that it has helped in hiring and retention. Overall, we have fewer vacant positions than we have had in some years in the past.

In short, we have made strides on the staffing front, although we still have a way to go. Now, if only we could do something about judicial salaries, which rank 51st in the nation . . .

(2) Reliable and Secure Technology Infrastructure

The Judicial Branch has been turning to technology with unprecedented speed in the last several years to efficiently manage increasingly complex caseloads. Technological solutions and tools are used every day to create the court record; provide remote access to proceedings; enable video interpreting to those with limited English proficiency; support scheduling and payment of mediators; and, of course, by attorneys and litigants to present their cases and evidence. We are always looking at tools – including AI – to expand access to justice.

You may recall that in last year's biennial budget we asked for and received funds for updating and maintaining the technology infrastructure. As a result, we have been updating our Zoom carts (which were cobbled together during the global pandemic) and replacing them with modern Neat Bar technology to bring better audio and video communication to remote and hybrid hearings.

We are also updating the hardware and software for the courtroom recording technology used for recording official court records and transcripts, known as "For The Record." The updated version of For the Record is being installed in courtrooms throughout the state over this biennium.

Maine eCourts

Most exciting of all, in 2025 we accelerated our installation and rollout of Maine eCourts and eFiling for all case types. In June, we launched Maine eCourts for criminal and juvenile cases in the Androscoggin Superior and Lewiston District courts. This was the first roll out of criminal and juvenile cases. Those cases

require close coordination and collaboration with the Maine Attorney General, district attorneys, public defenders, and private attorneys to enable a smooth transition from conventional filing to eFiling. The Department of Public Safety is a particularly important partner as integrations for the Metro Switch maintained by DPS are critical for things like warrants and bail.

We followed up in September with the installation of Maine eCourts for criminal and juvenile cases in the Rumford, Farmington and South Paris courts. These five courts in Region 3 are now using Maine eCourts for all active cases in all case types.

Then, on February 2, 2026, we “went live” for all case types in Region 4: the Augusta, Waterville and Skowhegan courts. Our goal is to continue with rollouts approximately every 2 months; Region 1, the York Judicial Center, is scheduled for March 31. This schedule will allow us to deploy Maine eCourts within the next year throughout the state so that all trial courts will be digital for all case types.

A couple of years ago I explained that implementation of Maine eCourts required switching every desk in every courthouse from Apple computers to PCs, which I think is emblematic of all the hidden, myriad challenges involved. As we go around the state we need to assess each facility to ensure it will support the new technology. So, a couple of examples to give you an idea of what I mean: the Waterville District Court needed to be rewired before we could go there, and in Houlton, the beautiful historic wooden bench and clerk's desk have slanted surfaces -- old-fashioned writing desks -- that will not hold the necessary computer monitors. Thus, we need to renovate those desks. I could go on, but you get the

idea of the kinds of issues involved, big and small, that go far beyond electronic technology.

There have been bumps, and there are more improvements to be made, but we did it. These rollouts were the biggest “ask” so far of the Branch and of court users. I want to take a minute to thank all of those involved, from information technology to court operations and clerks to judges, communications and process specialists. It is truly an “all hands on deck” effort for the Judicial Branch, and the hands have been nothing short of heroic. And, let me just say it looks like it is paying off because when I addressed the annual meeting of the State Bar Association a few weeks ago, the comment I received was “Thank you for bringing Maine Courts into the 21st Century.” So - While it takes a village, I also want to pause to recognize the leader of our Maine eCourts effort, who is here today. I said at the outset that Chris Oberg is our new Chief Information Officer. He was hired from within the Judicial Branch and has managed the Maine eCourts implementation from the start. It is only fair that I give a shout out to Chris Oberg who has been working tirelessly to ensure the success of this project: Chris, would you please stand to accept the recognition of the Convention?

In addition to a modern case management system and eFiling, we implemented a new electronic payment site, Defendant Access, in the court locations with Maine eCourts. And – this is near and dear to Representative Moonan - we have also implemented a program to deliver hearing reminders by text message for criminal defendants who have a cell phone number on file with the court. Defendants are texted three days in advance of their upcoming hearing dates with the goal of reducing failure to appear rates.

(3) Safe and Accessible Courthouses

2025 was both an exciting and a challenging year for our courthouses – and I do mean the buildings. With your permission and the full support of the local bar, we closed the District Court courthouse in **Madawaska**. Most of the towns served in that district now go to Fort Kent, and the remainder to Caribou. It was a leased facility that was only open two days a month, and it was staffed by the Fort Kent clerks. In fact, Fort Kent was closed on the days Madawaska was open. We do not consider any courthouse closures lightly, but this one made sense to everyone involved.

Challenges we faced this year included the discovery of mold in the basement of the **Lincoln District Court**, which had to be closed for cleaning for a period of time. Lincoln's cases were temporarily heard instead in Millinocket. Like Fort Kent and Madawaska, the Lincoln and Millinocket courts are staffed by the same clerk's office, and each is closed when the other is open, so the disruption was, I think, minimal. Both are now open.

The biggest challenge is posed by the **Newport District Court**. We discovered extensive mold in that leased court building, leading to its closure in early spring. All Newport operations have been relocated to Bangor since then. Our efforts at working with the landlord to resolve the issues have not been successful to date. This past fall, we put out a call for proposals to move the location of the court. That will, of course, be very expensive. To be clear, it has not been our intent to permanently close the Newport courthouse, but the cost involved in getting a new

facility up and running is significant. We understand the importance of providing convenient access to physical court facilities across the state, particularly in rural communities. But we also understand that resources are limited, and so whether we continue to have a court location in Newport is at least somewhat dependent on the will of the Legislature given the significant cost involved.

There is also exciting news on the building front. Intensive planning is ongoing for the three new courthouse facilities to be funded by the bonds that were authorized in 2024 and issued last summer. Each project will consolidate court services into modern, safe judicial centers supporting operations of both the Superior Court and the District Court for each county.

The **Hancock Judicial Center** is a new courthouse construction project. We would have liked to update the existing location appropriately, but it just can't be done. With the assistance of the City of Ellsworth, we obtained a site off High Street behind the LL Bean Outlet and Merrill Furniture. North Peak Architecture, of Lyman, Maine, has been selected as the architect for the project. The City of Ellsworth has completed the access road to the new site, and we expect to break ground in the late spring or early summer of 2026.

Next, we are building an addition to the Skowhegan District Court to consolidate operations and courtrooms for both trial courts into the **Somerset County Judicial Center**. Upon completion we will vacate the County building across the street. WBRC Architects of Bangor/Portland is the architect for the project, and we hope to begin construction in the fall of 2026.

Finally, we have hired Harriman of Auburn as the architect for the new **Androscoggin Judicial Center** in Lewiston. This is an addition onto the existing Lewiston District Court and will consolidate the trial courts into a single building. This is the most complicated build; it will be a challenge to combine the current District Court building and the building adjacent to it, the former Depositors Trust/KeyBank building, into the new AJC. We hope to begin construction on this facility in 2027. As with Somerset, this means we will be vacating the county building in Auburn when the new one is complete.

As an aside, abandoning the old historic courtrooms makes me sad. We have tried to avoid it where we can; we were able to keep the old courtrooms in South Paris and Augusta, for example. Leaving Auburn particularly saddens me as I spent much of my career in that courthouse. However, most county facilities across the state are aging and simply cannot support modern and safe court operations.

A few other updates:

- The backlog continues to improve, although very slowly. The civil backlog is about returned to pre-pandemic levels. Many family cases, however, are still significantly delayed, and we are working on that. Last year I reported that the criminal caseload was about 35% above pre-pandemic levels, about half what it was at its height. A year later, the criminal caseload is now running between 25 and 30% above pre-pandemic levels. An improvement, but still a long way to go.
- We are taking a hard look at how we process criminal cases, to see where we can be more efficient. Delays in criminal cases hurt everyone involved,

and the average age of our criminal cases is simply too old. To that end, last spring we hosted a New England Regional conference on criminal case processing, funded by the MacArthur Foundation. On January 1, we started a pilot project in the Bangor criminal dockets to try to put some of the ideas to work. We will be evaluating whether the different processes we have put in place are effective, and that will help inform what changes we may incorporate state-wide to increase the efficiency of our criminal case processing.

- On a related note, I am pleased to report that progress has been made in the last year in cases constitutionally requiring appointed counsel. Last year I told you that there were 1,150 matters pending without counsel at the end of 2025, including 998 criminal, post-conviction review, and juvenile matters; 112 child protective cases; and 40 appeals. Those numbers are improved, with about 225 criminal cases, 30 child protective cases, and 30 appeals pending in which we have been unable to appoint counsel. While the total number of cases lacking counsel is significantly reduced, it is still unacceptably high. There shouldn't be any. *No one* should be waiting to have an attorney appointed to represent them in cases in which there are significant rights and liberty interests at stake. *Every* case matters. This is something we all need to continue to work on.
- Our school outreach is ongoing and increasing. As we have for many years, we heard oral arguments in three high schools in October: Upper Kennebec Valley High School in Bingham, Oak Hill High School in Wales, and Falmouth High School. In addition, students from around the state visited courts to watch trial court proceedings, tour a courthouse, visit with a judge or justice about how a court docket is administered, and attend

programs about the various career opportunities within the state court system.

- Together with the federal courts, we are planning two events to commemorate the 250th anniversary – the semiquincentennial - of our country's founding this year. First, to recognize Law Day on May 1, we will have a joint presentation in the Supreme Judicial Courtroom in Portland – maybe some of you will come. And, in the fall, we hope to increase our outreach within Maine schools by hosting an event in which schools may be able to participate remotely. No details yet, we have just begun planning, but I expect we may ask for participation of bar leaders and other stakeholders.

I am excited to increase our community engagement efforts. And those efforts are particularly important in our current public climate. I worry, in these times of increasing partisanship and polarization, that we are losing track of what unites us into these United States. I have said before that public trust and confidence in our public institutions, including the justice system, is historically low. And as that trust has decreased, attacks on judges – both in word and in deed – have increased. We should not tolerate this: judicial independence is one of the cornerstones of the rule of law in this country. Disagreement with judicial interpretation cannot result in threatening judges for simply doing their work. I know you understand this: disagreements should also not result in threats to Legislators either.

This past summer in Maine, I was honored to host the national gathering of Chief Justices and State Court Administrators from across the country, sponsored by the National Center for State Courts. You will be happy to hear that everyone fell in

love with Maine and all we have to offer. I was privileged to introduce Chief Justice Roberts of the United States Supreme Court to the conference. To quote him,

[J]udicial rulings can provoke strong and passionate reactions. And those expressions of public sentiment – whether criticism or praise – are not threats to judicial independence. To the contrary, public engagement with the work of the courts results in better-informed polity and a more robust democracy.

[Unfortunately, there are] four areas of illegitimate activity that . . . do threaten the independence of judges on which the rule of law depends: (1) violence, (2) intimidation, (3) disinformation, and (4) threats to defy lawfully entered judgments.

I worry that, even here in Maine, those areas of illegitimate activity are on the rise. I fear that divisive partisanship will infect civil discourse and consideration of even those issues that should unite us. Nationally, the press appears to like to identify federal judges by who appointed them – a Trump judge, or an Obama judge. We don't do that here, nor should we. Maine has historically been non-partisan in the confirmations of state judges. If we were to identify Maine judges by the Governor who appointed them, then we have in this very room McKernon judges, King judges, Baldacci judges, and LePage judges. And all of us were reappointed by every governor along the way, including Governor Mills. Those labels are meaningless and must remain so: we are simply judges, doing our best to faithfully, impartially and independently administer justice in this state.

Let me wrap up by saying that it is indeed a pleasure to be able to address this Joint Convention. Particularly in this short second session, time is dear and you have a lot of pressing matters. However, the primary importance of the Chief Justice's annual address lies not in the content alone, but in the pause we take to recognize

and celebrate the American experiment of republican government, a pause that has never been so important. There are three co-equal branches of government, and the only times the three branches of Maine's government have reliably come together, quite literally, are for the annual addresses of the Governor and of the Chief Justice to the Joint Convention. That we all come together here despite our differences is one of the most potent symbols we can offer to our citizens.

When lawyers are admitted to the bar of this state, when you are sworn in as legislators or as Governor, and when judges are sworn in to judicial office, we all take an oath. We swear to support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of this State. That promise is the promise of the rule of law in this country: that all people and institutions are accountable under laws that are publicly promulgated by the Legislature, equally enforced by the Executive, and independently adjudicated by the Judiciary. Our oaths bind all of us together in service to the citizens of this state.

Public trust in our justice system, and indeed in all governmental institutions, is rarely dismantled in one fell swoop. Rather, it erodes; a death by a thousand cuts. We all must guard against those cuts on a daily basis. We do so by upholding the rule of law, by supporting the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of this State as we have sworn to do.

Thank you for your time this morning.