



New York State
Unified Court System

Hon. Joseph A. Zayas, J.S.C.
Chief Administrative Judge

JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE FY 2027 JUDICIARY BUDGET

STATEMENT OF CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE JOSEPH A. ZAYAS

February 12, 2026

Good morning Chairpersons Krueger, Pretlow, Sepúlveda, and Lavine, and all the other legislators participating today. I am Joseph Zayas, the Chief Administrative Judge of the New York State Unified Court System. It is my pleasure to appear today on behalf of Chief Judge Rowan Wilson, the Unified Court System's leadership team, and all of the dedicated judges and nonjudicial employees who are the lifeblood of our courts, to discuss the Judiciary's budget request for the upcoming fiscal year and also provide an update about some of our recent accomplishments.

I want to begin my remarks today by acknowledging an important milestone that we are on the cusp of reaching. The past two years, when I've appeared at this hearing, I've lamented how, over the course of many years, in large part due to persistent flat or austerity budgets, our nonjudicial workforce had been depleted. Back in 2009, the courts employed over 17,000 nonjudicial personnel. By the end of 2021, however, that number had plummeted to 14,000, which was simply inadequate to ensure that New Yorkers had meaningful, efficient access to their justice system, let alone to fulfill the role that our courts are increasingly playing — a role, I should emphasize, that we wholeheartedly embrace — in helping address some of society's most pressing problems.

Fortunately, we have been steadily reversing that trend. Since July 2023, we have increased our nonjudicial workforce by 1,700 employees. And we anticipate that, before the end of the

current fiscal year, we will finally return to the nonjudicial staffing levels we had in 2009. This was made possible by the strong, restorative budgets that were enacted in 2025 and 2026. We are grateful to the Legislature and the Governor for this support, and for your continuing commitment to ensuring that the Judiciary has the resources it needs so that our courts can resolve New Yorkers' disputes thoughtfully, efficiently, impartially, and creatively, and just as importantly, with compassion and empathy.

I can assure you that the State is getting a significant return on its increased investment in the courts. Of the employees who have joined our ranks in the past two years, nearly 100 work as project directors, case managers, and resource coordinators in our innovative problem-solving courts, amounting to a 30% increase in programmatic staff, which has allowed us to reduce caseloads in some of our busiest courts, particularly in New York City, and open new ones. As I am sure you all know, the Chief Judge and I have made the growth of our problem-solving courts, of which there are now over 350 parts across the State, one of our highest priorities. These courts transform people's lives by addressing issues that affect so many New Yorkers and often result in justice system involvement, such as mental illness and substance use disorders, adolescent traits like recklessness and susceptibility to peer pressure, and human trafficking. We also have Veterans Treatment Courts that connect justice-involved veterans with the support and resources they need. And we have community justice centers — which bring together courts, community organizations, government partners, and residents — that not only perform traditional court functions, but also connect residents who are not court-involved with mental health services, housing assistance, and healthcare.

UCS's problem-solving courts served thousands of New Yorkers last year. And we intend to serve even more in 2026. Indeed, we have another 36 problem-solving courts in various stages

of development, including, at the recommendation of our Judicial Task Force on Mental Illness, five new mental health courts that we will be piloting in the New York City Family Court, which will serve youth involved in juvenile delinquency proceedings as well as families in custody and support matters.

Our Family Courts have also seen a significant influx of nonjudicial staff, complementing the 29 judges who have recently been added to those courts. In fact, overall Family Court staffing, including judges, has grown by 20% since FY 2024. I am pleased to report that these additional resources have already had a significant impact in reducing well-documented backlogs. Since January 2025, the New York City Family Courts have seen a 25% reduction in pending support-related matters and paternity cases, and a 30% reduction in pending guardianship cases. During the same time period, the 17 other counties that recently received new Family Court judges have achieved a collective 11% drop in their pending caseloads.

So, we are making good progress in our Family Courts, but we continue to seek out new ways to make these courts more accessible and efficient. To cite one particularly promising initiative, which has been implemented in Brooklyn and the Bronx and will be expanding to the other three boroughs in the coming months: the New York City Family Court is implementing an innovative intake system for support matters that promotes efficient case resolution by carefully assessing cases at their inception to ensure that they start off on the right path. To this end, new litigants (most of whom are self-represented) are engaged in preliminary case conferences and provided with navigation services to help orient them with court procedures; videos and written reference materials are also available, which provide information about important topics like proper service and necessary financial documentation; and reminders of future court dates are sent by text message. The goal is to educate litigants on the child support process, reduce time to

disposition, and strengthen the quality of orders issued by the court, while upholding a culture of dignity and respect. This program will soon be referring appropriate cases for mediation, which we anticipate will make it even more impactful.

The increase in nonjudicial staff has also allowed us to continue implementing our case processing initiative in New York City's Supreme Criminal Term. The objective of this initiative is to establish, in each borough, effective case management procedures and infrastructure that will address, in a long-term, sustainable way, the most frequent causes of delay in felony criminal cases, so that defendants are not waiting too long to receive discovery, to be connected to treatment or other alternatives-to-incarceration programs, to engage in meaningful plea negotiations, or, simply, to exercise their right to a jury trial — and, equally important, so that victims are not waiting too long for justice.

A critical component of this work are the experienced court attorneys we have been able to hire and assign to key roles. They enforce scheduling orders, conduct virtual conferences with prosecutors and defense attorneys to try to resolve disputes over discovery as well as more mundane issues like scheduling conflicts, and thus prevent cases from languishing because of a lack of consistent court oversight.

This initiative is working. Every borough in New York City had more dispositions last year than it did in 2024. Brooklyn, where we first began piloting this work in late 2024, saw a substantial 15% increase. Citywide, dispositions were up 10%. Another positive development: we are seeing that the procedures we have put in place to promote discovery compliance have markedly reduced discovery-related litigation; and, in cases where that litigation can't be avoided, it occurs, as it should, early on, so that it doesn't cause more significant delays later.

One final area I want to highlight where increased staffing resources have combined with new legislation to allow us to make significant progress, is e-filing. In 2024, the e-filing statutes were amended to permit us to institute electronic filing throughout the court system. To leverage that new authority, we have taken meaningful steps to more expeditiously roll out e-filing across the State. We have increased the size of our e-filing unit and opened a satellite e-filing office in Albany that will serve as a regional hub for implementation, training, and technical support. As a result, e-filing is becoming the norm in more and more of our courts. It is now mandatory for all cases filed in 61 of our 62 Civil Supreme Courts, and for all types of claims adjudicated by the Court of Claims. In addition, Family Court e-filing doubled its geographic footprint in 2025 and has now been implemented in 24 counties. In New York City Civil Court, e-filing is now mandatory for consumer credit actions, and, later this month, it will be mandatory for landlord and tenant matters citywide. And we have, at last, introduced e-filing in our superior criminal courts, with a pilot launched last year in Brooklyn, which will soon be expanding to Queens and Staten Island.

So, as I said, we are grateful to once again have adequate nonjudicial staffing resources, and we are committed to deploying those resources effectively and innovatively so that they have the greatest impact for New Yorkers.

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With this year's budget request, we aim to continue building on this positive trajectory. Our proposed State Operating Budget of \$3.2 billion reflects a base increase of \$150 million, which is essential for us to be able to maintain our existing operations and initiatives. This base increase includes the costs of annualizing 15 new judgeships authorized in 2025; a 2% salary increase for all judges and justices, which was authorized, in 2023, by the Commission on Legislative, Judicial,

and Executive Compensation; and cost-of-living adjustments for professional and legal services providers.

We are also requesting an additional \$49 million that will allow us to continue making progress in key priority areas. This additional funding will, among other things:

- Commit an additional \$25 million in grants to civil legal services organizations who provide representation and legal counseling for low-income New Yorkers facing issues affecting “essentials of life,” such as housing instability, including evictions and foreclosures; consumer and medical debt; food insecurity; elder abuse and domestic violence; immigration concerns; and Family Court involvement. This funding would bring the total Judiciary Civil Legal Services budget to \$179.5 million, reflecting a \$29.5 million (or 20%) increase over the current fiscal year, and a \$75 million (or 72%) increase over the past two years.
- Enhance funding for Attorney for the Child (AFC) providers who represent children involved in Family Court proceedings.
- Support the implementation of several new Family Court initiatives, including the piloting of mediation parts to help resolve custody and support matters; the expansion of peer advocacy and court navigator programs to assist both parents and youth; and, as previously mentioned, the creation of mental health parts in New York City Family Court, which will focus on juvenile delinquency proceedings and custody and support matters.
- Establish a statewide lab-based drug-testing program for problem-solving court participants, which will help facilitate broader detection and more accurate analysis, and comport with best practices around drug screening.

- Expand Housing Court help centers to assist unrepresented litigants involved in eviction and other landlord-tenant matters.
- And provide an additional \$4 million in financial assistance to local governments for the maintenance and repair of court facilities.

Overall, we are requesting a 6.7% increase over the current fiscal year’s operating budget, which we believe is sufficient to enable us to continue advancing key priorities and initiatives, while, at the same time, being mindful of present fiscal uncertainties.

Lastly, our budget includes \$1.2 billion in General State Charges to meet court employee and retiree fringe benefit costs.

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Again this year, I want to emphasize the critical role that our program bills — which are drafted with input from court system advisory groups made up of judges, practitioners, and other subject matter experts — play in improving the administration of justice. Last year, we had one of our most productive legislative sessions in recent memory. With your support, and the support of the Governor, we were able to raise the juror per diem rate for the first time in decades, authorize the pilot program I mentioned that will provide mediation services in child support matters, increase access to justice by continuing to expand the use of affirmations instead of affidavits, and overhaul the outdated statute governing the use of virtual appearances in criminal cases, among other consequential and common-sense reforms. We are deeply appreciative of your attentiveness to our legislative agenda, and the spirit of collaboration that this consideration reflects.

We have assembled another strong package of program bills this year. One of our proposals is to amend the Criminal Procedure Law’s electronic appearance statute (which, as I mentioned, was rewritten last year) to allow virtual court appearances for minor defendants, which is currently

categorially prohibited. A preference for having minor defendants appear in person for court proceedings is understandable. But there are also good reasons to permit flexibility in appropriate circumstances, including the fact that always requiring in-person court attendance may interfere with an adolescent’s ability to fully participate in school, a treatment program, or a job. Our bill, which has significant support from a range of stakeholders (including public defense organizations and the New York City Administration for Children’s Services), would allow adolescent defendants to attend court remotely when the proceeding is not substantive, the parties consent, and when the court determines that a virtual appearance is in the minor’s best interests.

Another important criminal procedure bill whose passage we continue to advocate for would allow judges, with the consent of the District Attorney, to depart from predicate sentencing provisions or dispense with statutory restrictions on plea bargaining, when doing so aligns with the interests of justice. This proposal would give judges much-needed flexibility, when the parties consent, to resolve difficult criminal cases, where current restrictions on dispositions and sentencing ranges sometimes prevent the negotiation of a just outcome.

Moreover, consistent with our focus on improving the lives of New York’s children and families, we have several program bills that would amend the Family Court Act and relevant provisions of the Social Services Law. One, aimed at enhancing protections for immigrant children, would allow these youth, when they are 14 and older and placed in federal foster care or other out-of-home settings, to apply to the Family Court for services as “dependent children.” These services include the special court orders that they need in order to make applications to adjust their immigration status. The bill would also fill gaps in the Social Services Law with respect to the eligibility of non-citizen children and their families for certain critical services, including

those that combat human trafficking, support kinship guardianships, and provide education and training vouchers.

Finally, in collaboration with UCS’s Guardianship Advisory Committee, we have drafted an important proposal that would create a statewide guardian office whose mandate would be to care for and manage the affairs of individuals who are incapacitated, when no other person or entity is eligible or willing to serve in that capacity. This work — which the new office could perform itself or through contracts with approved nonprofits — would help assist the growing number of New Yorkers who are unfortunately in need of such services. I hope that, again this year, you will review all of our program bills carefully and work with us at UCS to address any questions or concerns that you may have about them.

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I want to close by echoing what both Chief Judge Wilson and I say in many other settings: that we are deeply grateful for our productive, collaborative relationship with the Senate and the Assembly, and for your continuing commitment to providing the Judiciary with the resources we need to be a national leader in the provision of innovative, impactful, and even life-changing court services. Our vision for the courts is not just to be respected by the other branches of government as co-equal and independent, but also to be a full partner in efforts to make New York safer, healthier, more equitable, more productive, and more willing to extend a meaningful second chance. We look forward to continuing this important work.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions that may have.