



**Testimony of the Fund for Modern Courts
on the Executive Budget
Joint Fiscal Committees of the NYS Senate and Assembly
Public Protection
February 11, 2026**

My name is Denise Kronstadt, Executive Director of the Fund for Modern Courts. Modern Courts is an independent, nonpartisan statewide court reform organization committed to strengthening New York’s judicial system and supporting the system’s mission of delivering justice fairly, efficiently, and transparently for all New Yorkers. At a time when public trust in democratic institutions is under strain nationwide, an independent and well-resourced judiciary is essential to the rule of law, to equal justice, and to public confidence in government itself.

Through research, court monitoring, public education, and advocacy, Modern Courts works to ensure that New York’s courts are accessible to the people who depend on them, capable of meeting growing demands, and equipped to administer justice without delay or disparity.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony in strong support of the Unified Court System’s FY 2027 Budget Request.

Judiciary Budget

Modern Courts supports the Judiciary’s FY 2027 Budget Request of \$4.215 billion, representing a \$199 million (6.7 percent) increase over FY 2026. This investment is not optional; it is essential to maintain the integrity of the judicial branch, uphold the rule of law, and ensure that New Yorkers can rely on the courts to resolve disputes and protect rights.

While a substantial portion of the increase reflects the annualization of prior initiatives and rising operational costs, the inclusion of targeted investments to close access-to-justice gaps, reduce backlogs, and modernize court operations is especially important. Courts that are under-resourced are courts that delay justice, deny meaningful participation, and erode public trust. Modern Courts therefore supports the Judiciary's full budget request.

Civil Legal Services

Access to justice is foundational to the legitimacy of our legal system. The FY 2027 Judiciary Budget proposes \$179.5 million for civil legal services, an increase of \$25 million over FY 2026. These funds support nonprofit legal services providers who represent low-income New Yorkers facing eviction, domestic violence, loss of benefits, family instability, and other civil legal crises.

While this increase is meaningful and necessary, its enactment is particularly important because the amount, even with the increase, remains far below what is required to meet statewide need. The Permanent Commission on Access to Justice has found that even at this level, Judiciary-funded civil legal services meet less than 20 percent of civil legal needs statewide, with an estimated justice gap of between \$842 million and \$1 billion. Without counsel, litigants are far less likely to achieve fair outcomes, and courts themselves are less able to function efficiently. Continued and sustained investment in civil legal services is essential both to fairness for litigants and to the effective administration of justice.

Technology Modernization

The FY 2027 budget proposes \$128 million for technology modernization, an increase of \$23 million over FY 2026. Modern Courts strongly supports these investments, which are critical to access, efficiency, and transparency.

Funding will support the continued deployment of the Virtual Court Appearance Platform; implementation of the Clean Slate Act; exploration of responsible uses of generative artificial intelligence, including real-time captioning and summarization of court proceedings; online e-plea systems for traffic infractions; courtroom modernization; and statewide e-filing administration and support. When deployed thoughtfully and equitably, technology reduces delay, lowers barriers for unrepresented litigants, and strengthens public confidence in the courts.

Family Court

Family Court is often the court of first and last resort for children and families in crisis. The FY 2027 Judiciary Budget includes funding for new initiatives to improve the delivery of justice in Family Court statewide. These include increased nonjudicial staffing in high-volume parts; expanded court-based services such as peer advocacy and court navigator programs; mental health pilot parts focused on justice-involved youth and families; expanded mediation services, including custody mediation pilots; enhanced training for judges and staff; and best-practices reforms in Family Treatment Courts.

These investments respond directly to long-documented challenges in Family Court, including overwhelming caseloads, high rates of self-representation, and unacceptable delays. Strengthening Family Court is not only a matter of efficiency, but of justice, dignity, and the long-term well-being of New York's children and families.

Attorneys for Children

The FY 2027 budget proposes \$72.5 million for Attorneys for Children, a \$4.2 million increase over FY 2026. While this increase is welcome, it falls short of what is necessary to ensure consistent, high-quality representation for children in abuse, neglect, custody, and permanency proceedings.

Children's interests are uniquely vulnerable in the legal system. Adequate funding for Attorneys for Children is essential to safeguard children's rights, support informed judicial decision-making, and ensure outcomes that serve children's best interests.

Data Reporting in Town and Village Justice Courts (A.3499/S.1849)

Data is essential to accountability, equity, and sound policymaking. Currently, City Courts outside of NYC and District Courts on Long Island are required to report baseline data on summary eviction proceedings, including filings by case type and the number of eviction warrants issued. This information is publicly available through the Office of Court Administration's Statewide Landlord-Tenant Eviction Dashboard.

In contrast, data collection and reporting in the Town and Village Justice Courts is optional. Although these courts are encouraged to report summary proceeding

filings to the Office of Court Administration, compliance is limited and inconsistent. Review of available data by civil legal services providers, including comparisons between court filings and provider caseloads, reveals significant discrepancies across the State.

This lack of consistent reporting prevents the Unified Court System, as well as municipalities, policymakers, and legal services providers from fully understanding the scope of evictions and housing instability statewide, the unmet need for legal representation, the appropriate allocation of limited tenant-protection resources, and the operational needs of Town and Village Justice Courts themselves.

To obtain a complete and accurate picture of evictions in New York State, Town and Village Justice Courts, OCA should require these courts to collect and report data comparable to that collected by City and District Courts. Clear protocols should be established to support data collection and reporting, and if voluntary compliance remains insufficient, legislative action to mandate reporting should be enacted with funding to support the technology, training and support necessary. Transparency in these courts is essential to equal justice and informed decision-making.

Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) Funding

Modern Courts urges the Legislature to fully fund the \$102.5 million appropriation requested by the Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) Fund, a state agency whose funding comes not from taxpayers but rather *entirely* from interest income on attorney trust accounts. IOLA's grantmaking is a cornerstone of the access-to-justice infrastructure, providing stable support for legal services organizations that serve low-income New Yorkers in every region of the State.

In 2025, IOLA committed to a five-year grant cycle with nearly 90 legal services organizations across New York State, which includes annual increases over the five-year period in order to meet the escalating needs of those organizations. FY 2027 is the second year of that cycle. IOLA has also launched a Justice Infrastructure Project that will introduce much-needed efficiencies into the statewide delivery of legal services, and in the first phase of that Project has recently selected a grantee to provide centralized training for legal services attorneys.

A shortfall in the FY 2027 appropriation would undermine the stability of legal

services providers at a time of sustained and growing demand. And in a period of drastic cuts in federal funding, inadequate IOLA funding will necessarily weaken the civil justice system as a whole, increasing the number of unrepresented litigants, straining court operations, and jeopardizing housing stability, family safety, and economic security.

Audio-Visual Coverage of Judicial Proceedings (A.1518A / S.462A)

Modern Courts urges the Legislature to act decisively to permit audio-visual coverage of judicial proceedings in New York courts. At a time when confidence in democratic institutions is fragile, transparency in the judiciary is not optional—it is essential to fairness, accountability, and the rule of law.

New York remains a dramatic outlier in this regard. Forty-eight other states permit some form of camera access in courtrooms. It is far past time for New York to align with the national consensus and modern expectations of open government.

Bringing cameras into New York courtrooms would promote transparency and fairness by allowing the public to observe judicial proceedings as they actually occur. Greater visibility restores public trust by demystifying court processes and demonstrating that justice is administered openly and impartially.

Audio-visual coverage also makes justice accessible. Members of the public who cannot physically attend court—including working people, caregivers, individuals with disabilities, and those who live far from courthouses—deserve equitable access to observe proceedings that profoundly affect public life.

Finally, permitting cameras in courtrooms promotes core democratic values by fostering accountability and informed public participation. Transparency strengthens legitimacy. It also allows systemic issues to be seen rather than obscured—exposing bias where it exists, encouraging informed dialogue, and inspiring reform grounded in public understanding rather than sensationalized speculation.

A pilot project could serve to study the value and challenges of contemporary audio-visual coverage of court proceedings. Modern Courts urges the Legislature

to modernize New York law and bring the State's courts fully into the twenty-first century by permitting responsible audio-visual coverage of judicial proceedings.

Respectfully submitted,

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